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Basketball Diarist Bounces Back

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The last time Jim Carroll played at the Middle East was three years ago. He shared a bill with Ray Manzarek, the former keyboardist for The Doors. But when Carroll returns to the Middle East tomorrow, the rock will probably take a back seat to the literary. Fans of Basketball Diaries scribe Jim Carroll have been waiting for the poet's first fictional work for the better part of a decade. The wait will continue, but at tomorrow's show, audience members will get a sneak peak at Carroll's novel-in-progress.

Carroll is best known for Basketball Diaries, his bestselling 1978 memoir recounting his adolescence in the rough-and-tumble Inwood neighborhood of Manhattan, which formed the basis of a 1995 film starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Carroll also ventured into the world of punk music with his 1980 hit single "People Who Died," immortalized in the opening scene of Steven Spielberg's E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial.

Since the 1998 publication of his last book of poetry, *Void of Course*, Carroll has been writing furiously but without focus, simultaneously working on two novels. One, tentatively titled *The Petting Zoo*, is the story of a young painter in New York. Carroll is keeping details of the second novel under wraps. All he will say is it resulted from a "great epiphany" years ago and that he "almost sold it as a film to somebody, but I didn't want to do that."

Fans are getting anxious, and so are Carroll's agent and lawyer. He humorously describes a "literary intervention" where his agent, his lawyer, and the agent's assistant all met him for lunch after *Void of Course* was published. "They all laid into me, saying, you have to choose one of these two books. You've been making notes now for years," he said.

Six years have since passed—and neither novel has yet been published.

The Petting Zoo follows "a hotshot painter" who has a nervous breakdown after viewing the work of seventeenth-century Spanish painter Diego Velazquez at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. As Carroll explains, "he thinks he sees in Velazquez's work a spiritual element...and he thinks his paintings and those of his contemporaries are spiritually bereft." The young painter then spends 72 hours in a psychological observation unit—"because they can do that if they think you're a danger to yourself or other people"—and subsequently goes into a recluse period.

Carroll calls the novel a "triptych—it doesn't have chapters, it just has three parts." He is in the process of rewriting some of the parts and "weaving them together," and the book, to be published by Viking Penguin, which has also published Carroll's other works, should see the light of day sometime this year.

But Carroll will debut some sections of *The Petting Zoo* tomorrow—if printer problems don't get in the way. "I'm going to read a lot of pieces of new prose, and I usually wait until the last minute to figure out what to read," Carroll said. "But since it's new stuff, I'm going

to have to think about it and print it out—except I can't print it out.”

Carroll consistently draws roars of laughter from his audiences. “The best bet at a club is to go for the funny stuff,” Carroll said, but he added that most of *The Petting Zoo* is “pretty serious.”

Carroll's earlier memoirs, *The Basketball Diaries and Forced Entries* (1987), drew criticism from one New York Times reviewer who said Carroll was too eager to sacrifice literary value for shock value. “One is aware almost throughout that the author is more intelligent than he appears,” wrote Christopher Lehmann-Haupt.

But Carroll says that in *The Petting Zoo*, “I'm not diminishing myself...at all. I can just cut loose and be as erudite as I want to be.”

Carroll adds: “It's easy to get by on a façade of fancy style, but sooner or later people are going to see through it. I'm trying to be as honest as possible.”

Sooner or later, Carroll will also have to hand in his overdue manuscript to his publisher.

As deadlines come and pass, Carroll has been forced to greatly cut back on his touring in the last year. But Boston holds a special place in his heart: his 1980 album *Catholic Boy* was a favorite among Beantown college audiences.

He admits he is a little nervous about the upcoming reading, especially having just recently recovered from pneumonia. “I did a reading in Worcester and there was a lot of smoke in the room, and the air conditioner didn't work, and I just got so sick, I thought I was going to die,” he relates. “Then the guy behind me threw open the door, because they can see I was sick. All this air came in, and I just sat down on this stool there. The audience was very patient. They thought I was doing some weird meditation thing, like astroprojection or something.”

There will be no astroprojection tomorrow, but Carroll will read at the Middle East Downstairs on 472 Mass. Ave. at 8pm. Tickets are \$15.

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