The Fire Next Time

Whole-Novel Discussion Activities

BURNING ISSUES

1. According to Baldwin, what must be done to end “the racial nightmare” (p. 105)? Think of heroes who have arisen since the publication of Baldwin’s essay. Have they already accomplished things that will eventually “change the history of the world”? Explain.

2. What elements in these essays reveal Baldwin’s style and his effectiveness as a persuasive speaker? Would these elements be effective in speeches today?

3. Baldwin claims that fear is at the heart of racial discrimination. What are your opinions on this issue? What do you think causes racism?

4. “Whoever debases others is debasing himself” (p. 83). In your own words, explain what this statement means. What examples from life demonstrate the truth of this statement?

5. “What it comes to is that if we, who can scarcely be considered a white nation, persist in thinking of ourselves as one, we condemn ourselves, with the truly white nations, to sterility and decay, whereas if we could accept ourselves as we are, we might bring new life to the Western achievements, and transform them” (p. 93). What do you think Baldwin means by this statement? In your opinion, is his assessment accurate? Explain.

CHOICES ACTIVITIES

1. Personal Letter Direct Address. Write a letter to James Baldwin in which you respond to The Fire Next Time. From your perspective as a contemporary high school student, you might inform Baldwin of what has been accomplished in race relations since The Fire Next Time was published. You might also challenge one of his statement or beliefs. (Creative/Critical Writing)

2. Short Story Weaving a Fiction. Write a short story about one of Baldwin’s friends growing up in Harlem, about someone who participated with Baldwin in a civil rights demonstration. Center your story on the effect Baldwin has had on your protagonist. Invent a plot that adheres to historical fact, or give your imagination free rein. (Creative Writing)

3. Music Jazzing It Up. Create a one-hour jazz or blues radio program by selecting at least eight jazz or blues recordings and writing introductions to each. Choose recordings that cover the span of time from the early twentieth century to the present. Devise a theme that links the works together, one that demonstrates, in some way, the freedom that Baldwin finds in this music. Record your program, including your introductions, and play it, or part of it, for the class.

4. Athletics Breaking the Color Barrier. Prepare an oral report or a display on breaking the color barrier in professional sports. Jackie Robinson’s entry into major league baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 is probably the most famous example, but what about athletes in other sports? Have color barriers also affected the Olympic Games? How have race relations in sports changed since The Fire Next Time was published (1963)?
5. **Presentation: Electronic Slide Show One Writer’s Life.** Put together a multimedia slide show on James Baldwin’s life and work. Use the Internet or other sources to obtain photographs of Baldwin and the people, places, and events that figured in his life. Use recordings of spirituals, protest songs, blues, and jazz as your soundtrack. Find some of Baldwin’s own recorded interviews and readings to use for your narration.

6. **Performance: Video A Play This Time.** With a group of classmates, write, perform, and videotape an original one-act play based on one theme or idea you encountered in *The Fire Next Time*. Your play can present a traditional narrative that puts your theme into a story, or it can take a less traditional approach. You may want to distribute responsibilities for writing, acting, directing, and filming, or the members of the group may share responsibility for each aspect of the performance.