



The Basketball Diaries

Jim Carroll

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The urban classic coming-of-age story about sex, drugs, and basketball.

Jim Carroll grew up to become a renowned poet and punk rocker. But in this memoir of the mid-1960's, set during his coming-of-age from 12 to 15, he was a rebellious teenager making a place and a name for himself on the unforgiving streets of New York City. During these years, he chronicled his experiences, and the result is a diary of unparalleled candor that conveys his alternately hilarious and terrifying teenage existence. Here is Carroll prowling New York City--playing basketball, hustling, stealing, getting high, getting hooked, and searching for something pure.

"I met him in 1970, and already he was pretty much universally recognized as the best poet of his generation. . . . The work was sophisticated and elegant. He had beauty." -- Patti Smith

The Basketball Diaries Details

Date : Published 1995 by Penguin Books/Penguin Group (USA) Inc. (first published June 1978)

ISBN :

Author : Jim Carroll

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography

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TK421 says

Before there was a “cop on every corner” in New York, there were some of the most interesting characters frolicking around, bounding up and down the streets as if they were players in a real-life version of a very fucked up Wonderland. Pimps and prostitutes and transvestites and junkies and businessmen and children and you-name-it all blended together and somehow figured out a way to live a somewhat harmonious existence in this concrete jungle.

This was the land of Jim Carrol. And it was in this land that Carrol wrote THE BASKETBALL DIARIES.

It was within this surreal playground that a fourteen year old basketball phenom decided to record his thoughts as his life slowly unraveled because of heroin.

The diaries start in the fall of '63. JFK is not yet dead. Nuclear holocaust is on everyone's minds. But to Jim Carrol the only pressing matter is basketball and girls. As a white kid, Carrol is an unusual basketball standout in New York City. He is rated as one of the top twenty prep players in the nation...the world is his oyster. Then, Carrol experiences his first big party. Girls and drugs abound. His life has entered into a phase where the inhabitants of Sodom might be jealous. It is also during this time that Carrol finds his voice. The entries during this time are slowly built upon, giving the reader a unique insight into the vast array of New York City.

However, it also during this time that I have to question the veracity of some of Carrol's adventures. I'm not going to say they never happened. But, I will be skeptical of how they happened. You see, to me, a diary is only the rebirth of previous memories. Sometimes these memories are shrouded in the fog of time; sometimes these memories have been tinkered with and are no longer a memory of what happened as they are a memory of what has been reconstructed. Regardless, Carrol's memories of this time evoke a sense of innocence that is about to be corrupted in a manner that can never be uncorrupted.

As the diary progresses, Carrol begins to flirt more and more with H. Never buying at first, only using when others around him supply the deadly euphoric, Carrol begins a dance that starts off as a waltz but turns into a frenetic assemblage of hands and feet that no choreographer could put any semblance to. As the diary moves from year to year, Carrol's decline becomes obvious as his basketball status slowly loses its luster. Folks know he has game, but they never know exactly what game is going to show up at any given time.

Besides the decline of his basketball prowess, Carrol notes, often in a sideway glance, what is happening in his beloved New York. It is within these segments that Carrol shines. As Carrol recounts how his relationship with his father is tenuous at best, the reader is given a sneak peak into the psyche of a child that only wants approval of the man he knows will never accept him. And as Carrol lets his hair grow long, and begins to travel with less-than-desirables, a war rages in a small country named Vietnam. To Carrol, this war is never a prominent fixture in his life, but to New Yorkers, who were constantly living in fear that the Russians would use this war as a way to attack the US, fear permeates through the streets. Kids, especially kids with long hair, are looked upon with disdain. War protestors were looked upon as if they were spies or insurgents. Sadly, during this time, Carrol was fighting this war; he just didn't know that his battles came in the form of H and basketball and family.

When the diaries conclude, some three-and-a-half years later, Carrol is a shell of the person he could have

become. But he is also so much more of what the man he is about to become. Let me explain. As his H problem increased, his basketball abilities decreased to a point where he was no longer looked upon in awe. But, also, as his H addiction increased, his will to adequately convey his journey through thoughts and images and words increased, too. Carroll remarks about this strange change, describing it as though he needs to write just as much as he needs to find where his next score is coming from.

