

JAMES BALDWIN TEEN CREATIVE CONTEST

Activity Guide

As part of The New York Public Library’s celebration of the centennial of the birth of writer and activist James Baldwin (1924–1987), this activity guide is designed for educators to help teens get started on a submission to enter a special creative contest inspired by Baldwin’s work. The guide features:

- **Contextual essays** written by expert curators, featuring excerpts from Baldwin’s work with vocabulary callouts to assist students at different reading levels.
- **Guided activities** with step-by-step instructions to help students take inspiration from Baldwin’s work and life.
- **Independent assignments** intended to help students draft their submission to enter the creative contest.
- **Extension activities** designed to promote deeper exploration of Baldwin’s work through a more personal lens.

About the Contest

James Baldwin wrote novels, essays, poetry, and plays. He wrote about his family, Harlem, religion, movies, music, literature, and politics. He used his platform as a writer and, later, regular guest on TV talk shows to publicly confront and challenge audiences about racism, segregation, white supremacy, homophobia, and much more. His influences included his family, the books he read at the Library, the Civil Rights Movement, the years he spent abroad. He was an expert at paying close attention, both to the world around him and to his own feelings, and this is evident from the power of his writing: he channeled the rage he felt into expressive writing about the world. Today, his vast archive of personal papers is kept by the Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

In celebration of the centennial of his birth, NYPL is inviting New York City teens to enter a special creative contest for the chance to be published in a special magazine and win \$250. Teens aged 13–18 are invited to submit an essay, a short story, or a letter of no more than 2,000 words—or five letter-sized pages of narrative/comic art—that express the things they are most passionate about, whether that be an internal reflection on their lives and feelings or an outward look at the world around them. Learn more about the contest: nypl.org/baldwincontest



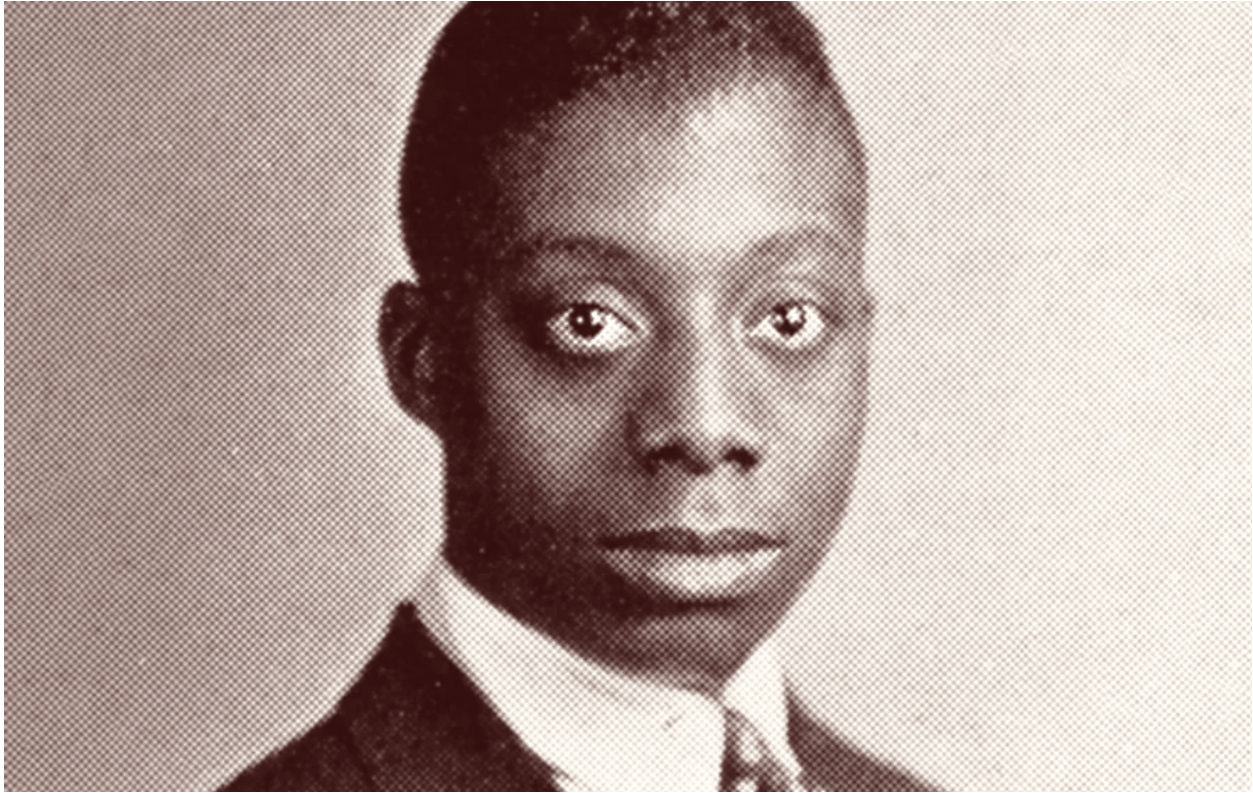
Schomburg Center
for Research
in Black Culture
The New York Public Library



