

THE BASKETBALL DIARIES

Jim Carroll

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Reviewed by

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THE BASKETBALL DIARIES by Jim Carroll is a literary miracle; a description of the formation of an artistic sensibility written by the artist, not in retrospect, but in the process. It is a portrait of the artist not just as a young man but as a child, written by the child, and thus free of the mature artist's complicated romantic love of himself in pain. It also works engrossingly well as a narrative, *The Catcher In The Rye* for real, for bigger stakes.

The Basketball Diaries is an anecdotal journal kept by Carroll from the age of twelve to fifteen, more or less from the first time he shot heroin until he showed up at Ted Berrigan's poetry workshop, a basketball in one hand and his poetry in the other, when he became something of an overnight sensation. Entries from the *Diaries* have been leaked one and two at a time to various poetry magazines over the years, surrounding the work with the atmosphere of legend. Once every couple of years there would be a new rumor that it was being published in *fat*; now, at least, here it is.

It makes a difference, seeing it all together. Reading it in drips and drabs over the years, a rather precious impression was created by Carroll's sharp ear for hip street lingo and the Mark Twainish droll exaggerations. It seemed to be the charming but trivial work of a pre-co-

sional tendency towards smart-aleckiness, the theme that reverberates through the whole, like the recurring melody of a jazz improv, is the struggle of a boy to hold on to his sense of himself. *The Basketball Diaries* is concerned with the ethics, rather than the politics, of survival.

In one telling episode, the junk-sick narrator goes in desperation to his middle-aged lover for money to procure the only medicine that will avail. She gives him the money; a friend who has come along goes out to score the heroin, leaving Carroll to sweat and shake it out till he gets back. His insatiable lover attacks him as soon as the friend leaves. He is revolted and tries to leave, although he can hardly move from the cramps. "What about my sixty dollars, you prick!" she screamed. "What about my innocence," I said, going down."

Rimbaud is the name that pops up, when people (Ted Berrigan and Patti Smith, for instance) talk about Jim Carroll, and *The Basketball Diaries* in particular. It is a useful invocation, for a change. One especially thinks of Rimbaud's remark that "The soul has to be made monstrous." If one word describes what happens in the *Diaries*, it is monstrous. The difference is that Rimbaud is talking about a self-conscious, systematic cultivation of the monstrous with the end of becoming a visionary, "the supreme Savant." There is nothing so calculated about Jim Carroll's excursion into the inferno; if there is an organizing principle here, it is not, refreshingly, the design of an artist preparing himself for writing poetry. He is only obliquely aware that he is a writer, which is exactly the genius of it. *The Basketball Diaries* functions with the kind of unimpeded sensitivity of observation that sometimes occurs when the writer is in direct, intimate touch with himself when his writing approaches

artlessness.

Make no mistake: *The Basketball Diaries* is no great work of literature. It is not literature, in the usual sense, at all. It is a great work of storytelling, in the most elemental sense—storytelling as in Homer, the kind of storytelling that happens when two good friends on a cross-country drive find themselves on the interstate in the middle of the night, two hundred miles from nowhere. It suffers from all the faults of the genre, too: some of the stories sound made up, others are stock footage from anyone's adolescence. In a prefatory note, Carroll says that people frequently ask him, with understandable skepticism, whether it all really happened. His response is a quotation from Hassan Sabah, the founder of the cult of the Assassins: "Nothing is true; Everything is permitted." To put it another way, the question is no more pertinent here than with Homer. Even the parts that are made up are true.

Like any narrative of the truth, *The Basketball Diaries* is a harmonious blend of funny passages and depressing passages. When it is funny it is hilarious, reminiscent of Lenny Bruce at his best. When it hits a blue note, it is harrowing, as in the final entry:

In ten minutes it will make four days
I've been nodding on this ratty mattress . . . both my forearms sore with all the little specks of caked blood covering them . . . two sets of gimmicks in the slightly bloody water . . . all the dope scraped or sniffed clean from the tiny cellophane bags . . . I get up and lean on a busted chair . . . I can see the Cloisters with its million in medieval art out the bedroom window . . . four days of temporary death . . . I just want to be pure.

Jamie James, formerly a sports columnist for *Andy Warhol's Interview*, has just completed a novel entitled *The Wallis MSS*.