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Greetings from Israel: Remembering Punker, Author Jim Carroll as a Teen



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I knew Jim Carroll during the period when he and I were teenagers who occasioned the St. Mark's Poetry Project in 1967-1969. By the time he passed away, Carroll was somewhat of a celebrity. Excerpts of his Basketball Diary--later popularized in film--appeared in early editions of *The World*, the monthly poetry magazine that the Project published.

My best memory of Carroll was during a lengthy and exceptionally boring poetry reading that occurred inside the chapel of St. Marks Church in the Bowery. I was sitting in the pew with Carter Ratcliff, as Piero Heliczer continued to intone his verse, oblivious to the growing restlessness of his audience. Heliczer was associated with the coterie of writers, artists, and actors that orbited about Andy Warhol.

During his lengthy recitation, just as Ratcliff and I thought that his reading was winding down, he employed a smoke machine that further facilitated the obscurity of his works, if not our own view of the poet at the lectern. While all this was happening, Ratcliff and I were in titters, bowing our heads with the greatest reverence beneath the level of the pews, smothering our guffaws, so as not to call attention to ourselves. Each time we thought that the poet had signaled his denouement, he would restart with something else that would throw us into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

Then, without warning, as the chapel had already filled with bellowing smoke from Heliczer's machine, the doors rattled and firemen suddenly burst into the nave, shouting to each other while dragging a long fire hose from the street in search of fire. As they proceeded down the aisle, it finally became clear to them that there was no fire, just an artsy gathering of people that sat redemptive and quiescent in a church full of artificial smoke, with an obfuscating figure rambling at the podium.

I don't know who was more stunned, Heliczer's captive audience, the befogged firefighters, or Heliczer ascending from oblivion. At first, Ratcliff and I thought that the crashing of the firefighters was part of the show, which would have been a cleverly conceived device for metaphorically relieving us of our crushing boredom and pent up energies, the firefighters as our redeemers or saviors within the ecclesiastical setting. Instead, we later learned that Jim Carroll, sensing the same profound ennui that we were experiencing, had inconspicuously retreated out onto the street and pulled the lever at a nearby fire alarm. Truly a memorable moment!

Born in the United States, Barry Steinberg relocated to Israel in 1969. He lives and works as a farmer in Eilon, a kibbutz in northern Israel. His parents and brothers live in Bethlehem, Pa. His wife, Debby, is from Plainfield, N.J.

Links to more information about Jim Carroll:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/14/books/14carroll.html>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdfnLhRCuQ&feature=related>

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