Each year, Loyola chooses a Common Text for all first-year students to read before arriving on campus. During Fall Welcome Week, the entire Class of 2022 will convene and you will discuss this text with your academic advisor and your fellow students in your Messina group. It is important that you read the text with care and come prepared to discuss the ideas presented in this study guide. The Common Text is considered “common reading” and may be included in Messina course discussions, tests, or assignments. We will also sponsor lectures and events throughout the year to address themes raised in the text.¹

Introduction

America is built upon a tradition of storytelling. From bedtime stories to scriptures and Facebook posts to Tweets, we have used the power of our words to contribute our voices to this shared lived experience. At the same time, stories from the Holy Bible, the Torah, or the Koran, for example, have been used to help define the moral character and fiber of different religious groups throughout history. Stories have also been used to facilitate conversations that have led to major changes in our society. They form the foundation for the principles and practices of our social change tradition—and they are essential to building the bridge to our envisioned future of a better world for all people. Telling a story opens up a person’s world to new possibilities and to that hopeful feeling that another world is possible, feelings and beliefs that then motivate an ongoing journey of change. The purpose of the Common Text is to provide you and your classmates with an opportunity to have a shared experience of reading and engaging with the same text.

During your time on campus—as you work to build community, make lifelong friends, and discover the questions that you want to spend your life answering—you will also spend some time meditating, exploring, and thinking about the Jesuit Values and about what it means to be a part of a Jesuit Ignatian community.² At the same time, with everything that has been happening around the country with the wave of student activism and involvement with the Black Lives Matter and the March For Our Lives Movements and the current administration, we fully expect you to be actively engaged in working to find ways where you can use your talents and skills to make the world (and our campus) a better and safer place. In an effort to help you to begin (or continue) to grapple with some of the issues that we are dealing with as a society, we have selected James Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time as our 2018 Common Text.³ Our hope is that as you open the book and engage with the text, you will begin to think about where you stand on the issues of race, gender, inclusion, diversity, religion, and sexuality—and about who you want to be on this campus and ultimately, in this world.

James Baldwin & The Fire Next Time

In 1963, during the Civil Rights Movement, writer and social critic James Baldwin wrote that “the black man has functioned in the white man’s star, an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to the core.”⁴ When you think of this period in American history, his comment makes sense as

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¹ For additional insight into James Baldwin, we also strongly suggest that all first-year students watch the interview with the Academy award-nominated director, Raoul Peck where he discusses "I Am Not Your Negro: Race, Identity, and Baldwin" documentary. documentary. This work was based on Baldwin's unfinished manuscript. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBmZ68pxJtU
² There are six values that are known as the Principles of the Jesuits:
   - Magis: Meaning "more." This is the challenge to strive for excellence.
   - Women & Men for and with Others: Sharing gifts, pursuing justice, and having concern for the poor and marginalized.
   - Cura Personalis: "Care for the individual person." Respecting each person as a child of God and all of God’s creations.
   - Unity of Heart, Mind, & Soul: Developing the whole person and integrating all aspects of our lives.
   - Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam (AMDG): For the Greater Glory of God
   - Forming & Educating Agents of Change: Teaching behaviors that reflect critical thought and responsible action on moral and ethical issues.
   https://www.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/StudentServices/SLIC/LEAD_Center/Jesuit_Values_PDF.pdf
³ The Fire Next Time (1963) was the first essay to spend 41 weeks in the top five of The New York Times’ Bestseller List.
America, as both a country and an idea, was struggling through what some have called the Second Great American Experiment, which was the work to end Jim Crow.\(^3\) It was a tumultuous year with both great highs (as in The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and the Birmingham Children’s Campaign) and of great lows (as in Dr. King’s time in the Birmingham Jail, the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church, and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy).\(^4\) 1963 also marked the centennial of the release of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and discussions were taking place around the country about this document. It is within this highly charged environment that Baldwin chose to release *The Fire Next Time.*\(^7\) Described as part sermon, part ultimatum, part confession and deposition, part testament and part chronicle, this book consists of two letters—the first was written to his nephew and describes what it means (in Baldwin’s eyes) to be black and male in America and the second (the longer of the two) details Baldwin’s struggle to both reconcile the struggles and oppression of black people in America with Christianity and to reconcile his struggles with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Difficult topics but timely.

Loyola faculty members, administrators, and students chose this book precisely because it forces the reader to think deeply about the type of country that they want to live in. What does it mean to be an American? How do we work to help to fashion the type of society that we want to live in? How do we take the lessons of the past and use them to shape the direction of this country? To whom are we ultimately responsible: the ones who came before us or the ones who will come after us? We encourage you not to shy away from the difficult and uncomfortable questions that you might struggle with, rather we strongly encourage you to lean in, to ask the difficult questions, to seek solutions, and to become the student who you have (perhaps) always wanted to be. This is your opportunity to craft a new narrative and to join us in a conversation that will shape your Loyola experience.

**Questions and Issues to Consider**

- What is the significance of the book’s title and its connection to the story of Noah; the titles of the two sections; and the short epigraphs that appear before each letter?
- What are some of the religious themes that are present in both “My Dungeon Shook” and “Down at the Cross”?
- In his letter to his nephew, how does Baldwin use the issues of poverty, blackness, and oppression to personalize his story so that his nephew gets a clear understanding of many of the challenges that he will face as a black man in America?
- Describe some of the challenges that Baldwin faced at the age of fourteen that made him turn to religion for answers and solace. What happened to him three years later that made him reject both his religious calling and Christianity as a whole?
- The letters tap into the themes of racial oppression, Baldwin’s sexual awakening and discovery, crime and the criminalization of the black body, religion, and self-realization—how did these themes shape Baldwin, personally and professionally?
- Describe Baldwin’s writing technique (his use of persuasive text) and explain whether or not it was successful in drawing the reader in to the text.
- Many of the issues that Baldwin writes about in “My Dungeon Shook” are being talked about today within the Black Lives Matter Movement. Do you think that American race relations have gotten better? Why or why not?
- In “Down at the Cross,” why do you think Baldwin was so adamant about not joining the Nation of Islam, particularly given the influence of both Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad and the organization’s work to help the black community?

