



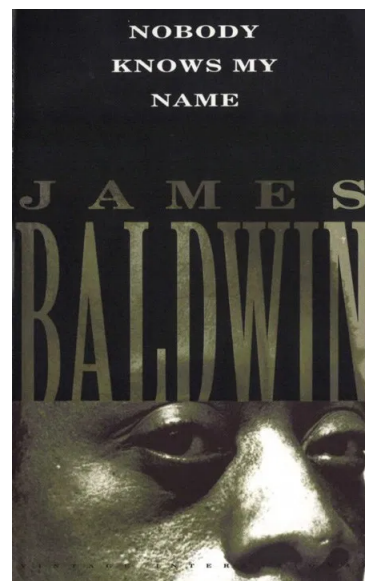
## James Baldwin on Freedom and How We Imprison Ourselves

“We made the world we’re living in and we have to make it over.”

BY MARIA POPOVA

“Everything can be taken from a man,” Viktor Frankl wrote in his timeless treatise on the human search for meaning, “but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” And yet, as Adrienne Rich observed in her sublime meditation on writing, capitalism, and freedom, “in the vocabulary kidnapped from liberatory politics, no word has been so pimped as *freedom*.” How, then, are we to choose our own way amid a capitalist society that continually commodifies our liberty?

The peculiar manner in which personal and political freedom magnetize each other is what **James Baldwin** (August 2, 1924–December 1, 1987) explores in a piece titled “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel,” originally delivered as an address at the 1960 *Esquire* symposium on the writer’s role in society and later included in his altogether spectacular essay collection **Nobody Knows My Name** (public library).





Baldwin writes:

Freedom is not something that anybody can be given; freedom is something people take and people are as free as they want to be. One hasn't got to have an enormous military machine in order to be un-free when it's simpler to be asleep, when it's simpler to be apathetic, when it's simpler, in fact, not to want to be free, to think that something else is more important.

In a sentiment that calls to mind Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer's piercing words on the writer's responsibility as a bastion of freedom, Baldwin adds:

The importance of a writer is continuous... His importance, I think, is that he is here to describe things which other people are too busy to describe.

Perhaps the most vital things for the writer to describe, Baldwin argues, are the habitual ways in which we imprison ourselves and relinquish our own freedom. Exactly half a century after Lebanese poet and philosopher Kahlil Gibran's stirring reflections on the seeming self vs. the appearing self and shortly before Hannah Arendt formulated her enduring ideas on being vs. appearing and our impulse for self-display, Baldwin writes:

There is an illusion about America, a myth about America to which we are clinging which has nothing to do with the lives we lead and I don't believe that anybody in this country who has really thought about it or really almost anybody who has been brought up against it — and almost all of us have one way or another — this collision between one's image of oneself and what one actually is is always very painful and there are two things you can do about it, you can meet the collision head-on and try and become what you really are or you can retreat and try to remain what you thought you were, which is a fantasy, in which you will certainly perish.

Two years before he came to converse with Margaret Mead about reimagining democracy for a post-consumerist world, Baldwin observes:

We have some idea about reality which is not quite true. Without having anything whatever against Cadillacs, refrigerators or all the paraphernalia of American life, I yet suspect that there is something much more important and much more real which produces the Cadillac, refrigerator, atom bomb, and what produces it, after all, is something which we don't seem to want to look at, and that is the person.

Echoing Eleanor Roosevelt's clarion call for our individual role in democracy and social change, Baldwin adds:

A country is only as good... only as strong as the people who make it up and the country turns into what the people want it to become... I don't believe any longer that we can afford to say that it is entirely out of our hands. We made the world we're living in and we have to make it over.

Complement this particular fragment of the wholly invigorating **Nobody Knows My Name** with Susan Sontag on literature and freedom and the great Zen teacher D.T. Suzuki on what freedom really means, then revisit Baldwin on the artist's struggle for integrity, the revelation that taught him to see, his forgotten conversations with Margaret Mead about identity, race, power, and forgiveness and with Nikki Giovanni about what it means to be truly empowered, and his advice to aspiring writers.

---

Published May 9, 2016

---

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/05/09/james-baldwin-freedom/>

---



[www.brainpickings.org](http://www.brainpickings.org)