

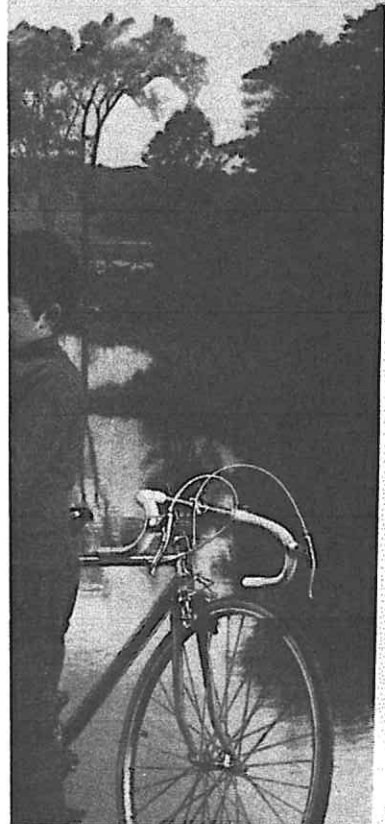
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**LIFE** BOOK REVIEW

# Useful talk by an odd couple

A RAP ON RACE  
by MARGARET MEAD  
and JAMES BALDWIN  
(I. B. Lippincott Company) \$6.95

The book does not explain how it happened, but the impresario who brought Margaret Mead and James Baldwin together was plainly a minor genius—the kind of brassy broker who in another time might have introduced Florence Nightingale to Franz Kafka; or, to mix millennia, Isaiah to Eleanor Roosevelt. Consider Baldwin: the passionate exile, the middle-aged Cassandra, brooding prophet of the fire next time. And Mead: the cool anthropologist, rational grandmother, symbol of common sense to millions of Americans.

An odd couple. Yet for two days last August, as a tape recorder eavesdropped, these two improbable communicants waged a remarkable Socratic marathon. Mead played a rather sharp-tongued Socrates to Baldwin's suffering Phaedo.

She wastes no time proving they have something in common. "As far as I know," she says to Baldwin, "I haven't any black ancestry. But you've got some white ancestry."

BALDWIN: Yes, yes.

MEAD: So we've got a brother in common.

BALDWIN: So we've got a brother in common. But isn't the tragedy partly related to the fact that most white people deny their brother?

He is eager to please, but when he considers "the tragedy" he is all petulance and apocalypse. He predicts that "the Western world will either live by what it professes to believe in or it will cease to exist." He meditates on the possibility of "blowing up the Empire State Building." He writes off white Americans who "go along singing like Doris Day in the sun and the rain," and never hear their black compatriots weeping. "I no longer care," he protests, "whether white people hear me or not."

At first Mead gentles him. Politely she translates his black chauvinism into excusable village parochialism. Yes, yes, she can understand how he feels. "When I'm in New Guinea, when I'm living in a village complete-



Baldwin and Mead rapping separately

It is a weakness she apparently cannot condone. One should see through a glass clearly, eclectically. Over the years she has gathered a quiverful of facts, astonishing arrows with which she now tries to puncture Baldwin's ballooning bitterness. She is mistress of the academic put-down.

Does Baldwin insist that "no black man has ever been tried by a jury of his peers"? Well, Mead answers, the 18-year-old has a similar problem. "Did you know that in many states you can't serve on a grand jury until you're over 25?" No, Baldwin didn't know that, nor does he appear interested. Is the Christian church "meaningless," as Baldwin claims? Perhaps, but "the great thing about a church is that it can breed heresies, whereas the sects cannot."

She is willing to grant him his peculiar racial pain—"I have never suffered as you have," she tells him—but she would rather rap on the whole human race. New Guineans believe that they become sea slugs when they die. . . . Starving Indians must get their vitamins from pine needles. . . . Human beings use only one-tenth of their brain capacity. The tape spins on and on.

At times it all seems too much for Baldwin. "I'm a poet," he reiterates. "I never learned anything through my mind. I learned whatever I've learned from my heart and my guts." And so they struggle to find each other, the sensitive poet and the sensible humanist, each feeling the weight of the brother they have in common.

Baldwin tries to come of age in Mead's milieu, and as the marathon draws to a close one suspects that his instincts are at least equal to his intellect.

BALDWIN: Let me say this. . . . nothing that we've done is that

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BOX L-3

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At first Mead gentles him. Politely she translates his black chauvinism into excusable village parochialism. Yes, yes, she can understand how he feels. "When I'm in New Guinea, when I'm living in a village completely related to everyone in the village, they're the people that matter, and nobody else matters."

Later she begins to lose patience. "You treat the country as if it had one problem," she complains. "It has a lot more than one problem."

"Yes," replies Baldwin, "but that one problem . . . has obsessed me all my life."



Baldwin and Mead rapping separately

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BALDWIN: Let me say this. In nothing that we've done in these last—what? 48 hours . . . if I did not believe you, *you, you*, I couldn't talk to you at all.

MEAD: But isn't that the answer?

BALDWIN: Wait a moment. That's the beginning of the question.

by Richard J. Margolis

Mr. Margolis is a free-lance writer who frequently writes about race problems.