

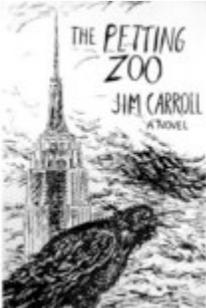


Fiction review: 'The Petting Zoo' by Jim Carroll

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In 1978, Jim Carroll published "The Basketball Diaries," his memoir of being a New York City teen in the mid-'60s, shooting hoops, shooting dope, turning tricks in public men's rooms, a beautiful Titian-haired Catholic kid running in sync with the energy that runs beneath the city's streets.

Carroll already was a bona fide poet and downtown art star. He lived with Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe in the '70s; fronted a successful punk band in the '80s; Leonardo DiCaprio played him in the 1995 film version of "The Basketball Diaries." When Kurt Cobain committed suicide, it was Carroll who went on MTV to read a poem he'd written, "8 Fragments for Kurt Cobain," which

began:

Genius is not a generous thing

In return it charges more interest than any amount of royalties can cover

And it resents fame

With bitter vengeance

With the posthumous publication of "The Petting Zoo," the novel he had been writing for nearly 20 years, we see the price Carroll paid for his genius and fame, as well as how seriously he took his responsibilities as a poet, the person who translates pain and beauty for the rest of us.

The story revolves around 38-year-old Billy Wolfram, a golden boy painter of the late '80s New York art scene. After seeing a Velasquez show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Billy flees into the petting zoo in Central Park, where the "characters in the paintings still shouted out, and ... continued to taunt him now for the shortcomings in his own work and his frivolous life."

Wolfram's crisis is so profound, he is first institutionalized, then takes up hermitage in his Chelsea loft, trying

to figure out why he can no longer make art. If he once felt umbilically attached to the enchanted kingdom of Manhattan, fed by its streets and art and inhabitants, now he lounges indoors; he watches TV; he despairs. In an attempt to draw sustenance from shame, he recalls the most humiliating times in his life, notably the time his mother barged in on him masturbating in order to tell him Kennedy had just been assassinated, an event that left Billy permanently impotent.

But maybe his impotence is not his fault? Maybe it's "the jaded cultural atmosphere in which he lived, where the cult of celebrity stripped the artist's work of all dignity and put him or her on the same aesthetic level as a fashion model"? Or is it that Billy's life has become too decadent, with an apartment building and maintenance in perpetuity left him by his late agent? And will the immortal talking raven that hops in and out of Billy's life provide the answers?

The choice of a protagonist who is a "full-out virgin to drugs," drinks little and is incapable of having sex, may have been Carroll's attempt to tap a new creative vein. But good Billy, neutered Billy, is not up for it. One of the few parts of "The Petting Zoo" that has any music, any oomph, is when he recalls he and a friend being paid, as teenagers, by a rich old queen to dress up in lederhosen and play naughty German boy scouts. Carroll knows where the gold is hidden, and still has access to it, but he will not let himself go there. Which is a shame. Where his writing was once fleet and fierce, now it is overwritten, tentative.

If "The Petting Zoo" does not succeed as a novel, as the archeology of the artist, it is fascinating. The real story here is watching Carroll try to recapture "that divine spark, the scintilla vitae." And he does try, he writes and he writes, so hard that at one point I imagined him in a train yard, at night, for 20 years, coupling and uncoupling the cars, laying and tearing up the track, in order to build a path of transcendence for us. Because wasn't that his job? To show where art comes from and how it's made and the meaning of birth and death and God? And wasn't he allowed, as he approached the winter of his life, to answer these questions without all the drugs and sex?

One does not know if Carroll would have published this book (it was edited and released just over a year after Carroll died, fittingly for the city to which he was devoted, on Sept. 11) or whether it was enough for him to keep looking, or if he would have eventually written one poem that explained it all, only that he died trying.

-- Nancy Rommelmann

The text to Carroll's poem "8 Fragments for Kurt Cobain" is at
americanpoems.com/poets/Jim-Carroll/214

THE PETTING ZOO

Jim Carroll

Viking

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