THE BASKETBALL DIARIES takes Carrol from Harlem to Manhattan to Riker's Island and everywhere in between. This is so much more than a story about being a junky or a disenchanted street kid from New York; this is a story about loss and real-life, about hope and the everlasting truth that hope is sometimes only found in the minds of those that are still crazy enough to believe in it; it is about finding the apparition of happiness within a world of phantoms.

Woefully, it is about knowing that life is not all about happy endings.

And as I sit here and type this review, I am still contemplating the last sentence of his diary. What does it mean? Was it his last confession? Did he know that his life was only going to get darker and decide that the reader was no longer invited on his journey? It was written in the summer of '66 after Carrol had lost almost everything. "I just want to be pure..." he says.

What an incredibly haunting admission.

All I can say is: Don't we all?

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Elizabeth says

Jim Carroll's diary about growing up "urban" on "mean streets" is a crock of shit. He grew up with a supportive family, albeit not wealthy, and he was given opportunities other kids could only dream of. He got himself hooked on heroin and other drugs, skipped school (where he was lucky enough to be on scholarship), frequently committed robbery, burglary, armed robbery and burglary, trespassing, assault, and ended up arrested a few times and in jail at Rikers. This work isn't an achievement, it's a celebration of white male privilege. If Carroll had been a minority or woman, his actions and character would have been condemned, not celebrated. This diary gives insight into the self-serving life of a voluntary addict with authority issues, and while may have been considered groundbreaking, is an affront to people not given the opportunities Carroll had. The positive reviews for this book are an allegory of passing members of the basketball team in school just because they showed up to class.

Jessica says

I don't really remember a thing about this book except that I really did like it at the time that I read it, around age fourteen. When the movie came out I cut school and drank some cough syrup or something and went to go see the matinee by myself. This was in Leonardo DiCaprio's fleeting, long-past early-nineties moment of hotness, and in the movie -- which was bad -- he looked gorgeous and lanky leaping around on the basketball court in his Catholic schoolboy uniform -- *dammmmmmn*. Whew! Leo, oh, Leo.... where did you go wrong?

But I do remember his junkie scenes being really corny and dumb. And that's about all I remember, oh and then something about swimming in the East River, which is gross.... well in retrospect, maybe it's the Hudson? I also remember that when they want to get codeine cough syrup, they have to sign for it at the pharmacy, but they don't need a prescription or anything like that, they write fake names and the guy just gives it to them, even though they're only like thirteen or whatever. Young Jessica was like, "GOD, was I born too late....!"

Anyway, I'd be interested to go back and reread this and see if it's still good. I'm really fascinated by my own adolescent fascination with substance abuse and general nihilistic fucked-uppedness, which is something I've finally realized not everyone has, and which I have only fairly recently -- and okay, not completely -- grown out of. I definitely think of this book as being a romantic period piece, and I love the mix of old-school New York, high school basketball, and hard drugs, a mythology of urban kids out on the street, this boy running around scribbling in his notebook.... As a prolific adolescent diarist, I'm sure I was thrilled by and envious of Carroll's anti-glamour-glamour, and wished I had more shocking stuff to write in my own notebook. I sort of remember this book being inspiring in that way, which I still appreciate -- when reading what someone else has written pushes you to document your own life, though I remember as a kid the frustration that my own life was too dull and tame to be worth recording.

I would like to revisit this book at some point, though I'm sure it won't be magical the way this stuff was for a kid. Isn't it funny how uncool drugs start to seem when you get a bit older and actually see them devastate people's lives? I don't know what it is about kids -- or at least some kids, or okay, I'll speak for myself: me as a kid -- that they (we) find this kind of danger and devastation so compelling. I guess it's the obvious teenage thirst for knowledge and rebellion, and maybe also the fact that drugs and disease don't make you ugly until you're an adult. You totally don't believe in Hep C when you're a kid, and maybe you do believe in dying from an overdose, but more, again, for its ability to immortalize you and make your band cool forever, not as a literal thing.

