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The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race



Synopsis

National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward takes James Baldwin's 1963 examination of race in America, *The Fire Next Time*, as a jumping-off point for this groundbreaking collection of essays and poems about race from the most important voices of her generation and our time. In light of recent tragedies and widespread protests across the nation, *The Progressive* magazine republished one of its most famous pieces: James Baldwin's 1962 "Letter to My Nephew", which was later published in his landmark book, *The Fire Next Time*. Addressing his 15-year-old namesake on the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Baldwin wrote, "You know and I know that the country is celebrating 100 years of freedom 100 years too soon." Award-winning author Jesmyn Ward knows that Baldwin's words ring as true as ever today. In response she has gathered short essays, memoir, and a few essential poems to engage the question of race in the United States. And she has turned to some of her generation's most original thinkers and writers to give voice to their concerns.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

With James Baldwin as inspiration, Jesmyn Ward gathers some contemporary voices to riff on race and the value or lack thereof of Black lives. This is an uneven effort with some high highs, and some disappointing lows. It's mostly a book of essays with some poetry sprinkled in, with varying levels of impact. Jesmyn Ward's introduction packs a wallop of truths along with some jabs of injustice and the feeling of hopelessness and helplessness. As she laments the myth of Black thuggish

hoodlums, as recently represented in the white imagination through the Trayvon Martin aftermath, she recognizes that myth was born in America. "A place where black life has been systematically devalued for hundreds of years." And the myth persists still, with all attendant outcomes "Replace ropes with bullets. Hound dogs with German shepherds. A gray uniform with a bulletproof vest. Nothing is new." So, with that powerful introduction the reader is bracing for maximum impact. But most of the collection fails to live up the promise of the explosive beginning. A highlight for me was Kevin Young's essay *Blacker Than Thou*. He uses the Rachel Dolezal debacle to talk about black identity and what it means with a humorous pen that provokes laughter. "Teaching a class about blackness doesn't mean you are black. Blackness isn't a bunch of facts to memorize, or a set of stock behaviors; nor darker skin color neither. It's like the jazz heads I've seen, often white, who can tell you every sideman on every session, but seem in the daylight unable to find the beat. The beat is there always; doesn't mean you can always hear it." Entertainment at its best. Claudine Rankin makes a strong contribution with her essay, *The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning*. The title alone alerts the reader that something hard-hitting and special awaits them over the next few pages and Ms. Rankin doesn't disappoint. She uses her turn to look at the public mourning of black bodies, invoking Emmett Till as exhibit A, while excoriating the nation for its continued anti-black racism. "The American imagination has never been able to fully recover from its white-supremacist beginnings. Consequently, our laws and attitudes have been straining against the devaluation of the black body. Despite good intentions, the associations of blackness with inarticulate, bestial criminality persist beneath the appearance of white civility." She implores the nation to recognize and deal with some hard truths, "a system so steeped in anti-black racism means that on any given day it can be open season on any black person—old or young, man, woman, or child. There exists no equivalent reality for white Americans. We can distance ourselves from this fact until the next horrific killing, but we won't be able to outrun it. History's authority over us is not broken by maintaining a silence about its continued effects." How can anyone deny the truth of that statement? She theorizes that public mourning must continue "but the real change needs to be a rerouting of interior belief. It's an individual challenge that needs to happen before any action by a political justice system would signify true societal change." Is it possible that through all the public mourning that; "Grief, then, for these deceased others might align some of us, for the first time, with the living. The most compelling essay in this book for me is *Black and Blue* by Garnette Cadogan. He simply has a love for walking. He finds it the best way to explore a city. While this activity was never a problem in his native Jamaica, Kingston specifically, he moves to New Orleans, LA to attend

college and his favorite activity becomes fraught with danger. He has to "cobble together" engagement rules to enjoy walking. Walking? "In this city of exuberant streets, walking became a complex and often oppressive negotiation. I would see a white woman walking toward me at night and cross the street to reassure her that she was safe." He moves from New Orleans to the Bronx, New York. He finds "The city was beguiling, exhilarating, vibrant. But it wasn't long before reality reminded me I wasn't invulnerable, especially when I walked alone." Walking? Again, certain rules of engagement become necessary. He describes being punched in the chest by a stranger for running, being accosted by NY's finest, for fitting the description. "Walking while black restricts the experience of walking, renders inaccessible the classic Romantic experience of walking alone." Walking? The book is another contribution to a rapidly building canon of looking at the value of black life. So, readers should welcome that, as there is always a different perspective to be examined and to be added or discarded from one's own ideas of the current state of affairs. The weak essays unfortunately are a drag on the overall strength of the book, rendering it one to get from the library rather than a retail outlet.