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NO PURCHASE NECESSARY. Enter between 12:00 AM (EDT) on 1/21/25 and 11:59 PM (EDT) on 3/23/25. Open to US residents who live, work, or go to school in the five boroughs of New York City, 13 to 18 years of age at the time of entry. Void where prohibited or restricted by law. See Official Rules at nypl.org/baldwincontest

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF JAMES BALDWIN AT NYPL



Join The New York Public Library to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of writer and activist James Baldwin with special exhibitions, free programs for all ages, book giveaways, and more! Discover all that the Library is doing to celebrate James Baldwin's centennial year: nypl.org/baldwin100

FREE EXHIBITIONS

Jimmy! God's Black Revolutionary Mouth **Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture**

515 Malcolm X Blvd

On display through February 2025

James Baldwin: Mountain to Fire **Special display in the Polonsky Exhibition of The New York Public Library's Treasures**

Stephen A. Schwarzman Building

Fifth Avenue & 42nd Street

On display through summer 2025

Plus! Book a free field trip to the Polonsky Exhibition of The New York Public Library's Treasures to view never-before-exhibited literary manuscripts from the early years of Baldwin's writing career. Schedule now to view the exhibition with your students: nypl.org/fieldtrips

PHOTO: James Baldwin, age 16, from his senior yearbook Clintonian. Bronx, NY: DeWitt Clinton High School, June 1941.

About James Baldwin

Contextual Essay

Today, James Baldwin (1924–1987) is recognized as one of the most influential American writers and thinkers of the 20th century. Before his distinguished career, however, he was a shy, curious kid who grew up in Harlem. He was so shy, in fact, that in his **semi-autobiographical novel** *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, he describes the 42nd Street Library, now known as the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, as “a building filled with books and unimaginably vast, and which . . . [the main character, who was based on Baldwin himself] had never yet dared to enter.”

Vocabulary

semi-autobiographical novel:
a fiction book that is inspired by the writer’s life events

In real life, an important teacher helped Baldwin find the courage to go inside the 42nd Street Library when he was a young teenager. Before that, he’d been a constant visitor to a branch library in his neighborhood: the 135th Street Library, known today as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. He visited three to four times a week and claimed to have read every book in it. Baldwin’s relationship with these two NYPL buildings left such an impression on him that he continued to write and talk about his experiences in those places throughout his career.

Baldwin went on to write numerous famous essays, novels, and other kinds of works. He wrote about himself and the world around him with honesty, humor, and insight. He befriended leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and became an activist himself, leaving behind a powerful legacy.

Today, in accordance with his dying wishes, James Baldwin’s collection of personal papers, photographs, and other materials are kept at the Schomburg Center.

Discover all that The New York Public Library is doing to celebrate Baldwin’s life and work, including free exhibitions, book recommendations, and more: nyp.org/baldwin100

Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953)

The Power of Place

Contextual Essay

At 19, James Baldwin began writing what would become his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The book's main plot follows the 14th birthday of John Grimes—a character whose thoughts and experiences are closely based on Baldwin's own life in New York City at that age.

In the following excerpt, John is setting out on a long walk from his Harlem home to the movie theaters in Midtown with a little spending money handed to him by his mother. Along the way, he stops at his favorite spot in Central Park.

In Central Park the snow had not yet melted on his favorite hill. This hill was in the center of the park, after he had left the circle of the reservoir, where he always found, outside the **high wall of crossed wire**, ladies, white, in fur coats, walking their great dogs, or old, white gentlemen with canes. At a point that he knew by instinct and by the shape of the buildings surrounding the park, he struck out on a steep path overgrown with trees, and climbed a short distance until he reached the clearing that led to the hill. Before him, then, the slope stretched upward, and above it the brilliant sky, and beyond it, cloudy, and far away, he saw the skyline of New York. He did not know why, but there arose in him an **exultation** and a sense of power, and he ran up the hill like an engine, or a madman, willing to throw himself **headlong** into the city that glowed before him.¹

Vocabulary

high wall of crossed wire:
chain link fence

exultation: feeling of great joy

headlong:
headfirst or without caution

Seeing the city skyline from his hill fills John with excitement. He goes on to think about his home in Harlem and the expectations of his family and community there. He fantasizes about a future in which he leaves Harlem and finds his place in the larger world.

