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Quotes by Baldwin, James

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James Baldwin: a writer (1924-1987)

People who treat other people as less than human must not be surprised when the bread they have cast on the waters comes floating back to them, poisoned.

- Baldwin, James

Be careful what you set your heart upon -- for it will surely be yours.

- Baldwin, James

The paradox of education is precisely this -- that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.

- Baldwin, James

It is very nearly impossible... to become an educated person in a country so distrustful of the independent mind.

- Baldwin, James

A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled.

- Baldwin, James

Fires can't be made with dead embers, nor can enthusiasm be stirred by spiritless men.
Enthusiasm in our daily work lightens effort and turns even labor into pleasant tasks.

- Baldwin, James

Voyagers discover that the world can never be larger than the person that is in the world;
but it is impossible to foresee this, it is impossible to be warned.

- Baldwin, James

Experience is a private, and a very largely speechless affair.

- Baldwin, James

Experience that destroys innocents also leads one back to it.

- Baldwin, James

There are few things more dreadful than dealing with a man who knows he is going under,
in his own eyes, and in the eyes of others. Nothing can help that man. What is left of that
man flees from what is left of human attention.

- Baldwin, James

If the relationship of father to son could really be reduced to biology, the whole earth
would blaze with the glory of fathers and sons.

- Baldwin, James

Any honest examination of the national life proves how far we are from the standard of human freedom with which we began. The recovery of this standard demands of everyone who loves this country a hard look at himself, for the greatest achievements must begin somewhere, and they always begin with the person. If we are not capable of this examination, we may yet become one of the most distinguished and monumental failures in the history of nations.

- Baldwin, James

The future is... black.

- Baldwin, James

We are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other -- male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it.

- Baldwin, James

It is rare indeed that people give. Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be.

- Baldwin, James

Americans, unhappily, have the most remarkable ability to alchemize all bitter truths into an innocuous but piquant confection and to transform their moral contradictions, or public discussion of such contradictions, into a proud decoration, such as are given for heroism on the battle field.

- Baldwin, James

Words like freedom, justice, democracy are not common concepts; on the contrary, they are rare. People are not born knowing what these are. It takes enormous and, above all, individual effort to arrive at the respect for other people that these words imply.

- Baldwin, James

An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger. Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which one's nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes.

- Baldwin, James

An identity would seem to be arrived at by the way in which the person faces and uses his experience.

- Baldwin, James

The making of an American begins at the point where he himself rejects all other ties, any other history, and himself adopts the vesture of his adopted land.

- Baldwin, James

People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.

- Baldwin, James

If you're treated a certain way you become a certain kind of person. If certain things are described to you as being real they're real for you whether they're real or not.

- Baldwin, James

Rage cannot be hidden, it can only be dissembled. This dissembling deludes the thoughtless, and strengthens rage and adds, to rage, contempt.

- Baldwin, James

The primary distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate that state which most men, necessarily, must avoid: the state of being alone.

- Baldwin, James

We cannot discuss the state of our minorities until we first have some sense of what we

are, who we are, what our goals are, and what we take life to be. The question is not what we can do now for the hypothetical Mexican, the hypothetical Negro. The question is what we really want out of life, for ourselves, what we think is real.

- Baldwin, James

Money, it turned out, was exactly like sex, you thought of nothing else if you didn't have it and thought of other things if you did.

- Baldwin, James

The establishment of democracy on the American continent was scarcely as radical a break with the past as was the necessity, which Americans faced, of broadening this concept to include black men.

- Baldwin, James

You know, it's not the world that was my oppressor, because what the world does to you, if the world does it to you long enough and effectively enough, you begin to do to yourself.

- Baldwin, James

It is a very rare man who does not victimize the helpless.

- Baldwin, James

Pessimists are the people who have no hope for themselves or for others. Pessimists are also people who think the human race is beneath their notice, that they're better than other human beings.

- Baldwin, James

He may be a very nice man. But I haven't got the time to figure that out. All I know is, he's got a uniform and a gun and I have to relate to him that way. That's the only way to relate to him because one of us may have to die.

- Baldwin, James

Anyone who has struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor.

- Baldwin, James

But the relationship of morality and power is a very subtle one. Because ultimately power without morality is no longer power.

- Baldwin, James

No one can possibly know what is about to happen: it is happening, each time, for the first time, for the only time.

- Baldwin, James

There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment; the time is always now.

- Baldwin, James

No one is more dangerous than he who imagines himself pure in heart: for his purity, by

definition, is unassailable.

- Baldwin, James

When one begins to live by habit and by quotation, one has begun to stop living.

- Baldwin, James

The question of sexual dominance can exist only in the nightmare of that soul which has armed itself, totally, against the possibility of the changing motion of conquest and surrender, which is love.

- Baldwin, James

The American ideal of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American ideal of masculinity. This idea has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden -- as an unpatriotic act -- that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood.

- Baldwin, James

Society is held together by our need; we bind it together with legend, myth, coercion, fearing that without it we will be hurled into that void, within which, like the earth before the Word was spoken, the foundations of society are hidden.

- Baldwin, James

The greatest significance of the present student generation is that it is through them that

the point of view of the subjugated is finally and inexorably being expressed.

- Baldwin, James

Confronted with the impossibility of remaining faithful to one's beliefs, and the equal impossibility of becoming free of them, one can be driven to the most inhuman excesses.

- Baldwin, James

We have all had the experience of finding that our reactions and perhaps even our deeds have denied beliefs we thought were ours.

- Baldwin, James

When the book comes out it may hurt you -- but in order for me to do it, it had to hurt me first. I can only tell you about yourself as much as I can face about myself.

- Baldwin, James

Most of us are about as eager to be changed as we were to be born, and go through our changes in a similar state of shock.

- Baldwin, James

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

- Baldwin, James

People can cry much easier than they can change.

- Baldwin, James

There is a sanctity involved with bringing a child into this world: it is better than bombing one out of it.

- Baldwin, James

Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.

- Baldwin, James

The moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.

- Baldwin, James

A platitude is simply a truth repeated till people get tired of hearing it.

- Baldwin, James

We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed.

- Baldwin, James

The price one pays for pursuing any profession, or calling, is an immediate knowledge of its ugly side.

- Baldwin, James

The responsibility of a writer is to excavate the experience of the people who produced him.

- Baldwin, James

Any writer, I suppose, feels that the world into which he was born is nothing less than a conspiracy against the cultivation of his talent.

- Baldwin, James

Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty -- necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have discovered the true faith the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels.

- Baldwin, James

The American ideal, after all, is that everyone should be as much alike as possible.

- Baldwin, James

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.

- Baldwin, James



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