



A Rap on Race

James Baldwin , Margaret Mead

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In 1970 James Baldwin & Margaret Mead met for an extraordinary seven-&-a-half-hour discussion about race & society. Mead brought her knowledge of racism as practiced in remote societies around the world. Baldwin brought his personal experience with the legacy of black American history. They talked with candor, passion, rage & brilliance, & their discussion became this unique volume. Here is Baldwin's creativity & fire. Here is Mead's scholarship & reason. Here, for all to see, are their prejudices, their pain, & finally, their shared desire to find the thread that binds us all.

"This book...traces a curve beginning in formal statements, moving thru wary affection & intellectual intimacy, ending with a raw confrontation."--*Newsweek*.

"Margaret Mead and James Baldwin are no ordinary people...their conversation...takes us along to places to which we could not otherwise go."--*Times Literary Supplement* (London)

A Rap on Race Details

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Author : James Baldwin , Margaret Mead

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Cathy says

Mead's input was cringeworthy and tone deaf. Baldwin's was far more insightful, but I'm not sure it's worth reading simply for his comments, since similar sentiments expressed by him can surely be found elsewhere.

Tracy Backer says

Occasionally challenging to read (you're reading a conversation, including the interruptions), but so timely and relevant. You're 'listening'/reading a conversation between James Baldwin and Margaret Mead as they talk about issues of the day (1970s), specifically race, and the difficulties that can entail from the white and black perspectives. Sadly, some things have not changed in 40 years.

Donna says

A book that is a transcription is a very bad idea! This was a failure I fear.

Kim says

I am not romantic. Thanks, Jimmy.

Kusaimamekirai says

"A rap on race" (I feel x10 cooler just typing the word rap in this context) was born out of several days of conversation between James Baldwin and the anthropologist Margaret Mead. At times, it certainly reads like that. At times rambling, and jumping from subject to subject, it feels very much like a conversation two very passionate and intelligent people might have. Running the gamut from race, colonialism, consumerism, and collective guilt, they often disagree but are always fascinating.

I found the last 1/3 or so of the book particularly interesting. Up to this point they have some mild disagreements but for the most part see eye to eye on most topics. That is until they broach the topic of history and collective responsibility. Mead is firmly in the camp of the past is the past and she refuses to accept guilt for something her ancestors did.

Baldwin deftly swats this argument away with a story about when he was a frail 10 year old and was beaten to within an inch of his life by two policeman. Baldwin argues that his history was "written on my brow" and the same history follows every black man in America.

It's powerful stuff and even Mead seemed temporarily flustered.

What I took away from this dialogue the most was the feeling that this kind of conversation seems almost unthinkable today. Could say, Steve Bannon (not saying Margaret Mead is anything like him of course!) and Bernie Sanders sit down over two days and just talk? No shouting, no trying to obfuscate truths, just a simple sit down discussion about what they believe. It feels like although this conversation took place just 30 years ago, it is as distant a possibility today in 2017 as it's ever been. For that reason alone, this is a powerful and important read.

As an aside, there is an audio version of this dialogue available on YouTube which I highly recommend as well to get the full experience.

BlackBookie says

I would love to hear the audio (if available) to experience the contexts of emotion, but I found this endlessly interesting. Especially towards the end. Baldwin's perceptions of the self with complicity in the systems that move and guide our lives is highly engaging.

Joanne says

This book is a transcription of a public seven-hour "conversation" between Margaret Mead and James Baldwin in 1970 at Columbia University. I had thought it would be worth reading (and went to the trouble of asking my public library to get it through interlibrary loan). I was wrong.

Kit Fox says

The kind of book that doesn't seem to be written anymore and which there sorely needs to be more of. Seriously, this needs to get a big old "40th anniversary" re-release with an updated version to follow; hell, things like *Robocop* get more attention. Then again, *Robocop* is a pretty amazing movie... Anyways, not that this was a contest, but towards the very last part when things got a little contentious (and Mead kept saying "fiddlesticks!" instead of swearing), Baldwin seemed to be making more cogent points regarding the inherent inequality black people experience in American society than white people, and Mead seemed a little out of touch. She wanted to relate and understand, though, and the gesture this book represents is monumental all around.

eva says

i'm glad that i was able to both read the entire transcript of "a rap on race" as well as see a live dramatization by seattle's spectrum dance company. the book is deeper, broader, & more nuanced - both in its subject coverage, and in what it reveals about baldwin & mead. but the performance made it come to life and somehow make sense in a way that the transcript never could. impossible to read these final words without getting a little teary-eyed as donald byrd's powerful voice seeps through the page.

Kevin Karpiak says

I don't know what funnier about this book, the archaic use of the term "rap" or Margaret Mead trying to convince James Baldwin he's not really black.