This is a great collection of essays that explore the diversity of the Black experience in America. As a white reader, it was incredibly helpful and important to engage with many different voices sharing their experience of what it's like to live as a Black American, as complex and challenging as it can be. No two pieces in this book are alike, and each brings an essential perspective to the conversation. I picked this up for a book club, and I think it's a great choice for discussion of the state of race in America, particularly as brutality against Black people is at the forefront of public discourse. I don't normally read book introductions (lazy, I guess?), but I read this one and am glad I did. Jesmyn Ward's explanation of her work in assembling this collection was a helpful orientation. Ward makes it clear why this book is a necessary addition to the American catalogue.

"My only sin is my skin, ... What did I do, to be so black and blue?" Fats Waller, "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?" The title of this choric collection of prismatic prose and poetry convoking for equality, compassion and freedom from fear, written by some of today's prominent and talented African-American writers, derives from the title of James Baldwin's groundbreaking *The Fire Next Time* which he ended with the fiery memorable passage: "If we...the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others--do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not dare

everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by the slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!"I will never know the pain and fear and rage felt by African-Americans, including the artists who contributed pieces to this innovative anthology full of timely contributions to the current critical conversation on racial relations in the U.S. Nonetheless, if this book can be a bridge to better, fuller understanding by me (which, I think, it most definitely is) and others similarly situated, such a comprehension of the unknown being, after all, one of the main goals of artists and writers, then maybe it will help us all play some part in changing ourselves and perhaps the world for the common

good. _____ "Be the change, you wish to see in the world."

Mahatma Gandhi. "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself." • Leo Tolstoy _____ Jesmyn Ward, the editor and an author of parts of this book, won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2011 for her novel *Salvage the Bones*. She begins the book with her hope that: "this book makes each one of you, dear readers, feel as if we are sitting together, you and me and Baldwin and... all the serious, clear-sighted writers here--and that we are composing our story together. That we are writing an epic wherein black lives carry a worth, wherein black boys can walk to the store and buy candy without thinking they will die, wherein black girls can have a bad day and be mouthy without being physically assaulted by a police officer, wherein cops see twelve-year-old black boys playing with fake guns as silly kids and not homicidal maniacs, wherein black women can stop to ask for directions without being shot in the face by paranoid white homeowners. I burn, and I hope." Ms. Ward grew up about an hour from me. She wrote an affecting essay entitled "Cracking the Code," which really made me think about many of us in the United States who don't really know their full ancestry, including me, how this country is truly a melting pot, as it reminded me of how ridiculous and hateful it is that some people still judge others by the color of their skin. In it, she discusses a relatively inexpensive genetic testing company called 23andMe, that she and some other family members used not long ago to find out their ancestry. She grew up as "black" but her dad looked as much Native American as black, and she has relatively light skin for an African-American. Anyway, she talks about how she felt upon finding out that's she's more European than sub-Saharan African; specifically, 40% European-mix of British, Irish, French, German, Scandinavian, Iberian, Italian, and Ashkenazi-- 32% sub-Saharan African, a quarter Native American and less than 1% North African. Another essay I found particularly thought-provoking, in a book full of poignant essays and verse, was one called "Blacker Than Thou," by Kevin Young, considering the question of Rachel Dolezal: "It would be one thing...if in her house, to her pillow or family, Dolezal said she felt black...

It's when that somehow translates to what she does, when she teaches black studies as if she's a black person—not a teacher, but a mind reader—that it becomes a problem. She wears the mask not to hide but to gain authority over the very thing she claims to want to be. How very white of her!" This anthology has improved my understanding on matters of race and thus effected a change in me. I highly recommend it for anyone seeking to gain different perspectives on race and racial relations in our current political climate.

_____ "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

• Margaret Mead "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

• MLK, Jr.

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