Read *Go Tell It on the Mountain*! Search the catalog to borrow a copy of this title—available as a physical book, e-book, and e-audiobook—using your NYPL library card: [nypl.org/browse](https://www.nypl.org/browse)

Plus! Discover never-before-exhibited literary manuscripts from the early years of Baldwin's writing career, including draft pages from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, on view at the Polonsky Exhibition of The New York Public Library's Treasures at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building—and explore an archive of his personal papers on public display for the first time at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Learn more: [nypl.org/baldwin100](https://www.nypl.org/baldwin100)

¹ James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Vintage International, 1953), 26.

Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953)

The Power of Place

Guided Activity

1. Print and distribute the contextual essay to your students. Read it aloud.
2. Repeat the excerpt from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Invite them to close their eyes and visualize the scene.
3. Have your students open their eyes and ask them to underline or highlight details in the passage that help them visualize the scene. Then, invite a few volunteers to share what they highlighted.
4. Tell your students that James Baldwin—just like John—had a favorite hill in Central Park that he visited often. It was a place he could set his imagination free and enjoy being alone.
5. Ask your students to think about a place that is special to them. It might be a place they go to be alone, to daydream, or just to think. Maybe it's a place where they can be social or visit a loved one. Have your students identify the place and write it down on the sheet of paper.
6. Give your students five minutes of quiet time to think about their special place and write notes, including descriptions of what the place looks like, how the place makes them feel, etc. Encourage students who are struggling to make a list of 10 details about their special place or start by illustrating it.
7. Invite students to share their special place, how it makes them feel, and what they like to do there.
8. If time permits, refer to the extension activity to facilitate greater discovery with students.

Independent Assignment

Ask students to create a short story about their special place. Encourage them to include visual language and explain how the place makes them feel and what kinds of things they think about there. Tell them not to feel too restricted by what has happened in real life; this is meant to be a fictional piece. Anything can happen!

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Extension Activity: Dive Deeper

Go Tell It on the Mountain is a complex novel that explores themes including faith, queerness, and generational trauma. Much of the book is told in flashbacks, chronicling the life stories of the adults in John's life: his father, mother, and aunt. The lives of these family members contextualize John's own story and personal experiences.

Invite students to think about what they know about the lives of their parents, grandparents, or guardians and challenge them to make connections between those stories and their own.

Optional: Generate questions to help students conduct family interviews at home.

Notes of a Native Son (1955)

“I Was Born ... I Want to Be ...”

Contextual Essay

James Baldwin’s second book—*Notes of a Native Son*—is a collection of nonfiction essays on books he read, his personal experiences, and his thoughts about culture. He decided to begin the book with an essay titled “Autobiographical Notes.”

The essay tells us a lot about James Baldwin’s life and the things he believed were important. In the following excerpt, he reflects on writing.

One writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience. Everything depends on how **relentlessly** one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder or life the order which is art.²

Vocabulary

relentlessly: without giving up

Read *Notes of a Native Son*! Search the catalog to borrow a copy of this title—available as a physical book, e-book, and e-audiobook—using your NYPL library card: [nypl.org/browse](https://www.nypl.org/browse)

Plus! Discover never-before-exhibited literary manuscripts from the early years of Baldwin’s writing career on display at the Polonsky Exhibition of The New York Public Library’s Treasures at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building—and explore an archive of his personal papers on public display for the first time at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Learn more: [nypl.org/baldwin100](https://www.nypl.org/baldwin100)

² James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Beacon Press, 1955), 7.

Notes of a Native Son (1955)

“I Was Born ... I Want to Be ...”

Guided Activity

1. Print and distribute the contextual essay to your students. Read the text aloud—or ask students to read the entire essay.
2. Then, repeat the excerpt from “Autobiographical Notes.” Pick two or three students to read the sentences out loud.
3. Facilitate a class discussion to explore what the statement means.
4. Have students work with a partner to rewrite the excerpt in their own words. Invite some pairs to share their rewritten statement. If needed, ask students the following questions for guided inquiry: Why do you think Baldwin encourages people to write from their own experience? Do you think this applies to genres other than nonfiction? Why or why not?
5. Let your students know that “Autobiographical Notes” begins with the sentence: “I was born in Harlem thirty-one years ago.”
6. Give your students three minutes to think and write down their own version of this sentence. Start with the phrase, “I was born . . .”
7. Let your students know that “Autobiographical Notes” ends with the sentence: “I want to be an honest man and a good writer.”
8. Give your students three minutes to think and write down their own version of this sentence, beginning with the phrase, “I want to be . . .”
9. If time permits, refer to the extension activity to facilitate greater discovery with students

Independent Assignment

Tell students to write a personal essay that begins with the sentence they wrote during the activity: “I was born . . .” From there, they should go on to describe their life and talk about the things they think are important. The essay should end with the sentence they wrote during the activity: “I want to be . . .”

