



# BOOKS of the TIMES

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By GEORGE VUKELICH

## A Dialogue

By James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni. J. B. Kippincott Company, 112 pages.

# Blacktalk

*In London, England on November 4, 1971, James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni taped a conversation for the television program "Soul!" The program was first shown in the United States on WNET . . . This book, A Dialogue, was developed from the transcript of the conversation taped for "Soul!" and includes slight revisions and corrections made in the transcript by Mr. Baldwin and Ms. Giovanni.*

This isn't really a book and it would be, as my West Coast friend says, "a pimp" to pretend that it was.

What it is is a conversation, a dialogue between one young black writer and one older black writer and it's worth reading no matter what they call it.

Baldwin sets the pace on page 14 when he says he is based, at the moment, in the south of France.

"But," he adds, "there isn't any way ever to leave America. You know, I'd be a fool to think that there was someplace I could go where I wouldn't carry myself with me or that there was some way I could live if I pretended I didn't have the responsibilities which I do have. So I'm a cat trying to make it in the world because I'm condemned to live in the world."

"You know," says Giovanni, "in New York there's a big campaign going on to humanize the policemen. They have posters,



Nikki Giovanni



James Baldwin

billboards upstate and they have a picture of a big cop bending over this little blonde girl —

**Baldwin:** Uh-huh.

**Giovanni:** And the sign says: "And some people call him pig."

**Baldwin:** Uh huh.

**Giovanni:** And I wanted to rent a billboard, I told a friend of mine, and show this big cop and this fourteen-year-old black kid with thirty bullets in him and say: "And some people call him peacemaker."

**Baldwin:** You ought to do it.

As heavy as that may be, don't go away. Later in the rap, it gets heavier.

"You see," Baldwin says, "the reason people think it's important to be white is that they think it's important not to be black. They think it's important to be white because white means you are civilized and being black means you are not civilized . . ."

It is when the two talk about writing that the piece begins to take off and soar a little.

"A writer," says Baldwin, "whether or not he knows it always has to go to the source, because there isn't anything else to work from. You can't work from other people's assumptions; you have to work out of what you discover are your own assumptions, and your own assumptions come out of something much deeper than you . . ."

**Giovanni:** Yet, and I keep coming back to this kind of thing, there's a whole movement or something that says we have to write only about black people.

**Baldwin:** Tsk, tsk, tsk . . . Look, the very first thing that a writer has to face is that he cannot be told what to write.

**Giovanni:** I agree with that — but with the same argument they say, well, why should a writer be free to write what he wants when a teacher is not free to teach what he wants or a postman—

**Baldwin:** A teacher who is not free to teach is not a teacher.

**Giovanni:** That's true.

**Baldwin:** If I assume the responsibility, then I have to be free to teach the way I see it. Angela Davis is in trouble not for all those nonsensical reasons given by those impeccable, honorable men like the governor of California and the head of the FBI, not for any of those reasons, but precisely because she was trying to teach. And to teach in the situation in which black people find themselves, really to teach is a revolutionary act.

**Giovanni:** You solved it for me! It's something you keep hearing and they always say, well, why should the artist be free to do what he wants to do when nobody else is?

**Baldwin:** The artist is not free to do what he wants to do; the artist is free to do what he has to do.

**Giovanni:** When, in fact, everyone else should pursue it along those lines. That's wild. I hadn't thought about it that way. That is the God's truth . . ."

And in what is either profound or provocative or both, depending on where you're at, Baldwin concludes the discourse on writing with this surprising paragraph: "Yes, you're responsible for what the word means, so you have to find the way to use that word to liberate the energy in that word, so it has a positive effect on the lives of people. There is such a thing as the living word. And that's not a mystical statement."

Oh! In her Preface notes, Ida Lewis says, "Jimmy and Nikki are a cornerstone. The next brick is yours. You can hurl it or you can put it in place."

And as I conclude this, the night news carries the story of the University of Wisconsin withdrawing support of the Afro-American Center.

Here we are, reading the books.

And there they are, unmortaring the bricks.

**JAMES BALDWIN** established himself as one of the most important writers of the century with his novels (among them, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*), two plays (*Blues for Mr. Charlie* and *The Amen Corner*), and a number of essays (including *Notes from a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, and *The Fire Next Time*). Mr. Baldwin, raised in Harlem, now lives in France.

(**NIKKI GIOVANNI** is a young poet whose books include *Re: Creation*, *Night Comes Softly* and *My House*. She was born in Knoxville, Tenn., grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, and returned to Tennessee to get her B.A. degree from Fisk University. She now lives with her young son in New York City.)