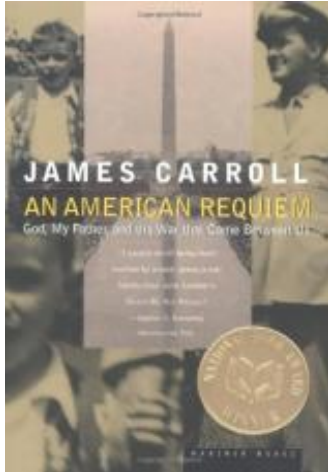


An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War That Came Between Us

by James Carroll



About the Book

Winner of the National Book Award. Joe Carroll was an Air Force lieutenant general who chose Vietnamese targets for American bombs. Joe's son James began adulthood by fulfilling his father's abandoned dream of joining the priesthood. But soon a father's hopes for his son--and a son's peace with his father--were ruined, yet another casualty of a war that tore apart so many families along generational lines.

Discussion Guide

1. How did Lieutenant General Joseph Carroll, in his person and his history, embody the forces that shaped James's life and behavior?
2. How are various hierarchical authorities, both institutional and individual, portrayed in the book? How do father and son, individually, relate to them?
3. What is the significance of Carroll's beginning the book with his ordination Mass and closing with Joseph Carroll's requiem Mass? Is this framing device appropriate to the progression of the book's narrative?
4. In chapter 1, Carroll writes that, during the early years of his anti-war activity, "I was two people, and . . . each of my selves seemed to have a coherence and integrity that were belied by the fact that I could not bring them together." Does he succeed in integrating his disparate selves?

5. In chapter 1 and again in the final chapter, Carroll writes, "I believe that to be made in God's image is to do this: arrange memory and transform experience according to the structure of narrative. The story is what saves us." How does this belief relate to both Carroll's personal development and his book?
6. The concept of redemption recurs in various contexts, not all of them religious. What kinds of redemption are presented? Does one eventually assume precedence?
7. What are the similarities and differences between Carroll's life and his father's? How did his father's life and career shape Carroll's own?
8. What photographs in the book seem of particular importance? What is their significance in the progression of James Carroll's life?
9. Several men play important roles and have profound influences, both positive and negative, at key points in Carroll's life. Who are these men and what are their roles and influences?
10. In chapter 3, Carroll writes that "[presidential] inaugurations had been like a sacrament of the streets to me, rituals of rebirth," and he later refers to "the holy mysteries of Washington." What other religious or liturgical terminology is used to characterize political and social events, places, and people? What effect does the use of this terminology have?
11. What biblical allusions and images occur in the book? How do they enhance Carroll's narrative and our understanding of his story?
12. Does Carroll succeed, at the book's conclusion, in achieving "the acceptance and forgiveness and affirmation" that, in chapter 4, he longs to bestow on his own younger self?
13. In chapter 5, Carroll identifies "three distinct but related revolutions—interpersonal, religious, political - that I underwent as a Paulist." Does he convincingly demonstrate the occasions and nature of each of these "revolutions" as the book proceeds?
14. In chapter 6, Carroll refers to "the worship of false gods, the making of idols" as "the sin to watch out for." What does he mean by this? Can you identify the false gods and idols to which he refers?
15. What bearing on his personal story do Carroll's narratives of events outside his own direct experience or observation have (e.g., political corruption in 1930s Chicago, the FBI's harassment of Martin Luther King)? Are they necessary to his, and our, understanding of his experience?
16. The words "priest," "poet," and "prophet" can be applied, individually or together, to specific persons who appear in Carroll's narrative. Who are these priests, poets, and prophets, and how do they embody the qualities of each role?
17. Does Carroll present a coherent picture of the true dynamics of his family, including his own relationships with his mother and four brothers? Does he focus too narrowly on his relationship with his father?
18. On the book's final page, Carroll makes a number of statements that reflect on both his life and his book. How does

each of these statements relate to everything that has come before?

?War had come down to war between us. I saw the lesson of it clear: we both lost.?

"The broadly political is always personal for me.?

?The story is a victory over the need to be victorious.?

Author Bio

James Carroll was born in Chicago in 1943 and raised in Washington, D.C., where his father was an Air Force general and the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. He was educated at Washington's Priory School and at an American high school in Wiesbaden, Germany. He attended Georgetown University before entering St. Paul's College, the Paulist Fathers' seminary, where he received his B.A. and M.A. degrees. Carroll has been a civil rights worker, an antiwar activist, and a community organizer in Washington and New York. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1969. Carroll served as Catholic chaplain at Boston University from 1969 to 1974. During that time, he studied poetry with George Starbuck and published books on religious subjects and a book of poems. He was also a columnist for the National Catholic Reporter (1972-1975) and was named Best Columnist by the Catholic Press Association. For his writing on religion and politics he received the first Thomas Merton Award from Pittsburgh's Thomas Merton Center in 1972. Carroll left the priesthood to become a writer, and in 1974 was a playwright-in-residence at the Berkshire Theater Festival. His plays have been produced at the BTF and at Boston's Next Move Theater. In 1976 he published his first novel, **Madonna Red (1978)**, which was followed by-- among others-- **Prince of Peace (1984)**, and **Memorial Bridge (1991)**. **The City Below (1994)** is now available in a Houghton Mifflin trade-paperback edition. He has written for numerous publications, including The New Yorker, and his op-ed column appears weekly in the Boston Globe. He won a National Book Award for *An American Requiem*. James Carroll lives in Boston with his wife, the novelist Alexandra Marshall, and their two children.

Critical Praise

"A tragic, moving book about a family torn apart by the Vietnam War, a young man looking for God, a writer finding his voice."

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