



Letter to Jimmy

Alain Mabanckou , Sara Meli Ansari (Translator)

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Written on the twentieth anniversary of James Baldwin's death, *Letter to Jimmy* is African writer Alain Mabanckou's ode to his literary hero and an effort to place Baldwin's life in context within the greater African diaspora.

Beginning with a chance encounter with a beggar wandering along a Santa Monica beach—a man whose ragged clothes and unsteady gait remind the author of a character out of one of James Baldwin's novels—Mabanckou uses his own experiences as an African living in the US as a launching pad to take readers on a fascinating tour of James Baldwin's life. As Mabanckou reads Baldwin's work, looks at pictures of him through the years, and explores Baldwin's checkered publishing history, he is always probing for answers about what it must have been like for the young Baldwin to live abroad as an African-American, to write obliquely about his own homosexuality, and to seek out mentors like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison only to publicly reject them later.

As Mabanckou travels to Paris, reads about French history and engages with contemporary readers, his letters to Baldwin grow more intimate and personal. He speaks to Baldwin as a peer—a writer who paved the way for his own work, and Mabanckou seems to believe, someone who might understand his experiences as an African expatriate.

Letter to Jimmy Details

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Helena of Sparta ☆ says

J'ai écrémé ceci pour un essai, alors j'ai lu des extraits, pas le livre en entier. D'après ce que j'ai lu, je n'ai pas été impressionné, mais cela couvrirait des sujets sensibles. C'est essentiellement une biographie de James Baldwin, qui Mabanckou admire. Ce livre couvre également des thèmes tels que le racisme et l'homophobie en Amérique.

Traduit en anglais:

I skimmed this for an essay, so I read snippets, not the entire book. From what I read, I wasn't impressed, but it did cover sensitive subjects. It's essentially a biography of James Baldwin, who Mabanckou admires. This book also covers themes such as racism and homophobia in America.

Manika says

4.5

Starlon says

This books is genuine, sincere yet deep in wit, intellect and style.

This book really illuminated the slight intellectual tiff between Baldwin and Wright. Mabanckou shows the great amount of nuance in Baldwin's writings and how prophetic and yet of his time he was. The postscript seems to point to Baldwin as a stronger essayist than novelist. His later novels aren't even mentioned in this book beyond a sentence

KC says

A lovely book with wonderful translation!

World Literature Today says

"In Letter to Jimmy, Alain Mabanckou gives a heartfelt tribute to James Baldwin. Gazing at Baldwin's black-and-white picture, the author's mind wanders and takes us into Baldwin's life and peregrinations." - Rokiatou Soumaré, University of Oklahoma

This book was reviewed in the March 2015 issue of *World Literature Today*. Read the full review by visiting our website: <http://bit.ly/1Br9ITZ>

Rowena says

"People would argue for a long time about the real reasons behind your "exile" in France. But the truth is that there is nothing more disheartening than the imprisonment of a creative person, nothing worse than the feeling that the world collapsing before you will swallow your dreams in the end."

Alain Mabanckou, *Letter to Jimmy*

I feel this book is many things at once: it's a sort of biography, a homage to a great writer, and at the same time it's a sort of guide to the search for one's inner self through the works of someone who has clearly influenced us. It was a beautiful recapitulation of James Baldwin's life by someone who is clearly a great admirer and knows a lot about him. At times Mabanckou is speaking to James Baldwin, at other times he is addressing us, the reader, filling the gaps in our knowledge and giving us interesting tidbits and interspersing the book with book reviews.

To me, the title of the book illustrates a closeness between the writer and James Baldwin, and it's no surprise the admiration and reverence Mabanckou feels to Baldwin because I, and so many others, feel it too. An enigmatic individual, insightful, brave enough to take his life into his own hands, eloquent enough to dissect and present the race problem in an accessible and very incisive way. One of the chapters is entitled "black. bastard. gay and a writer", I believe the first three words basically sum up the complexity of his identity, especially in the era in which he lived, and yet he managed to become one of the best writers of the 20th Century despite so many obstacles.

I also like that Mabanckou talks about how Baldwin's words are needed, even now (or maybe especially now); he means so much to marginalized folk and also people searching for their own identities, and so many of his words are timeless and are still very relevant to this day. He has a lot to teach all of us:

"At a young age, we end up accepting what is said about us, especially when it comes from adults. It remains this way until something comes along to contradict those early notions, to make things right, even if only superficially."

Since I recently reread Baldwin's own essay on sentimentalism, I thought it was interesting that Mabanckou seems to have the same, or similar, ideas about African literature. It surprised me to see that parallel but Mabanckou makes a pretty good argument, I'd say:

"A variety of African literature known as "child soldier" literature-- or as "Rwandan genocide" literature, when it was created more in protest than in an effort to truly understand the tragedies-- convinced me definitively that we were not yet free of the vortex of Uncle Tom's Cabin, and that the sentimentality and moralizing current that runs through some of these works does harm to African literature."

All through this read I was thinking about how our favourite author influences us and plays the role of guide in our journey. Regardless of the gender, ethnicity, era, country of origin, etc, writers can reach out to so many people, just like Baldwin clearly reached out to Mabanckou.

Eric says

a great reminder of the genius of Baldwin and how his words can still touch those struggling with identity and place