**Additional resources to guide your reading, including information and prompts for the Common Text Essay Contest (due August 14, 2018), may be found on the Messina Common Text Website –**

[https://www.loyola.edu/department/messina/common-text](https://www.loyola.edu/department/messina/common-text). **If the content or the process of reading the book arouses concerns or questions, please contact the Messina Office at 410-617-2669 or messina@loyola.edu.**

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\(^3\) The First Great America Experiment happened in 1776 when America, as a nation, was working to find a way to both define and apply the concept of democracy. At the same time, America was still a nation with enslaved people and suppressed voices so democracy, at that time, was only applied primarily to white men with property. During the Civil Rights Movement, there was a sense that America was going through another war. Unlike the Civil War or World War I or II, this war was not about land or territory but about trying to free this country from the vestiges of the past. Jim Crow was the law of the land and the work that was being done by Americans who had envisioned a more just and verdant society, radically changed the fabric of this nation. The problem today is that even though Jim Crow has ended, we are still struggling with some of the same ideas (around who has the right to call themselves American and what does it mean to a diverse and inclusive nation) that we struggled with then. Thus, Baldwin’s book, with the questions that it raises, is as timely today as it was then.

\(^4\) For more information, see [http://www.visionaryproject.org/timeline/](http://www.visionaryproject.org/timeline/).

\(^7\) There is some confusion about this document and it is important to note that although the document at its core did not free any enslaved person, many have argued that it gave them the impetus to free themselves. See *What The Emancipation Proclamation Didn't Do* [https://www.npr.org/2013/01/09/168957092/what-the-emancipation-proclamation-didnt-do](https://www.npr.org/2013/01/09/168957092/what-the-emancipation-proclamation-didnt-do) and *Did Lincoln Really Free the Slaves* [https://www.theroot.com/did-lincoln-really-free-the-slaves-1790874318](https://www.theroot.com/did-lincoln-really-free-the-slaves-1790874318) for further information.
Further Resources
Videos about or featuring James Baldwin
“James Baldwin and America’s Race Problem,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnljXmfTSYg

Texts written by James Baldwin
“The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King,” https://harpers.org/archive/1961/02/the-dangerous-road-before-martin-luther-king/

Additional Resources
https://lithub.com/on-james-baldwins-radical-writing-for-playboy-magazine/
Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me, https://www.amazon.com/Between-World-Me-Ta-Nehisi-Coates/dp/04514822212
https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/rise-black-anti-semitism/

8 Please note, this is just a very short list of all of the resources that are available either written by or about James Baldwin. Feel free to google or to go to Goodreads for a complete list of his books: https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/10683.Best_of_James_Baldwin
Common Text Essay Contest

Answer one of the two prompts below using only the Common Text and your intellect. That is, no outside resources are needed in this exercise in reflection and discernment. The goal is original thought inspired by careful reading. Your essay should be no longer than 5 double-spaced, typed pages.

To be eligible, please submit an original essay based on the prompt below to the Messina Office at messina@loyola.edu no later than midnight on August 14, 2018. Three prizes of $350 each will be awarded. We will celebrate the winners during Fall Welcome Weekend at the Common Text Convocation on August 31, 2018.

Essay Contest Prompts (choose either A or B):

A. Baldwin, in “My Dungeon Shook,” writes, “Please try to be clear, dear James, through the storm which rages about your youthful head today, about the reality which lies behind the words acceptance and integration. There is no reason for you to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them.” (8) Think for a moment about what it means to be accepted into a society that previously held you at bay and about what it means to be integrated into this very same society: describe how Baldwin’s 1963 letter to his nephew outlines the differences between the two. Given that integration legally happened in this country in 1954 (with the Brown v. Board decision), why does Baldwin argue that the social and political condition for black people had neither improved or changed? What evidence does Baldwin give to support his assertion that black people need to accept white people? Why does he see these two points (white people accepting black people vs black people accepting white people) as being mutually exclusive rather than being part and parcel of one another? In what ways did the history of our country both limit and support acceptance and integration?

B. In his “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” Baldwin writes, “Now there is simply no possibility of a real change in the Negro’s situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure. And it is clear that white Americans are not simply unwilling to effect these changes; they are, in the main, so slothful have the become, unable even to envision them. It must be added that the Negro himself no longer believes in the good faith of white American—if, indeed, he ever could have.” (85) Think for a moment about the political and social landscape of 1963 (as outlined in both letters) and describe the type of change that Baldwin argues needed to happen but did not. What evidence does Baldwin offer to support his assertion that white America is not willing to implement the types of changes that he believes need to happen. Why do you think that Baldwin believes that black people probably never believed in the good faith of white America? It has been 55 years since the release of The Fire Next Time, briefly describe whether or not the changes that Baldwin described have actually happened.

Questions?
Contact the Messina Office at 410-617-2669 or visit www.loyola.edu/Messina for a list of academic and support services available to Loyola students, including resources to help you make the transition to campus and college life.