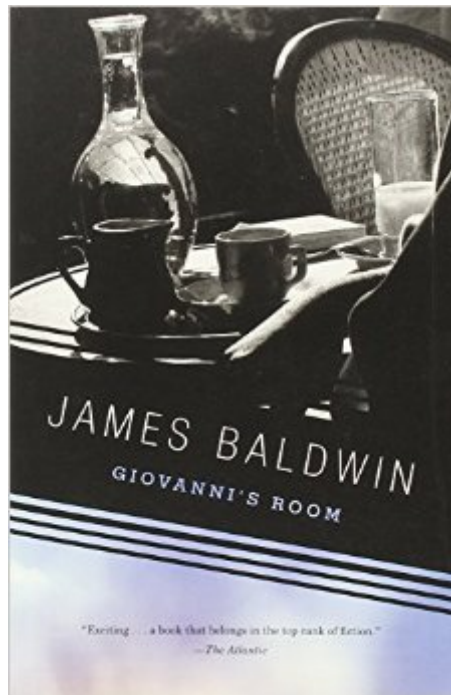


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Giovanni's Room



Synopsis

Set in the 1950s Paris of American expatriates, liaisons, and violence, a young man finds himself caught between desire and conventional morality. With a sharp, probing imagination, James Baldwin's now-classic narrative delves into the mystery of loving and creates a moving, highly controversial story of death and passion that reveals the unspoken complexities of the human heart.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Now and then it is healthy and rewarding AND enlightening to revisit some of the books in our libraries that are time-tested, durable pinnacles of literature. Such is the case of opening the cover of James Baldwin's inimitable, cherished novel GIOVANNI'S ROOM. Baldwin died in Paris in 1987 after gifting us with great novels and strong social commentary. It is only fitting to return to the Paris of this wonderfully rich novel when the need to reflect on how writers of stature had the courage to begin the genre of novels dealing with same sex relationships in a manner of pure literature. GIOVANNI'S ROOM is a fluid, nonlinear exploration of alienation: the narrator is living in Paris (having escaped the US with the smilingly shallow American image desecrated by Parisians), heads toward a "comfortably normal courtship/engagement" with a very normal fellow American girl also living in Paris/Spain, and quite by accident encounters his repressed sexual self when he meets Giovanni, an expatriated Italian. The subcultures Baldwin details are palpably present on every page - many characters seem like enemies until their roles in the journey of these two men unfold and clarify. The title of the book is well chosen: Giovanni's room which he shares with David

our narrator is claustrophobic, unkempt, dour, and threatening - an apt description of the mental environment this stumbling act of finding a new type of love creates. Baldwin lets us know from the start that we are entering a doomed affair of the heart and it is this atmospheric, eloquently written memoir that adds to the sense of the inevitable isolation that makes this a great novel. Enough cannot be said about the beauty of Baldwin's prose, the richness of his terse description of the city of Paris, his uncanny ability to paint characters that are wholly three-dimensional. This book merits frequent re-visits. It is a rare vintage wine.

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is a challenging work of literature that explores a summer in the life of an expatriate named David who is living in Paris after World War II. David must come to terms with his own contradictory desires. David's life in Paris in the 1950s--where homosexuality, while not illegal, is stigmatized--affords him a certain amount of space to discover what he wants and what he can accept. His dilemma, on the surface, can be stated simply: he is passionately in love with a young Italian man, Giovanni, yet he is also engaged to Hella, an American woman with whom he can live, on the surface, a "socially acceptable" life. On a deeper level, the novel is a study of the loneliness that comes with an absence of self-acceptance. David shares many characteristics with Ernest Hemingway's young, expatriate anti-hero Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*. In David, Baldwin has created a character who remains, ostensibly, detached from the world, which lends to his anti-hero a veneer of invincibility and hard assurance. There are a number of passages, especially intimate scenes, described from a mechanical third-person point of view. Giovanni at one point asks David, "Do you know how you feel? Do you feel? What do you feel?" to which David replies, "I feel nothing now, nothing." David's inability or unwillingness to be honest about his feelings, however, undermines his relationships with others and his sense of self, and ultimately leaves him profoundly alone. The novel suggests, more hopefully, that the loss of innocence, if accepted, can be the beginning of a journey that leads to knowledge. The novel takes place as a flashback over the course of one evening in a rented house in the south of France before David will take a train back to Paris the next morning. Drinking by himself in the large, empty house and looking at a window, David recalls this statement from an acquaintance named Jacques: "Nobody can stay in the Garden of Eden." This is an idea which frames the novel and perhaps offers David one way to understand his life. A few final notes: The final paragraph of the novel is incredible, suggesting how actions, despite our most earnest hopes when we have erred, stay with us. All of the descriptions of Giovanni's room are artistic and reflect David's psychology. The novel portrays a cruel side of Paris (a characteristic, I think, which all large

cities share to some degree), where lives on the margins are often bought and sold, and where there can be a calculated indifference to suffering. This is a riveting work of literature that has many levels of meaning.

James Baldwin is, without a doubt, one of the most eloquent and talented authors that I have ever been exposed to. In his novel, *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin explores the struggle between a man and his sexuality. Torn between his feelings for another man and another woman, we are taken through David's journey of joy, love, anger, pain, and confusion. Through secrets and lies, the story unfolds, teaching that there are no excuses when it comes to real love. This is by far one of the most beautifully written books I have ever read. Each sentence leaves you with a good taste in your mouth. Baldwin's passion and power in writing is proved clearly all throughout the book. His word choice and sentence development is absolutely wonderfully printed, that each page simply flows one after the other. His ability to develop and express each character's thoughts keeps the reader wholly engaged; feeling attached to their personal dilemmas. At the end of the book, you are left with the feeling of complete satisfaction. Although this is a story of a gay man's struggle, it is a story that affects everyone regardless his or hers sexuality. Everyone who has ever been found in a conflict with themselves will discover that this book will touch the hearts, leaving the longing to come in touch with their true self. Anyone who has been caught between desire and morality will relate and find that this book captures the genuine feelings of that difficult and tense struggle.

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