

Queer Classics

James Baldwin's "Giovanni's Room"

BY ERNIE MCLEOD

When James Baldwin (1924-1987) submitted his second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, for publication, no one was pleased. His publisher, Knopf, turned the book down; his agent told him to burn the manuscript; everyone said he shouldn't have written it. This was the mid-50s and Baldwin, born in Harlem and the grandson of a slave, had already established a reputation for himself with prestigiously published essays and an acclaimed semi-autobiographical first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. These early works branded Baldwin an eloquent chronicler of the black experience, and, logically, it was expected that his next work would also deal with "the Negro problem." Instead, *Giovanni's Room* was set in Paris, featured white characters, and dealt with sexual ambivalence at a time when ambivalence was frowned upon and sexuality was locked tight behind closet doors.

In spite of its shocking theme, the novel did get published, first in London and then in the States by a smaller press than Knopf. The reviews were, at best, mixed. One, while praising Baldwin's delicacy with such a controversial topic, made sure to also note that much of the novel was "laid in scenes of squalor" and host to a "grotesque and repulsive" background of characters.

Complicated as its reception was, *Giovanni's Room* couldn't have a simpler plot. In the first few pages, David, the story's narrator, reveals that his fiancée Hella has abandoned him in the south of France to sail back to America and that Giovanni — the man he was "with" when Hella went off to Spain for a while — is headed for the guillotine the next morning. The rest of the novel is basically an extended flashback tracing David's relationship with Giovanni from its drunkenly romantic Paris inception through its unbearably cruel unwinding as David attempts to forge a more acceptable life with Hella. The novel circles back finally to David standing completely alone on the eve of Giovanni's execution, imagining for the reader Giovanni's last hours on earth and the circumstances of his downfall, while contemplating how he might save his own body from the "sentence of death."

Quotable Giovanni

"The morning light filled the room, reminding me of so many mornings and of the morning I had first come there. Giovanni sat on the bed, completely naked, holding a glass of cognac between his hands. ... His body, which I had come to know so well, glowed in the light and charged and thickened the air between us. Then something opened in my brain, a secret, noiseless door swung open, frightening me: it had not occurred to me until that instant that, in fleeing from his body, I confirmed and perpetuated his body's power over me."

Further Reading:

James Baldwin: Collected Essays edited by Toni Morrison

GLBTV

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