I will add as a post-script that "People Who Died" is one of my all-time favorite running songs, and arguably one of the best of ALL songs. I have no idea how *The Basketball Diaries* holds up, but that song will definitely live on forever!

Anyway, R.I.P. Jim Carroll. Thanks to Tosh Berman, I just found out that he'd died earlier this month. I remember being surprised and a bit guiltily disappointed as a kid when I found out that Carroll was still alive and living in New York. It was the same thing as when I'd learned Lou Reed was still alive.... teenagers are such heartless little bitches. Anyway, the *Times* article about Carroll was pretty moving and tragic. I think his life illustrates in a lot of ways the teenage perspective: that ideal of going out blazing, and not getting any older. Getting older is difficult, and dying's very sad. When you wait longer to do it, you lose the sexiness of those who die young and stay pretty. I guess that's an adolescent attitude, but it's not irrational. I am very glad I lived past youth, and also, of course, that Carroll did too. But I will say adult life does lose some of its glitter, especially the gritty shit, which when it's stripped down by time can just look depressing. Maybe that's what the kid fetish for the dark side is really about: coming out of childhood and realizing how fucked up the world is, then trying to make sense of that by seeing these things as poetic and alluring? I think that's what this book did for me way back when I read it. And I'll admit I sort miss that, even though it's really stupid. When you see things that are ugly as just being ugly, your world's percentage of ugliness really does shoot up.

Natalia says

If I had to chose one book as my favorite of all time, it would be *The Basketball Diaries*. I've basically lost track of the number of times I have reread it.

The fact that the book is, in fact, Carroll's diary makes it so much more real. His experiences aren't censored and modified. Instead, you are given an intimate and raw look into a portion of Carroll's teenage years and his struggles with substance abuse, as well as just growing up, in 1960's New York City.

RandomAnthony says

The Basketball Diaries reminded me of an after school special (look it up, kiddies) gone very, very wrong. And while I'm sure this book attracts adherents because it's "real" or whatever I can't say the book held much of my interest.

Maybe *The Basketball Diaries* is one of those titles that when first published (1978) was considered cautionary and groundbreaking but needs too much license and contextualization in 2011. For example, these passages are supposedly Carroll's authentic (although edited) teenage diary transcripts. If this is so, well done, high school Jim Carroll, you get an A+, young man. But I think there's a reason that not many teenage authors get published and, honestly, it's because teenagers write like teenagers. You can't blame them. They're teenagers. Also, the whole "did a lot of heroin and now I'm becoming an addict" arc felt very *Go Ask Alice* (published in 1971) but filtered through the lens of a NY hipster. Ok, you did heroin. And then you did heroin again. Oh, and you did heroin a third day, and pretty soon, you spent all day chasing heroin. Page after page of heroin-chasing gets boring. So while maybe *The Basketball Diaries* has some historical value as a document of aberrant behavior in early seventies NY, the endless "I did drugs/I had sex/I cut school/I played basketball stoned" messages gets tiresome. I'm not sure of the point, even if the passages read quickly and Carroll's writing, even as a high school kid, is smooth and natural.

Maybe I'm jealous because, if this book is accurate, Jim Carroll had more sex by age sixteen than I did in my teenage years X 20. I'm not sorry I read *The Basketball Diaries* but I wasn't impressed, either.

David says

Some bold lines. Visceral and vivid, striking. Perhaps I should have read this when I was a bit younger, but I still enjoyed it now. Strong writing.

Frank Stein says

The book starts out amazing, with Carroll writing in his diary as a sharp but un-selfconscious 13 year old willing to share his own mundane and amazing stories. At this point he's just a lower class Irish kid on the Lower East Side who has a talent for basketball but still spends most of his time running around shoplifting, doing drugs, and chasing girls. He relates it all with a beautiful honesty and lack of pretense. As the book

progresses, though, he becomes more aware of himself as a writer and an "artist" and picks up some obnoxious 60s hipsterisms ("fuck you and your war pig dreams, dig?"). He also gets heavily into heroin, and the book turns from a series of adventures into a ceaseless search for H. On one level it's just another junkie memoir, except it's told in the moment, which is both amazing and annoying in its way. He actually becomes a stick up artist holding knives to little old ladies but is too far gone to see anything wrong with this. He even uses some of the 60s cant to justify it all ("the real junkie should be raised up for saying fuck you to all this shit city jive, for going on with all the risks and hassles and con.") Some of this can get to you, but it's still all fascinating. The book ends with him still addicted, still only 16, nodding off in a filthy shooting gallery, wondering what he did to himself. It's these moments of realization and horror that make even this part a great read.

