The Novel at a Glance

MORE ABOUT THE WRITER

When James Baldwin was sixteen, he began one of the most important friendships of his life. As a confused and self-doubting teenager, he needed a mentor, and he found one in Beauford Delaney, a painter who lived in Greenwich Village in New York City. A black man and an artist, Delaney provided Baldwin with a model of how to respond to experience and transform it into works of art. Virtually taking the place of a father, Delaney introduced his young protégé not only to music and art, but also to a wide circle of friends, and Baldwin began to recognize new possibilities for himself.

Through Beauford Delaney and his scratchy phonograph recordings, Baldwin became interested in jazz and blues, and he maintained a passion for music throughout his life. He listened to Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Fats Waller, Bessie Smith, and Lena Horne. As he grew up, jazz became a fundamental part of his life, and he accumulated a large collection of records. On a transatlantic voyage in 1952, he was able to spend hours talking with Dizzy Gillespie, and late in his life he was extremely impressed by a young trumpet player making one of his first appearances—Wynton Marsalis. Baldwin wrote several essays about music, and his volume of selected poems is called *Jimmy’s Blues*. In fact, when he was in Hollywood working on a script for a movie about Malcolm X, he made the ultimate connection between words and music: He said he wanted to write the way Aretha Franklin sounded.

Baldwin’s experience with the Malcolm X film offers a telling example of how he battled power, hypocrisy, and the economic system in an attempt to articulate and realize his vision of America. As the story is related by his biographer David Leeming, in 1968 Columbia Pictures hired Baldwin to write a scenario on the life of the Black Muslim orator. Baldwin wanted his close friend Billy Dee Williams in the lead role, but Columbia favored either James Earl Jones or Sidney Poitier. A greater problem arose when Baldwin realized that the Hollywood moguls, fearing the response of American audiences to such a highly charged story, intended to make many changes in the scenario and tone down the blistering realism that Baldwin wrote into the script. Eventually, Baldwin abandoned the project, thoroughly disillusioned with the way his efforts were distorted. As Baldwin himself well knew, however, the mere passage of time can bring about major transformations. The script that he wrote (with the help of an assistant, Arnold Perl) later became the basis of Spike Lee’s film biography of Malcolm X, starring Denzel Washington.

Baldwin was a charismatic man, and many people who knew him personally talk about his unforgettable personality and presence. William Styron, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, recalls that Baldwin was a key influence on his life and his art. In the autumn of 1960, Baldwin moved into
Styron’s studio in Connecticut. Baldwin was starting work on *The Fire Next Time* and Styron was working on his controversial novel about a slave who attempts to lead a revolution. Baldwin encouraged Styron to write from the black man’s point of view, because only in this way, Baldwin later said, could a “common history—*ours*” be written.

**BACKGROUND**

These essays were published in 1963 and reflect years of struggle for civil rights for African Americans. Civil rights acts ensuring blacks the right to vote had been signed into law in 1957 and 1960. In 1963, when this essay was published, National Guard troops were sent to protect black students as they enrolled for the first time in the University of Alabama, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his great “I Have a Dream” speech. In 1964, discrimination in public housing, education, and employment was banned. Not until 1965 was the Voting Rights Act passed, which outlawed the use of literacy tests and poll taxes to decide who could vote. That same year, on February 21, Malcolm X, a leader in the black Islamic movement, was murdered by three gunmen from the Nation of Islam, with which he had split.

**MAJOR CHARACTERS**

**The nephew** is the author’s brother Wilmer’s son. He is the “Big James” to whom “My Dungeon Shook” is addressed.

**The father** is David Baldwin, actually the author’s stepfather, to whom he almost always referred as his father.

**The brother** is Wilmer Baldwin, one of the author’s younger brothers and the father of the nephew James to whom “My Dungeon Shook” is addressed.

**Elijah Muhammad** (1897-1975), born Elijah Poole in Georgia, led the Nation of Islam from 1934 until his death.

**Malcolm X** (1925-1965), born Malcolm Little in Nebraska, was a renowned Black Muslim spokesman and a fiery orator. He was assassinated in February of 1965 while addressing a rally in New York City.

**Robert F. Kennedy** (1925-1968), brother of President John F. Kennedy, served as Attorney General of the United States from 1960 to 1964 and was prominent in the struggle for civil rights. In 1968, while campaigning in California for the Democratic presidential nomination, Kennedy was assassinated.

**W.E.B. Du Bois** (1868-1963) was a prominent sociologist and historian who researched and wrote widely on the black American experience.
VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Several kinds of exercises can help you own a word. You can map the word; you can verify meaning by providing examples of the word in use; and you can analyze synonyms and their connotations.

Section 1
truculent, p. 4
aspire, p. 7
impertinent, p. 8

Section 2
implacable, p. 17
peremptory, p. 18
assuaged, p. 22
inexorable, p. 26

Section 3
altercation, p. 56
intimidate, p. 68
exacerbate, p. 75
surreptitiously, p. 96