

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Baldwin, the renowned novelist, essayist, literary critic, playwright and civil rights activist, was born James Arthur Jones on August 2, 1924, in New York's Harlem Hospital. Three years later, his mother, Emma Berdis Jones, wed David Baldwin, a preacher and factory worker who'd moved to New York from New Orleans. The author then assumed his stepfather's surname. After graduating high school, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village, where he forged friendships and received encouragement from other writers. He relocated to Paris seeking a less racially hostile environment in which to work.

His first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, was published in 1953. *The Fire Next Time*, which includes the essay, *My Dungeon Shook*, was published in 1963. In 1985, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was dramatized on public television's *American Playhouse*. Baldwin would go on to publish a total of sixteen books and receive numerous awards before his death in 1987.

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

“Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself. Not until the morning of his fourteenth birthday did he really begin to think about it, and by then it was already too late.”

With the fateful words of this opening paragraph, James Baldwin launches readers into the circumscribed lives of young John Grimes, his mother, stepfather, aunt and siblings. As a birthday treat, John's mother has spared a few coins from her meager reserves and urged her first-born to buy something for himself. John decides to go to the movies, where he sees an *Of Human Bondage*-like film, only to come home to witness even more drama.

The first part of the excerpt selected for OCWW's July 2024 Summer Session picks up at this point. Before completing his seminal novel, Baldwin published a magazine version of this segment (middle of numbered 38 to top of numbered page 47) under the title, “Roy's Wound;” similarly, the “Florence's Prayer” chapter initially appeared in magazine form as “Exodus.”

CRAFT DISCUSSION TOPICS

Go Tell it on the Mountain and *My Dungeon Shook*, from *The Fire Next Time*

- What might we learn from the unconventional story structure of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*?
- How effectively does Baldwin signal transitions from current action to flashback scenes?
- Does the author's voice change when relating the story from different points of view (John vs. Florence)?
- How does Baldwin use dialog to propel plot and enhance character development?
- What technique does Baldwin use to convey time and place?
- How does the author employ irony in defining the relationship between Gabriel and his son, Roy?
- How well does Baldwin employ character foil as a literary device?
- What ironies are evident in the *Florence's Prayer* chapter?
- How does Baldwin use religious references and symbolism to add depth to his narrative?
- Do Baldwin's reflections on race remain consistent across genres (in both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* vs. *My Dungeon Shook*)?