E.D. Martin says

This book was insightful, in that it showed us the life of a very troubled kid in 1960's NYC. But what value is that, in that it was mostly his daily activities without any insight into why he did it? There was no growth, no reflection. No beginning, no end. This was a snapshot, not a reflection.

Unbridled says

I kind of want to make fun of this book, so I will, momentarily: "Listen up cats and kittens, I won't jive you, if you dig a 13 year old voice that squeaks to be hip, this is the book for you. No squares allowed, dig?" This diary reads exactly what you'd expect from a posturing 13 year old - as edited by the diarist with eyes on Rimbaud and Burroughs (and the rest of the Beats) many years later. Even though this sounds dismissive, I don't want to give ol' Jim too much of a hard time because there are moments of beauty too and it is understandable Carroll became a poet and sought the beautiful in the murk for the rest of his troubled life. And say what you will about the exaggerations, fabrications, and outright idiocy of the 12-15 year old mind, in that 3 year span good ol' Jim lived more of a life than most can wring out of 75. I admit to being slightly impressed that he played basketball in an elite NYC league with Lew Alcindor (the future Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) and Earl "Goat" Manigault (the legend of his time). That's the big time, ya dig? He's funny too - a poor man's NYC junkie heir to Huck Finn/Tom Sawyer.

Blake Nelson says

I was so young when I first read this, I didn't know that the word "lame" was just the normal word "lame", like kids used. I thought it was a fabric or something. I wasn't used to seeing how people actually talked, printed in a BOOK.

Etienne says

2,5/5. I had loved so much the movie adaptation with DiCaprio when I was young that I thought this would be a great read. Unfortunately, I find it long, repetitive, and just not deep enough. It contains scenes of drug uses and basketball games and just not enough introspection as I would have liked. Not what I was expecting

and I was left on my appetite here...

Tosh says

In my intensity to read anything regarding the streets of New York City, I picked up this book at Alias East in Atwater Village. I have known this book for ages, but for whatever reason I had no interest in reading it. The only interest for me is New York. The drug part is not interesting to me, but i think anyone from that world or is about to go into that landscape, would probably find this book fascinating.

To me it reads like a young adult novel, or memoir. I would give this book out to teenagers, who are interested in reading about that subject matter. Not sure if its appropriate for a young persons eyes and brain, but the narration of the journal is very straight forward. He grew up at a young age, and yet, the book is still innocent to me. But his experiences are real and in no way does it confirm the joys of heroin or makes that life heroic, but it does capture a moment and time of youth going by quickly.

If I read this as a teenager I think it would mean more to me, but reading it now as an adult, it doesn't have the pull or interest to grab me. And this is not Carroll's fault as a writer, but more about me as a reader. But really the U.S. school system should use this journal as a text book. I imagine it would lead to interesting discussions in the class room.

F says

One example of the film being better than the book.

Kevin says

I actually read with Jim in 1996 or so. It was at Berbati's in Portland and he was very shaky and nervous. As he kept reading though, he seemed to really take off and his words soared to wonderful heights. But I may be imagining that because I was high on acid that night. Ironic, since I think Jim was actually clean.

Melki says

Sex, drugs and stealing purses.

WINTER 1964

My old lady found a nickel bag of grass in my hiding spot under the rug today and flushed it down the toilet. She had a long talk with me and asked me if I was addicted to the stuff. I told her it's heroin you get addicted to, not grass, and I think I finally convinced her. She was not so convinced that she'd give me back the five bucks though, when I asked her for it. In fact, I think she got a little angry about it.

