The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/13/nyregion/a-literary-friendship-in-black-and-white.html

A Literary Friendship in Black and White

By Joseph Berger

Sept. 13, 2004

They were two boys from striver families, showing up at DeWitt Clinton High School's literary magazine in 1939 to start clambering toward some faintly imagined heights of artistic achievement.

But in those days the chances of a friendship seemed slim. As Sol Stein tells it now, he was white, Jewish and attracted to women, while James Baldwin was black, the stepson of a Pentecostal minister and attracted to men.

But somehow their toil as editors of The Magpie, the school magazine, kindled a bond that endured until Baldwin's death of stomach cancer in 1987 and invigorated both their careers, Mr. Stein's in publishing and Baldwin's as a sage voice of American race relations.

The aesthetic climax was Mr. Stein's role in coaxing into being Baldwin's masterpiece, "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), a collection of essays that became a classic of the black experience in America. At a recent ceremony at Clinton, Henry Louis Gates Jr., chairman of African and African-American studies at Harvard, described the friendship as "one of the great moments in interracial harmony and intimacy in the history of American literature."

Now Mr. Stein, 77, a novelist and playwright who founded the publishing house Stein & Day, now defunct, has reflected on that relationship in "Native Sons," published last month by the One World imprint of Ballantine Books.

The book is a concise memoir augmented by their correspondence and a story and play they wrote together. But it manages to recreate a time in New York when, however deep-seated the prevailing racial hostilities, a relationship between kindred spirits could still flourish.

"So much happened in our work together that his color disappeared, my color disappeared and it stayed that way for the rest of our lives," Mr. Stein said in an interview at his Westchester County home.

It began at DeWitt Clinton, a sprawling powerhouse in the north Bronx that turned out

Richard Rodgers, Burt Lancaster, Countee Cullen, Neil Simon and Paddy Chayefsky. Baldwin, wanting a finer school than Harlem supplied, trekked up by subway.

The Magpie crew, Mr. Stein remembered, gathered on Fridays in the school's tower. The faculty adviser, Wilmer Stone, would read the writers' stories "in the most boring monotone imaginable," scaring one faint-hearted colleague, Richard Avedon, into a celebrated career as a photographer.

"We learned then what all writers must eventually learn, that the reader has to be moved by the words alone, without help from the histrionic talents of their author," Mr. Stein writes.

Mr. Stein, a courtly man with a twinkling smile, suggested that part of his kinship with Baldwin came from their outsider perspectives; Baldwin "assumed his ancestors came to America in chains" while Mr. Stein's parents made their way illegally from Russia. But he was also drawn to Baldwin, he said, because he was exceptionally smart.

"I have all my life been attracted to really smart people," he said. "It was not his writing, but how smart he was about life, about books, about people."

Academically, Baldwin shrugged off subjects that did not interest him, which may explain why, as well read as he was, he never went to college.

"If he wasn't interested in it, he didn't do it," Mr. Stein said. "You couldn't force Jimmy to do anything -- to come on time for a meeting, to take a day job just to support his family -- anything."

As their friendship blossomed, Baldwin often invited him over to spend time with his mother, Berdis, a cleaning woman from the Maryland shore, and his eight younger brothers and sisters. And Mr. Stein invited Baldwin to meet his family on Sedgwick Avenue in the north Bronx.

"My mother took a liking to him," Mr. Stein said. "He had these dancing hands, and Jimmy was great with kids. And I was crazy about Jimmy's mother. She was my second mother. She struck me as colorblind. I never had the feeling I was the white kid visiting. I was Jimmy's friend."

In the cafeteria or at each other's homes, they shared a Depression-era outlook toward food, expressed in starkly different ways.

"At my mother's table Jimmy would eat like a bird, one small piece at a time, taking two hours over a simple meal, while I devoured all of it in the first few minutes," Mr. Stein writes. "One might suppose that Jimmy was stretching out the pleasure of food while I

was gulping it down before it vanished."

Their friendship had to cope with the prevalent racial attitudes, as Mr. Stein discovered visiting Baldwin. "I remember a cop at 131st Street said to me, 'What's your white face doing in this neighborhood?"' he said.

Mr. Stein went to City College and enlisted in the Army Air Forces and later commanded an Army infantry unit in American-occupied Germany. Baldwin worked at defense plants in New Jersey, where the indignities he suffered among bigoted Southern co-workers and whites-only restaurants reshaped his racial outlook, and then as a waiter in Greenwich Village. They never wrote to each other. But when Mr. Stein returned in 1946, they picked up their friendship.

One subject the two avoided was Baldwin's homosexuality. "He knew I knew," Mr. Stein said. Baldwin, though, did introduce Mr. Stein to the love of his life, Lucien Happersberger, a handsome Swiss sidewalk artist who was the model for a character in Baldwin's explicitly gay novel, "Giovanni's Room" (1956), and whom Baldwin discreetly called "L" in his letters.

By the early 1950's, Mr. Stein was executive director of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, comprising 300 intellectuals opposed to totalitarianism, and he proposed a series of high-quality nonfiction paperbacks, a relatively new concept. The writers would include Bertram Wolfe, Leslie Fiedler and, with sly calculation, his friend Baldwin.

Mr. Stein helped shape essays Baldwin had been writing for intellectual magazines like Partisan Review into a book with a sustained flow. The letters portray a smooth working relationship, ruffled by tensions over Baldwin's dramatic lateness in delivering copy.

Flashes of Baldwin's sagacity but also self-doubts pepper the letters. While living in France, as he did much of his life, Baldwin recognized his rootlessness as endemic. "I'll tell you this, though," Baldwin wrote. "If you don't feel at home at home, you never really feel at home. Nowhere."

Baldwin hints at a crisis soon after "Notes" appeared to laudatory reviews: "I thought I was sick, and indeed I was, but it turned out to be only a nervous breakdown. About breakdowns, baby, there is nothing to say, nothing one can say while it's happening, nothing to be said when it's over."

Baldwin's body of work was to include the novels "Go Tell It on the Mountain" (1953) and "Another Country" (1962) and the essay collection "The Fire Next Time" (1963).

Reflecting on his friend's legacy, Mr. Stein suggests that Baldwin, despite his rage at the treatment of blacks, in his early works provided a counterpoint to the black nationalism of the 1960's and the identity politics that followed, someone who argued that black-white relationships were more complicated than one of victim and victimizer. Mr. Stein recalls that when Swiss villagers were astonished at Baldwin's color, Baldwin's literary response was to imagine how African villagers might have reacted to the first white man they saw.

Mr. Stein quotes a passage from an early draft of "Notes": "It is time for white people to stop feeling guilty about Negroes, and for Negroes to stop trying to make then feel guilty, unless they want to feel guilty about being persons on this earth."

Baldwin showed "that thought about the issues rather than anger was essential to establishing the sense that we are all human beings and not of color," Mr. Stein said. "Divisiveness works against that. Multiculturalism works against that."

His own "conspiratorial" friendship with Baldwin, Mr. Stein said, demonstrates the need for blacks and whites to encounter one another, whatever their attitudes going in. He recalled that when he was commanding an infantry unit in Germany, a white soldier from the South had complained, "They put a negra in the bed next to mine."

"I told him: 'It's in alphabetical order. Goodbye."'

But the two soldiers quickly grew so close that they were hauled up on charges of cheating together on an exam.

"I think about what is there that's applicable to other people," Mr. Stein said of his friendship with Baldwin, "and the key word is proximity."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section B, Page 1 of the National edition with the headline: A Literary Friendship in Black and White; For James Baldwin and Sol Stein, Words Kindled a Fire