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JAMES BALDWIN REFLECTS ON 'GO TELL IT' PBS FILM

By Leslie Bennetts

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At the start of the final section of James Baldwin's first novel, "Go Tell It on the Mountain," is an epigraph for the 14-year-old protagonist that foreshadows the long, difficult journey that will lead him from his bitter childhood into whatever he makes of his life: "Then I buckled up my shoes,/And I started."

Although the author was 28 when "Go Tell It on the Mountain" was published in 1952, in the eyes of the world it marked the beginning of his own journey, which has been geographical as well as literary, political and sexual. It was largely autobiographical, telling the story of a impoverished black boy growing up in Harlem under the tyranny of his father, a rigidly autocratic preacher who hated his son. By the time the book brought Mr. Baldwin acclaim as a new and authentic literary voice, he had long since fled his origins and moved to Paris.

The coming years would see Mr. Baldwin publish many more books, both novels and collections of essays, and be hailed as one of the nation's leading black spokesmen. He would become active in the civil rights movement, and add another dimension to his public persona when he began to write about his homosexuality in such novels as "Giovanni's Room." But until now, his first - and to many, his best-known - work had never achieved a second life on film.

On Monday, however, that will change with the PBS broadcast of "Go Tell It on the Mountain," a new television movie starring Paul Winfield, James Bond 3d, Olivia Cole and Rosalind Cash. An American Playhouse presentation, the film was made by Learning in Focus, the production organization responsible for the 17-part "American Short Story" series on public television several years ago.

After all this time, Mr. Baldwin is amazed that his book has been made into a movie. "I never expected to see it on film," says the author, who was not involved with the production. "Nobody ever wanted to do it." Indeed, the film's producer, Robert Geller, spent eight years wrestling with financing difficulties and a pervasive lack of commercial interest in the project before bringing it to completion.

In a telephone interview from London, Mr. Baldwin pronounces himself delighted with the result. "I am very, very happy about it," he says. "It did not betray the book."

And although the novel was written "more than 30 years ago, half my life ago," as the 60-year-old author puts it, it remains in many ways the keystone of his career.

" 'Mountain' is the book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else," he explains. "I had to deal with what hurt me most. I had to deal, above all, with my father. He was my model; I learned a lot from him. Nobody's ever frightened me since."

Mr. Baldwin says he has never reread this or any of his other novels. "When I reread a book I have written, all I can see is what's wrong with it," he admits. But the movie touched him deeply: "I still see myself there," he says softly. "I was John once, in some way, and the actor who plays John is very accurate. I cannot say by the time I wrote the book that I was John; what was left of John was the book. It's the me that was me once. But I suppose that did determine my life."

Like the book, which takes place on the boy's 14th birthday, the movie spans the lives of three generations, using flashbacks to tell the searing stories of love and loss, of untold truths and the damage wrought by hypocrisy, of the terrible toll of racism and the fortitude of those who endure, of faith and the immensely destructive ways people wound each other in its name.

Like "Go Tell It on the Mountain," most of Mr. Baldwin's best-known works were written in the 1950's and early 60's; he is well aware that his name is no longer on everyone's lips. "The rise and fall of one's reputation," he muses. "What can you do about it? I think that comes with the territory. A book has its own life. Any real artist will never be judged in the time of his time; whatever judgment is delivered in the time of his time cannot be trusted."

He does not pretend to be unaffected by his eclipse in the marketplace. "I'm very vulnerable to all of that," he admits, "but after all, that's not what it's all about. A book has a season, and it's a great mistake to think you can write a best-seller once a year. The book behind you is the book behind you; the book ahead of you is the book ahead of you. And a success can be as difficult to survive as a failure. When you're a success, if you believe it, you're finished."

He chuckles. "Someone told me in Turkey a long time ago that life is a water wheel," he says. "It turns. The trick is to hold your nose when you're under and not get dizzy when you're up."

Although he remains peripatetic, Mr. Baldwin views himself these days as a commuter rather than an expatriate, shuttling back and forth between St. Paul de Vence, France, and the United States. He rejects the label of expatriate - but when he taught last semester, as he will teach again next fall, at the Five College Consortium in Massachusetts, his subjects were the history of the expatriate novel and the history of the civil rights movement.

Nevertheless, Mr. Baldwin says: "Only white Americans can consider themselves to be expatriates. I am not that romantic. If I pretended I could leave America, I would be lost."

Once I found myself on the other side of the ocean, I could see where I came from very clearly, and I could see that I carried myself, which is my home, with me. You can never escape that. I am the grandson of a slave, and I am a writer. I must deal with both."

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"James Baldwin reflects on 'Go Tell It on the Mountain' Pbs film". The New York Times. Retrieved 13 February 2018. External links[edit]. Go Tell It on the Mountain on IMDb. Go Tell It on the Mountain at Rotten Tomatoes. Baldwin makes several references to the Bible in Go Tell It on the Mountain, most to the story of Ham, Noah's son who saw his father naked one day. Noah cursed Ham's son Canaan to become the servant of Noah's other sons. Baldwin refers to several other people and stories from the Bible, at one point alluding to the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, drawing a parallel to that exodus and the need for a similar exodus for African-Americans out of their subservient role in which whites have kept them.

