

REVIEW

A Star-Cross'd Nation: *If Beale Street Could Talk*, 2019

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Abstract

I reflect on the place of *If Beale Street Could Talk* in the corpus of Baldwin's writings, and its relationship to Barry Jenkins's movie released at the beginning of 2019. I consider also what the arrival of the movie can tell us about how Baldwin is located in contemporary collective memories.

Keywords: romance, tragedy, the politics of the everyday, Baldwin remembered/forgotten

We know that Baldwin-the-writer didn't do romance. Or, when he found it did intrude, he couldn't help but deliver it with a raft of misgivings, qualifications, and counterpoints. His second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), tells the story of a love affair, set *in Paris, in the spring*. But the narrative doesn't conform to the expectations we have of romance. On the opening page there appears a short and uncompromisingly dark riff on the extermination of the indigenous peoples of America, the purpose of which is to locate the novel's principal protagonist (the luminously white American, David) as the direct inheritor of this deep, unhealing history. These first sentences of the novel are very shortly followed by the declaration that "it was too late by that time."¹ At the outset we can't be sure what this refers to, but there's no doubt that it's ominous. Before long we realize that the mechanisms of tragedy have been set in motion and that a remorseless denouement awaits.

Later, in one of his last essays, "Here Be Dragons" (1985), Baldwin claimed of the United States that "No other country has made so successful and glamorous a *romance* out of genocide and slavery."² Romance, in the Baldwin lexicon, was close to his idea of innocence: not the liberatory reflex of William Blake, but an ethically culpable compulsion *not to see* the depredations which lay close to hand. Doris Day and Gary Cooper, among a myriad of others, were in his sights.

Yet *If Beale Street Could Talk* sits oddly in Baldwin's oeuvre. It has always felt to me particular in its sensibilities. It was published in 1974 when—after the assassinations and when a state terror against radical black America was still underway—Baldwin's fear for America was becoming ever-more acute. It wasn't as if these fears were new. A decade earlier, in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), he had observed, in an undramatic, steady voice, that the fate of Germany in 1933 signalled an outcome to which the United States was—possibly, the chances were stacking up—heading. *Beale Street* isn't without its terrors. Much in the manner of *Giovanni's Room*, it's apparent from early on that one of the novel's two principal lovers—Fonny, a young black man—is in jail.

There is, though, a tenderness which runs through *Beale Street* which I don't quite see elsewhere in Baldwin's fiction. Uniquely in his novels, *Beale Street* is narrated by a woman—Tish, Fonny's lover—whose youth and blackness lead her to experience herself at odds with the world. None of the names which pass through her mind conforms to the world she knows. Even so, her sense of dislocation doesn't appear from her interior monologues to be lived as a cataclysm. It's more an everyday fact of life. Her social subordination is in the air she breathes, neither a matter which immobilizes her nor one by which she is mobilized. At least to begin with. Oppression is all around. But she creates a daily existence in which she can, within its confines, imagine a self which enables her to navigate her own journeys, through a world which she makes hers. She dreams her own dreams. Her family acts as a quiet, unspoken salvation, allowing her to hold fast her integrity. Domestic life is a source of succor and warmth, in vivid contrast to the story recounted in *Giovanni's Room* where the domestic conditions of Giovanni's relationship appeared to his lover, David, to be tyrannically depressing.

Tish, while still young, and after the usual mishaps we're familiar with in the romance genre, falls for a guy who all along has effectively been a brother. Responses to the questions "Who are you?" and "Where are you from?" aren't required. An intimacy already binds them; they simply change gear. Baldwin presents the relationship, and its domestic setting, with a close ethnographic sympathy. Fonny transmutes in an instant from a puzzling object of frustration to a being who inhabits Tish's dreams and desires. And then he inhabits *her*. That—to me at any rate—feels good, as I'm sure it's meant to. It's at this juncture that, when we piece together the chronological order of the story, the romance is violently interrupted and the force of the racialized state intervenes to break the shared, emergent life of the young couple. *Beale Street* is in this respect Baldwin's *Romeo and Juliet*, conceived while Baz Luhrmann was still a boy in rural New South Wales: creolized and transposed to an America whose very existence seemed on the point of destruction.

My impression is that in Britain *Beale Street* isn't widely read. It's common for Baldwin aficionados to take a while to get round to it. I've not heard of anyone starting off with *Beale Street*, and being led from that point to the rest of Baldwin's writings. Few of my students embark upon it. In the recent run of Baldwin conferences I don't recall it featuring prominently or even regularly. However, circumstances changed

with the arrival of Barry Jenkins's movie, full of expectation after the success of his earlier film, *Moonlight* (2016). For some reason the release in London was staggered, so even after its official release it never proved easy to locate. An enterprising and inspiring colleague at work—Rupert Dannreuther—arranged for a showing at the local cinema, with a panel discussion to follow. It was rammed, and felt like *an occasion*. Many of us convened with friends from different segments of our past lives. Momentarily *Beale Street* was in the limelight. It felt buzzy and convivial.