Jim Carroll's early teens growing up in nineteen-sixties' Manhattan were W-A-Y different from mine spent in suburbia a decade later. While I was reading crappy movie-tie-in novels and wondering why boys didn't like

me, he was hustling gay sailors, and robbing stores and elderly women, all while nursing a heroin habit.

I know that teens are universally self-absorbed, but Carroll takes the cake. According to him, EVERYONE, from priests to teachers to women on the subway, either wants to do him harm or have sex with him...or both. He seems not to like or care about anyone other than himself. When he catches the clap at age 14, he doesn't go to a "real" doctor because *They won't let you out without finding out the name of every girl you ever touched, and then they send out these notices to all your chicks, next thing you know, you can't get a girl to talk to you.*

Had I read this when I was younger, I may have found it illicit and thrilling, I don't know, but at this point in my life, Carroll's accounts of relentlessly using others for his own satisfaction makes for a murky, depressing and frankly, boring, read.

Lynx says

It's amazing to know Jim Carroll wrote this book when he was age 13-16, not only due to subject matter but for the undeniable talent that seeps through every page. With Manhattan as his playground and local junkies, thieves and hooligans as his playmates, Carroll spirals from mild delinquent to full blown addict believing (as all addicts first do) that where others fail, he has it all under control.

Those expecting this to be like the movie beware. Hollywood takes a bunch of his stories, glosses them up and presents them to you nicely gift wrapped. Carroll himself does no such thing. He lays them out, fearless and real, strips them raw and leaves you to pick up the pieces.

Neil Strauss says

I strongly recommend for those who don't regularly read.

William Prystauk says

Carroll's diary chronicles his teenage years of drug addiction in New York City during the mid-1960s. He tells the reader candidly about his addictions to glue, codeine and heroin, what he did to get it and all the sex he had along the way.

Most importantly, Carroll established a consistent tone and voice full of sardonic wit and he never flinched at revealing his life at the time. For better or worse – most assuredly worse – Carroll has the guts to expose his ugly self to the reader and holds no punches because he is a man who has accepted his weak and dark self. This makes him one hell of a strong individual in my mind since he had the guts to face himself head-on. This is a very brave work to say the very least.

In regard to voice, Carroll's delivery is poetic as well as manic. As if he has little time to tell the tale, Carroll delivers it quickly and sharply. Needless to say, there is no fluff here and there is certainly no slow going. The language is also bold and colloquial, adding to the youthful New York aesthetic, helping to paint an even clearer picture of Carroll's world for the reader. He reveals a sort of underbelly, showing the reader that

drug usage wasn't just for the college-aged Hippie set, but could reach into jacket and tie wearing, teenage Catholic boys.

If this had been a smoothed out reflection of his past, the book would have failed miserably. By keeping the work youth-based and in the moment, the narrative has verve and a sincerity that would have been lost. I'm so glad Carroll didn't use his teenage writings as a source to look back into his past, but presented them as "then and there".

Carroll makes no apologies for himself or the situations he had gotten himself into. The book gets dark and claustrophobic, and he never lets us come up for air. He keeps us in his moment regardless of all its ugliness, leaving us to make our own judgments.

Carac Allison says

William Burroughs and Irvine Welsh wrote my favorite books about junk addiction. I love "Naked Lunch" and I love "Trainspotting".

I don't think of Jim Carroll when I consider those two writers. Because I don't think of Jim Carroll as a writer.

I don't think of "The Basketball Diaries" when I consider those two novels. Because "The Basketball Diaries" isn't fiction.

Jim Carroll was a prodigy diarist and "The Basketball Diaries" is a personal journal of his addiction. The power of the words comes not from his creativity but from his fearless account of the truth. He relates the depths of his personal depravity. He confesses to his crimes and sexual servitude. He becomes a beat poet of the real, chanting and shaking to conjure.

The Dicaprio movie isn't bad. But the true spiritual film adaption of this book for me is "Kids". Now that might seem strange. Because "Kids" is not about heroin at all. But it has the same sense of kids acting like adults in an urban world with no boundaries.

Carac

Ben says

The book where I felt transported to a place so different than the world I knew. Still one of my favorite books.

And now for some riffage at TNBBC's The Next Best Book Blog - <http://thenextbestbookblog.blogspot.com>