Karen says

I could not stand reading *Absalom Absalom* with its Southyness and constant reference to things like Wild N***** and how the non-children children that white men have with black women aren't real children, without some kind of other discussion to frame and balance it. Don't get me wrong. I don't think that the book is racist. I think Faulkner is using the novel to explore certain very dark things that include and extend beyond race into the deepest paradoxes of the human soul. But it is still a novel and still is set in a time and place that horrifies, mystifies, and overwhelms me. Thank god yet again for Baldwin. His book (a conversation with a very sharp lady, no less, which adds even more much-needed perspective and a frame of reference for experience that I can relate to) explicitly addresses in an intelligent, loving, passionate, and human way every single thing I want to investigate and understand and rant about in *Absalom, Absalom*. Instead of having to form a book club to discuss the intense racist, etc. shit in Faulkner I am letting these two brilliant men just talk to each other in my head through their work. I feel an enormous sense of relief.

Susanna Sturgis says

In August 1970 writer James Baldwin and anthropologist Margaret Mead met for a total of seven and a half hours over a three-day period to talk about "race." They'd never met before. This book, first published in 1971, is a transcript of their conversation.

Like any conversation, this one rambles and sometimes jumps around, so it's best not to come to it expecting the carefully organized progression of distilled insights that one finds in a good essay. Here two extremely intelligent, extremely articulate individuals, one black, one white, one male, one female, are feeling their way toward each other across difficult, shifty terrain fraught with dangers both seen and unseen -- and taking us, the readers, along with them.

Baldwin and Mead each bring a daunting diversity of life experiences to the project, and tremendous courage as well. It's the willingness of both participants to draw generously and bravely on these personal details that makes their journey both enlightening and inspiring to us. Communication about difficult subjects almost invariably breaks down when the parties fall back on grand generalizations. These two are sometimes tempted in that direction, but they always pull themselves back. They *want the conversation to continue*.

This is not to say that they don't sometimes get impatient and even testy with each other. Since the subject is race, experiences were forced on Baldwin from a very early age that were never forced on Mead. This is how white privilege works: a white person can choose to listen or not where a black person has no choice. Had the subject been sex, the dynamics would have been different. Sex and gender expectations do come up here, but we can only imagine what might have transpired if Baldwin and Mead had come together for a second conversation with sex in the foreground.

When this conversation happened in real time, I was a 19-year-old college student and antiwar activist. Reading *A Rap on Race* took me back to that time. War was raging in Indochina, Nixon was president, Watergate hadn't happened yet, the watershed year of 1968 still loomed large in the rearview mirror. So much has happened since then, but it was remarkably easy for me to pass between that time and our own, using this book as a bridge.

The journey may be more difficult for readers who have no firsthand memories of that era, but I think it's worth making anyway, not least because as a society we're still struggling to communicate across our culture's several fault lines. In the last 50 pages of the book, Baldwin and Mead grapple with issues of responsibility and atonement -- of the role history plays in the present day. Ta-Nehisi Coates recently brought these issues back to the fore in his landmark 2014 essay on reparations.

The polarizations afflicting the U.S. now have very deep roots, and our collective inability to communicate across them is making them worse. *A Rap on Race* suggests that we can do better than this, and provides plenty of insight into how it might happen.

Jean says

i would have preferred reading a concise analysis of the interview

Bull Durham says

A transcript of a 'conversation' between two intellectual lions of the late 60s / early 70s, this book's value was more as an exposé of what passed for an informed conversation between two elites of the time rather than, as I hoped, an examination of race relations of the time.

I walked away disappointed with Mead and frustrated with Baldwin. Mead was a cultural anthropologist scientist whose sociological studies of primitive societies were incorporated into the popular culture of the time. My problem with Mead's side of the conversation is that she comes across as a poor listener, which was shocking given that such skill is required in her line of work. Because of that too much time is wasted in drilling down on topics that got no where.

On the other hand, Baldwin, a prolific essayist of the time and whose work is the basis for the 2018 Oscar-nominated feature-film documentary "I am Not Your Negro," seems to indulge in too much baiting of Mead to the detriment of the conversation. Mead catches on during the last 20 pages of the transcript, but too late. When she does challenge him on that point, he just throws up his hands and commences to destroy his arguments.

I didn't learn much about race relations in the early 70s except that not much has changed. There are some nuggets from Baldwin that resonated with me:

"[T]he salvation of America lies in whether or not it is able to embrace the black face. If it cannot do that, I do not think the country has a future."

"It is a terrible omen when you see an American flag on somebody else's car and realize that's your enemy."

Amy says

This book took about 6 months to show up through interlibrary loan, and I can't exactly remember what made me request it in the first place, but it's not quite what I was expecting. The whole book is just a transcript of seven hours' worth of conversation -- in front of an audience, no less -- between Mead and Baldwin. Just a fascinating, frustrating dialogue between two interesting thinkers who often talk over and around each other about everything from race and identity to consumerism, television, and poetry. Sometimes I found it completely engrossing (especially Baldwin's complicated views on history and responsibility), but sometimes the unfiltered, unfocused nature of their talk was distracting (as was Mead's repeated use of the epithet "fiddlesticks").
