

The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green

by eric orner



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If it sounds like an exceptionally gloomy tale, it is. But Baldwin's language is often so exquisitely mournful that you'll want to embrace it even as you angrily reject the narrator's assertion that two men together cannot have a life. When Baldwin describes a "tenderness so painful I thought my heart would burst," you feel it. He falters only in his rendering of "les folles" — men who call each other "she" and scream "like parrots." It may be the narrator who confesses that the sight of such men gives him an unease akin to that of "monkeys eating their own excrement," but it's hard not to suspect that it's really the author's internalized homophobia intruding into the text.

While Baldwin didn't care for the label "gay" — preferring to be "open to love, no matter what form or gender it might take," he also didn't hide his sexuality. His unclosetedness was especially brave given his religious upbringing in the Bronx (where he did some preaching as a teenager) and his passionate involvement in the Civil Rights movement (which was generally hostile towards homosexuals). In fact, black activists such as Eldridge Cleaver were among Baldwin's harshest critics, calling him a "faggot" in print and claiming that the homo scenes in his novels were somehow evidence of hatred towards blacks. (A black man getting fucked by a white man in the 1961 novel *Another Country* was the ultimate sin.) Baldwin's insistence on including multiple sexualities in his fiction was probably what excluded him from speaking at the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington.

Most of Baldwin's adult life was spent in France, where he moved in the late 40s to escape the racial bigotry of the States. He considered himself a "commuter," though, not an expatriate. In an interview he said, "Only white Americans can consider themselves to be expatriates." During his early years in Paris, he fell in love with a Swiss

man named Lucien; their relationship and the city's sexual ambiance at the time helped set the tone for *Giovanni's Room*. Though Lucien went on to marry, the novel was dedicated to him, and he and Baldwin remained involved in one way or another until Baldwin's death.

Many critics — particularly straight ones, I'm guessing — consider Baldwin's essays rather than his novels and plays to be his lasting contribution to literature. The Publishing Triangle, however, ranks *Giovanni's Room* second (behind *Death in Venice*) on their list of the 100 Best Lesbian and Gay Novels. The first time I read *Giovanni's Room* I found the narrator a bit cold and flat, as if the black commuter Baldwin didn't quite want to get under the expatriate David's privileged white skin. Baldwin did say he purposefully excluded race from the story because he didn't think he could "handle both propositions" in the same book.

This time around I appreciated *Giovanni's Room* most for its elegantly simple structure, and for the nuanced way Baldwin negotiated "the stink of love," the "lying little moralities" we invent out of fear. When asked what *Giovanni's Room* was about, Baldwin said it wasn't about homosexual love per se, but about "what happens to you if you're afraid to love anybody." Giovanni is a memorable character because, unlike David, he isn't afraid to love. He's the lusted-after provincial straight boy who turns out to be not so straight and much too vulnerable. David may need to flee Giovanni and all his "filthy little room" represents, but the reader who's a sucker for the tragically romantic will want to linger in the squalor, to slip between the sheets and hold him tight.