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Jim Carroll: author of The Basketball Diaries

Jim Carroll was a writer, rebel poet and punk rocker, who became best known for his autobiographical work *The Basketball Diaries*, turned into a film in which he was played by Leonardo DiCaprio.

A youthful acolyte of Andy Warhol, he became a central figure on the New York art-punk scene in the 1970s alongside Patti Smith and the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. His poetry earned the praise of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and comparisons with Bob Dylan, and in 1978, with the encouragement of Smith, he formed the Jim Carroll Band, with whom he released several albums. His music was acclaimed enough in punk circles but it was his 1978 book, *The Basketball Diaries*, that earned him notoriety, with its lurid account of his fall from promising high-school basketball star to teenage heroin addict, hustling on the streets of Manhattan.



Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries* was hailed as a classic of adolescent literature for its portrayal of teenage angst

James Dennis Carroll was born in 1949 in New York into a staunchly Catholic family. At the age of 15 his sporting prowess earned him a basketball scholarship to Trinity, one of New York's top private schools. He was a good enough player to be recognised at national high school level, but — according to the account he gave in *The Basketball Diaries* — by the age of 13 he had started using heroin and was soon funding his habit as a male prostitute on the streets around Times Square.

Carroll had also developed a love of poetry and was drawn as a would-be writer to the St Mark's Poetry Project in Greenwich Village, where he met Ginsberg. His first book of verse *Organic Trains* (1967) was published before his 18th birthday and he was instantly lauded as a significant new poetic voice, with work appearing in prominent literary magazines including *The Paris Review*.

After briefly attending Wagner College and then Columbia University, Carroll dropped out to throw himself wholeheartedly into New York's bohemian art scene, gravitating to Andy Warhol's Factory, where he wrote dialogue for several Warhol films and later co-managed Warhol's theatre. He was also employed as a studio assistant by the painter Larry Rivers and by 1971 was living in an apartment with fellow spirits Patti Smith and Mapplethorpe.

Further books of verse followed with *4 Ups and 1 Down* (1970) and *Living at the Movies* (1973). In 1973, as he later chronicled in the book *Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries*, he left New York for northern California in an attempt to kick his heroin addiction.

On the West Coast he married Rosemary Klemfuss, although the union did not last for long. He

also launched a parallel rock'n'roll career, after the punk poetess Smith had invited him on stage to recite his poetry, accompanied by her band. Suitably encouraged, he teamed up with a San Francisco rock group called Amsterdam to form the Jim Carroll Band. They caught the ear of Keith Richards, who recommended them to the Rolling Stones' label, Atlantic Records, which signed Carroll on a three-year contract.

His debut album was *Catholic Boy* (1980), with a style that owed something to the influence of both Smith and Lou Reed. It made him a cult figure in punk circles, but his music reached the mainstream when one of the album's most striking songs, *People Who Died*, was featured in the 1982 film, *ET*. Further albums followed in similar style with *Dry Dreams* (1982) and *I Write Your Name* (1983), featuring Lenny Kaye, Smith's lead guitarist.

By then, Carroll had published *The Basketball Diaries*. It was acclaimed as a classic of adolescent literature — some critics compared it to J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* as a portrayal of teenage angst and rebellion — and eventually led Carroll to return full-time to writing.

In addition to providing lyrics for other musicians, including Boz Scaggs and Blue Oyster Cult, further collections of verse followed with *The Book of Nods* (1986), *Fear of Dreaming* (1993) and *Void of Course* (1998). He also published a second autobiographical work with *Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries* (1987). Carroll also recorded several spoken-word albums, including one of him reading from *The Basketball Diaries*, released in 1994 to cash in on the film of the book which appeared the following year, starring DiCaprio as Carroll.

A first novel, under the working title *The Petting Zoo*, had occupied him since the early 1990s but progress was slow and how close the work was to completion at the time of his death is not clear.

Jim Carroll, poet, author and punk musician, was born on August 1, 1949. He died of a heart attack on September 11, 2009, aged 60

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