



The Fire Is upon Us: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Debate over Race in America

Nicholas Buccola

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Nicholas Buccola's *The Fire Is upon Us* is a riveting, expansive companion text to a historic debate that swept the nation.

On February 18th, 1965, two high-profile thinkers met to discuss a pressing question: "Is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro?" James Baldwin, a radical black author and essayist, eloquently defended his belief that America's success was built on the unpaid labor of black Americans. William F. Buckley, the conservative founder of the *National Review*, combated Baldwin's notions of inherent American racism. *The Fire Is upon Us* not only explores that seminal debate but fills in the historical context of the moment.

No moment exists in a vacuum. When Buckley and Baldwin's debate—termed an "intellectual clash for the ages" by Buccola—occurred, these thinkers had experienced complex circumstances that brought them each to the stage. The book examines their backstories and the progression of surrounding movements. As Baldwin grew into a celebrated personality, the civil rights movement gained traction; as Buckley cultivated his career as a mainstream pundit, the conservative intellectual movement came to fruition.

By the time the book reaches the 1965 debate, the men have become fully formed and realized characters, thanks to Buccola's extensive research and storytelling. Strong, authoritative prose follows Baldwin's rise from economically depressed Harlem and contrasts it to Buckley's journey, which began in a wealthy Connecticut mansion. Complete with telling photographs and noteworthy observations, this book builds a history of two opposing movements and reveals the seeds of their modern day counterparts.

The Fire Is upon Us adds crucial personal and historical context to a debate that took the country by storm. Following the men's journeys with meticulous detail, Buccola's biographical/historical/political hybrid proffers valuable insights for the current day.

MYA ALEXICE (July/August 2019)

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