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misc ●

People Who Died: Remembering Jim Carroll

The first time I met a writer was the first time it occurred to me that one could be a writer.

I was a college sophomore who, through a random set of instances, walked into a very large auditorium containing a very small audience.

Jim Carroll was on a dark stage reading from a collection of stories, *Praying Mantis*, that he had just

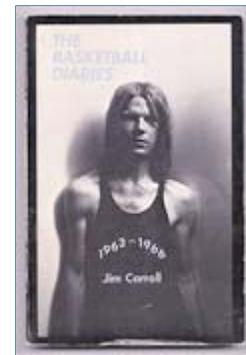
put out. His crackling, stuttery, affected voice filled the room as he said, "This is 'Tiny Tortures' ([mp3](#))." I actually counted the number of people in the audience: eight.

Carroll had survived modest success in the '70s as a rock singer. "Catholic Boy," which sounded a little like The Clash meets the Stones, and "People Who Died" ([mp3](#)) were small hits in 1980. But after that he lived in relative obscurity for over a decade, until Leonardo DiCaprio came along to play him in *The Basketball Diaries*.

When I walked into that dark room, Carroll was reading something called "A Day at the Races" ([mp3](#)). I grew up in a town about the size of your apartment building, so this was the first time that I ever heard someone read their own work. And I was mesmerized.

I happened to know the student council person who booked him at this random midwest college, so I asked her if I could take Carroll out for the night. Frightened by his stories of heroin abuse, she was relieved that I would entertain him. So at a bar called Whitey's on a cold winter night in North Dakota, Jim Carroll drank with me. He told me a hundred stories about people and places I had never heard of. And he frequently snuck in the bathroom to do I-don't-know-what.

I had never met someone like Jim Carroll, but his writing eventually led me to people like William Burroughs and Patti Smith. I never talked to him again after that night, but every time I walked down St. Mark's -- 10, 15, nearly 20 years later -- I thought of him. It was one of those incalculably small events that probably changed me



forever.

Update: [NYT obit.](#)