Predictably a film-of-the-book is obliged to take liberties. The transposition from page to screen couldn't occur otherwise. In this case Jenkins endeavored to stick closely to the original text, which he achieves with a certain panache. The film retains the interrupted, broken chronology, such that it opens with Tish visiting Fonny in prison, and then tells the story in a series of flashbacks.

In the event I was puzzled by certain—particular—decisions the director made, although I'm not sure if any of them is material. I find Tish more glamorous on the screen than on the page, but that's hardly a surprise. It may in any case be a matter of interpretation. More curious is the music. Baldwin is careful in the novel to specify the soundtrack. The readers hear what the characters are listening to: Billie Holiday, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, B.B. King. It's precisely orchestrated. Jenkins opts for a rather more highbrow rendition (Miles and Coltrane), which could have something to do with the imputed expectations of a twenty-first-century audience. Or maybe he believed the revision better guided the meaning of the original? Who knows? Perhaps of greater consequence is the film's closure. The ending of the film is more tightly fixed than that of the novel. Tish and her young son, now maybe five or six, visit Fonny in jail. The family give the impression that, notwithstanding the hardships, they are still able to function as a family. As they are about to make a start on the picnic that Tish brings along, there's a pause while mother and son hold hands as a prelude to saying grace. Fonny looks bemused, but joins them. This clearly isn't something he's used to. That's it. It's a moment, that's all. It's not in the novel, nor anything like it. Coming at the close of the film, though, it carries a certain gravity. I was as bemused as Fonny. It's a strange interpolation.

These reservations are not of great significance. Of greater import, perhaps, is that in my view Jenkins remains *too* faithful to the original. The strengths of the novel are also its weaknesses.

The pivotal moment in the story occurs when Fonny has a run-in with the neighborhood cop, an unredeemed racist who finds himself humiliated in public. From that moment Fonny is in his line of vision. The cop bides his time. A Puerto Rican woman is raped by a black man; Fonny is hauled in; a fabricated case is speedily assembled; and it proves his undoing. It's clear in both novel and movie that it's less the personal dispositions of the cop which are at issue. It is the entire judicial system, from top to bottom. Yet, in the vein of the tragic mode which runs through the narrative, none of this comes as a surprise. We can't anticipate the details. But, it having been made clear from the outset that Fonny was in jail, and this being Baldwin, something of this order was always waiting around the corner.

There are other key points which punctuate the romance. There's the occasion before Fonny's arrest when he meets with his old buddy, Daniel, who has just been released from prison. As darkness falls, he sits with Fonny talking, the terror and violence inside him breaking through to the surface. There's also, similarly, the occasion when Sharon—Tish's smart and resourceful mother—on the advice of Fonny's attorney travels to Puerto Rico in order to try and persuade Fonny's accuser to withdraw her story, allowing the charges to be dropped. It's a heart-breaking scene in which both women are confronted up close by the tragedy which envelops them, and everyone close to them. But there is no possibility of stepping back, extricating themselves and drawing breath. They are caught tight in the grip of the prevailing tragedy. They've been conscripted to the frontline of the race divide and must bear its pain. Neither the episode with Daniel opening himself to Fonny, nor Sharon's excursion to Puerto Rico, was witnessed by Tish. In both instances her narrative voice is quietly eclipsed. It's as if there is only so much grief one voice can carry.

The most memorable, bravura scene appears about a third of the way through the novel, and near the beginning of the film. In each it is enacted with verve. Tish informs her mother that she's pregnant with Fonny's child. Her father and two sisters join them and, after the initial shock, intimacy and joy take command. After some deliberation, they agree to invite Fonny's family. His mother and her two sisters, we discover, are *really* hard work. They are zealots in abiding strictly to what social convention decrees and to an unforgiving reading of the Bible as the undisputed source for moral instruction. To begin with, the antagonism between the two families carries a comic ring to it. But the seriousness of the situation quickly comes to dominate, inviting Baldwin (in the novel) to ruminate on the virtue of hating "properly." On hearing that Tish is pregnant, Fonny's mother allows the bile inside her to come forth in a brutal, volcanic condemnation of Tish for leading her son into sin. Harsh words are spoken, and the scene closes with Fonny's father striking his wife. It's a shocking collapse, occurring in the heart of the domestic world which had generated love.