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Extension Activity: Dive Deeper

Notes of a Native Son collects essays that Baldwin wrote over several years. They address a wide range of topics, including books he had read as a young person, the death of his father when he was a teenager, a time he experienced racial discrimination in a restaurant, and the time he was arrested while overseas.

Invite students to make a timeline of their lives, including important events along the way. Have them think about how those moments shaped who they are and the kind of person they want to become.

“A Letter to My Nephew” from *The Fire Next Time* (1963): Advice on How to Get By

Contextual Essay

James Baldwin’s 1963 book *The Fire Next Time* tackles issues relating to race and religion in the United States. It became one of the most important books of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Fire Next Time is made up of two essays. The first essay is written in the form of a letter, from James Baldwin to his teenaged nephew, also named James. In “A Letter to My Nephew,” James Baldwin gives young James advice about growing up in a world that will often judge him unfairly simply because he is Black. Among other advice he gives, James Baldwin says:

Take no one’s word for anything, including mine, but trust your experience. Know **whence** you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go.³

Vocabulary

whence: from where

Read *The Fire Next Time*! Search the catalog to borrow a copy of this title—available as a physical book, e-book, e-audiobook, and audiobook—using your NYPL library card: [nypl.org/browse](https://www.nypl.org/browse)

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³ James Baldwin, “A Letter to My Nephew,” *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage International, 1963), 8.

“A Letter to My Nephew” from *The Fire Next Time* (1963): Advice on How to Get By

Guided Activity

1. Print and distribute the contextual essay to your students. Read the text aloud—or ask students to read the excerpt.
2. Repeat the excerpt from “A Letter to My Nephew.” Pick two or three students to read the sentences out loud.
3. Place students in pairs or small groups. Invite them to discuss the following questions: What does Baldwin mean when he advises his nephew to trust his own experience? How does trusting your own experience help you when you are stereotyped or when the world treats you unfairly?
4. Follow up with these additional questions: Baldwin writes that if you know where you came from, there’s no limit to where you can go. What does it mean to know where you came from? How can this knowledge be useful?
5. Invite your students to think of one challenging moment or period they had to live through, and write it down.
6. If time permits, refer to the extension activity to facilitate greater discovery for students.

Independent Assignment

Tell students to write their own letter to someone—a real person, a make-believe person, or their younger self—who is about to go through the same or similar challenge they experienced. The letter should begin with explaining the challenge they endured and then give advice on how to get by in the face of this hardship.

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Extension Activity: Dive Deeper

Provide students with the next two sentences in Baldwin’s letter to his nephew:

The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear.⁴

Facilitate a discussion with students about how these additional sentences add to their understanding of the letter. You might begin the conversation by asking students the following question: have you ever had an experience when you’ve been stereotyped or when someone has falsely constructed who you are?

⁴ James Baldwin, “A Letter to My Nephew,” *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage International, 1963), 8.

Schedule a Field Trip with NYPL's Center for Educators & Schools

Book a free field trip to the Polonsky Exhibition of The New York Public Library's Treasures to view never-before-exhibited literary manuscripts from the early years of Baldwin's writing career. Plus, find teaching resources, including free curriculum guides, from NYPL's Center for Educators and Schools: nypl.org/ces

About the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

The Schomburg Center is one of the world's leading cultural institutions devoted to the research, preservation, and exhibition of materials focused on African American, African Diaspora, and African experiences. As a research division of The New York Public Library, the Schomburg Center features diverse programming and collections spanning over 11 million items that illuminate the richness of global Black history, arts, and culture.

About The New York Public Library

Founded in 1895, The New York Public Library is the nation's largest public library system with a unique combination of neighborhood libraries throughout the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island and four scholarly research centers—the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, the Library for the Performing Arts, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the Thomas Yoseloff Business Center at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library (SNFL). Serving millions of patrons a year both in person and online, the Library offers free materials, classes, and programs for users of all ages.



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