

After 'The Fire Next Time'

Reviewed by
Geoffrey Wolff

The reviewer is a critic and the author of a novel, "Bad Debts."

What good is a work of art? Read this meditation, another "The Fire Next Time," again, a decade after the original so improbably lent class to the Lincoln Continental and Peck & Peck ads in The New Yorker. Consider the fruit of a prose writer who stands with Orwell (for clarity), with Swift (for deadliness), and alone with himself for patience and gravity. What use is he?

Remember? He wrote "The Fire Next Time" as a brimstone sermon for the white man's ears, to trouble the white man's soul into decency, or terrify him into justice. We heard the sermon, and agreed it was a most remarkable performance. People were even shamed into shaking their heads at the truths James Baldwin told about other people, and they were entertained by the elegance of his delivery.

He has written "No Name in the Street" because no one really seems to have acted on the lessons he taught before Watts, before Detroit, before anyone you or I know had ever heard the name Angela Davis. America has not fundamentally changed—except that the vision of brotherhood that drifted like a heat mirage over the 1963 Washington March dissipated even before Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered.

But Baldwin has changed. Once, for the sake of the health of black souls, Baldwin "opposed any attempt that Negroes may make to do to others what has been

Books

NO NAME IN THE STREET. By James Baldwin.

(Dial, 197 pp., \$5.95)



Author James Baldwin: "Now his sermons are for black men, and, most especially for himself."

done to them." Now, though the reader can feel the nervousness of his conclusion, Baldwin refuses to argue against violent means for the imposition of just ends. In the ripe knowledge that brutality is ruinous, aim-

less, in the ripe knowledge that without a wrenching change of white heart, we are all done for, Baldwin's patience with us has in effect been broken on the still

See BOOKS, B4, Col. 1

10 Years After 'The Fire Next Time'

BOOKS, From B1

wheel of our indifference. Well, then—he seems to say—let the house come down.

"The blacks are the despised and slaughtered children of the great Western house—nameless and unnameable bastards. This is a fact so obvious, so speedily verifiable, that it would seem pure insanity to deny it, and yet the life of the entire country is predicated on this denial, this monstrous and pathetic lie," Baldwin writes. In any case, his capacity for outrage against our monstrosities is finite, and so surely is his capacity for pity in the face of our delusions. Think about "benign neglect." Oh, we are quick enough to confess our sins in public. It is at night, in private counsel, that we lie, and admit we are sick unto death of our guilt, and fabricate such phrases as "benign neglect." For all the noise we make, for all our cant and slogans, we kill each other off by benign neglect.

So Baldwin does not

really expect anything from us any more. He will not trouble himself to hector us any more. Now his sermons are for black men, and most especially for himself. In his book he brings himself to account in such a brave and decorous and intelligent manner that his honesty serves both as a reproach and as a pathmark. He asks to be judged—and not, by God, by us—against his capacity to tell the truth. He, at least, knows where some kinds of truth hang out. He tells a story about an old school chum who telephoned him one day soon after Martin Luther King's funeral. It seems that Baldwin had worn a particular suit to the funeral, and later he had heard the writer telling the gossip columnist Leonard Lyons, theatrically enough, that he could never wear the suit again. Well, *ugh, hey, old buddy, why don't you give the suit to me?*

What does it mean for a black man to be recognized on a white world?

"Nothing could be more

unutterably paradoxical: to have thrown in your lap what you never dreamed of getting, and, in sober, bitter truth, could never have dreamed of having, and that at the price of an assumed betrayal of your brothers and your sisters." It is a monstrous fix. Eldridge Cleaver made the charge explicit in "Soul on Ice." That Norman Mailer is blacker than James Baldwin. Baldwin confronts Cleaver's charge, and with more generosity than it deserves: "He seemed to feel that I was a dangerously odd, badly twisted, and fragile reed, of too much use to the Establishment to be trusted by blacks."

Well, this returns to the question: Of what use is a work of art? On the evidence, it is of no utility, either to the Establishment—which has not acted on Baldwin's art—or to the blacks, who have not been freed by it. And while it is true that Baldwin has had forced upon him a life as a spokesman for the Movement, and

as a celebrity, it is equally true that we are compelled to understand him as that rare creature, at once an artist and an unfinished work of art. Beginning with his first mighty act, "Go Tell it on the Mountain," and continuing, sometimes by indirection, more often straightforwardly, James Baldwin has been troubling himself, completing himself.

Cleaver is a public man, a revolutionary. Baldwin is an artist. "These two seem doomed to stand forever at an odd and rather uncomfortable angle to each other, and they both stand at a sharp and not always comfortable angle to the people they both, in their different fashions, hope to serve. But I think it is just as well to remember that the people are one mystery and that the person is another," Baldwin observes.

The obscene absurdity of color prejudice has compelled us to think in terms of people, has compelled Baldwin to write in terms of such a chimera. But listen, by some miracle, the compulsion has not silenced him, and even if he no longer talks to us, he talks. If we can find no better use for his words than we have found so far, then we are not going to find our way home, really.