It's also the most highly charged scene in the narrative (in both novel and film), which requires much of the remaining story, through a series of flashbacks, to demonstrate its counterpoint without which it makes no sense: the growing bonds of affection between the two lovers, Tish and Fonny. Yet after the dramatization of the meeting of the families, the story unfolds as a lengthy anti-climax. In the film especially—it isn't a short film—this obliges the director to dwell on the emerging romance between the couple. Dwelling on an emergent romance, it must be said, is not difficult to manage when the lovers are young and beautiful and wronged, improvising a home in an early instance of loft-living in Greenwich Village. It's impossible for the story to unfold without the conventions of Hollywood romance actively intervening. The difficulties in the narrative structure of the novel are amplified when it's relocated to the cinema.

I liked the film, and I liked what it did with Baldwin. It has beautiful moments. In the novel, for example, Baldwin has a few brief sentences where Tish reflects on

the experience of her job on the perfume counter in an upmarket department store, and on how—unspoken—the logistics of race infiltrate the various encounters which compose her day. The scene is conducted in the movie with a beguiling, understated grace. There are a number of such moments, and they elicit my regard for the film. But the misgivings never entirely evaporate.

This leads to a larger question, which is not particular to the film, although its release in Britain provides my pretext. On 31 January 2019 the UK edition of the *Financial Times* prominently carried a long and thoughtful article on *Beale Street* (the film) by Diana Evans, the author of *Ordinary People* (2018), which took for its title “James Baldwin: Why Beale Street Still Talks.” It was positive about the movie, and unfaltering in its admiration for Baldwin. It opened with the observation that “James Baldwin never goes out of fashion,” insisting that he is “as relevant [. . .] as ever.”³ I was touched, if faintly amused, that the *FT* should choose to be aligning itself under the banner of Baldwin. I certainly have no quarrel with its estimation of his relevance, although I find the idea of Baldwin’s fashionableness odd.

The article stands as a version of the discussion of the ways in which Baldwin has been remembered/forgotten. It’s a discussion which at various times has crossed these pages. I’m not persuaded by the insistence that Baldwin “never goes out of fashion.” I’m also skeptical that his place in the collective memory of the United States has at last come to be secure, after years of wavering. It seemed as if this was the momentary consensus from the end of the 1990s, when there occurred a renaissance in the critical work on Baldwin. It recurred with the arrival of Raoul Peck’s *I’m Not Your Negro* (2017). And it’s beginning to happen again after the release of *Beale Street*. Over the long term it may be the case that the memory of Baldwin is now more secure than it was. But it doesn’t feel like that. It’s more as if he keeps on being forgotten, and keeps on needing to be re-remembered. It’s an unnerving phenomenon, in which, as I see things, he remains tantalizingly out of reach of public memory. If this is so, what is it that makes Baldwin such an awkward figure for popular memory to contain?

It must partly be that he continues to be too much of a disruptive figure to be settled in any of the prevailing currents of the nation’s memory. Too black for whites, too white for blacks, and too queer for everyone. There must be some truth in this.

But I also think that the recurring willingness to “forget” Baldwin is part of a larger historical and political phenomenon. It’s part of what has happened to civil rights/Black Power in the age of populist nativism. Civil rights/Black Power hasn’t been *forgotten*. There’s the music, a range of books, significant movies, all working to keep the memory of black radicalism alive. However, what is “forgotten” in this, or only unsteadily recalled, is the fact that the destruction of civil rights/Black Power was the outcome of a concerted, organized political defeat, in which over the long period the power of the state was mobilized. In April 1963, when civil rights were carried to Birmingham, Martin Luther King could announce without a blush that the “Third American Revolution” was underway. Baldwin said much the same at the same time, in *The Fire Next Time*. Who now thinks in terms of a

“Third American Revolution”? Who now *remembers* that people believed that such a thing was underway?

The enormity of the political defeat, and its continuation into the Trump years, is simultaneously material and “forgotten,” or persistently edged out of collective memory. There’s only so much that a single movie or a book can do to counter this larger forgetfulness. And only so much that the recovery of a single figure can do to hold back the larger forgetfulness. We need to return to Walter Benjamin’s sixth thesis on “The Philosophy of History” where he reflected on the inner properties of political defeat. “Only that writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past,” he wrote, “is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”⁴

This may seem a long way removed from the 2019 release of a movie based on one of James Baldwin’s novels. But I suspect it isn’t. As Baldwin himself knew, there’s always more thinking to do, especially as the days darken.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) (New York, Laurel, 1988), p. 9.
- 2 James Baldwin, “Here Be Dragons” (1985), reprinted as “Freaks and the Ideal of American Manhood,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 815.
- 3 Diana Evans, “James Baldwin: Why Beale Street Still Talks,” *Financial Times*, 31 January 2019, www.ft.com/content/0577aafe-20b0-11e9-a46f-08f9738d6b2b (accessed 16 April 2019).
- 4 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1942), www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html (accessed 16 April 2019).

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