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Dudek on Film

Film critic Duane Dudek offers his take on the state of the movie world

Catholic Boy

By Duane Dudek of the Journal Sentinel

Sept. 23, 2009

The death of poet and punk rocker Jim Carroll of a heart attack last Friday, was pretty good news.

In light of the self inflicted pain of the high school jock turned junkie, burglar and hustler, the good news is that he lasted this long.

His punishing biography "The Basketball Diaries" chronicles the bleak events of his life between 1963 and 1966 when he was a Catholic high school student and son of a single working mother.

During this period Carroll committed felonies, sniffed glue, played on a basketball team on its way to a championship and ransacked opposing teams' locker rooms for cash.

But what separated him was his intelligence. He was never without a notebook in which he scribbled the verse that became his autobiography and his poetry. "The Basketball Diaries" was published in 1978, and a not very satisfying or coherent film was made of it in 1995. It starred a waifish and bulimic lean Leonardo DiCaprio, fresh off his Oscar nomination for "What's Eating Gilbert Grape."

He survived to become moderately well known for his music, including the aggressive song, "People Who Died," the video of which can be seen below, interspersed with clips from the DiCaprio film.

But my favorite Carroll song is "Catholic Boy," with its lyrics about being "conceived in pain and not in joy," which always remind me of my favorite book James T. Farrell's "Studs Lonigan" trilogy, which is about that very thing.



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mcasey5

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Mr. Dudek,
Thanks for your column on the late, great Jim Carroll. However, some of your information is off. First, Carroll did not grow up with a single mom. His parents were married. In fact Carroll's dad, a saloon-keeper in NYC, is in the B-ball diaries (the book, not the sappy, silly movie version), and Carroll attended Trinity High, which is not a Catholic school at all.
Always good to check the real book and not rely on movie versions as facts.
Michael Casey