

## James Baldwin: A writer who inspired me

Annabelle Sami

I never used to have idols. I didn't have a favourite celebrity. And I found it impossible to answer when asked, 'Who would your dream dinner party guest be?' But all that changed when I met James Baldwin.

Of course, I didn't actually *meet* him. He died in 1987 and I grew up later with Polly Pockets and Pokémon cards. But once you've read James Baldwin or watched him give a talk or an interview, you do feel as though you've met him. That you know him personally. That's the first thing about his writing, that it reached out and drew me in. It felt as though he was sitting with me, telling me the story of a bright teenager living in Harlem in 1935, or a queer man struggling with his identity, or a group of people in Greenwich Village brought together by their friend's death. His stories. His worlds.

I took a module on Baldwin as an undergrad and immediately became entranced by his writing. The worn copy of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952) became a precious object in my hands, transformed by the connection I felt with the words

and the author. He writes prose that is at once beautiful and sad, acerbic and passionate, and always life-affirming, even in its most devastating moments. He wrote jazz music in *Another Country* (1962) that I could actually *hear*. I'd never experienced someone who could *write* the experience of listening to music before. It was through experiencing his writing that I realised the true power of books to change people's lives. After all, he had changed mine. He made me realise the type of writer, and person, I wanted to be.

There's an abundance of amazing James Baldwin quotes. I had so many of them printed out and stuck on my walls at university, I basically didn't need wallpaper. Reading one of Baldwin's essays is like listening to a sermon. It's non-fiction at its most poetic.

I was 21 and writing my undergrad dissertation on James Baldwin's queer characters when I came across a quote I've seen people share many times since:

'You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.'

I *obviously*, immediately burst into tears. As someone who suffers from depression, to gain a perspective like this was transformational. I read that quote, and countless others that I'd underlined in his books, over and over. James

Baldwin's work taught me that to write for others is a gift and a responsibility. And what a gift he gave me – to know I am connected to all the people alive now and throughout history by words, emotions and experience.

His writing has made me a better author and, ultimately, a better human being. I think that, at the very least, warrants idol status.

### **Annabelle Sami**

Annabelle Sami is a writer, director, producer and performer living in London. She has a BA in English and Drama, and completed her MA in English Literature from Queen Mary University in 2018. Since then she has been working as a producer for theatre whilst writing numerous books for children. Her work includes the *Agent Zaiba Investigates* series (Little Tiger), the *Llama Out Loud* series (Farshore) as well as stories in the *Amazing Asian Tales from the Past* anthology (Scholastic) and *The Very Merry Murder Club* anthology (Farshore). Her work has been shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, the Diverse Book Awards and won the Spark! Book award. Her interests include poetry, music, nature and spirituality.

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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