

## Squalor Revisited

A journalist reports on his own past as a drug addict

By Edward Kosner

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### The Night of the Gun

By David Carr

Simon & Schuster, 389 pages, \$26

The addiction bookshelves are as well-stocked as the neon-lit back bars at good saloons, but David Carr's memoir, like a peaty single malt, has its own peculiar tang.

A longtime druggie and complementary drunk, Mr. Carr survived a protracted Hogarthian interlude to raise infant twins to womanhood, beat cancer and emerge, minus his spleen and half his pancreas, as a media correspondent and columnist for the New York Times and the paper's annual Oscar blogger. He tells the story of his serial falls and resurrections in "The Night of the Gun," a remarkable narrative of redemption as manipulative as it is compelling.



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What distinguishes Mr. Carr's book from so many others is that he didn't simply rely on his added memory but strenuously reported out his own life, swooping in on ex-lovers, enablers and rehab therapists with tape recorder and video camera to check their recollections against his own. Not all of them were thrilled when this specter from their squalid common past reappeared, intent on fact-checking his war stories, nearly all of which are retold here in unflinching detail.

Mr. Carr was born the middle child in a big Irish family whose members remind him of characters in a John Cheever novel lost in the fringes of Minneapolis. Three siblings "have the allergy to alcohol," he reports; his father is in recovery, and his mother liked her toddlers. "I drank and drugged," he writes, "for the same reason that a four-year-old spins past the point of dizziness: I liked feeling different."

He succeeded in feeling different thanks to a pharmacopoeia that included LSD, peyote, pot, mushrooms, mescaline, amphetamines, Quaaludes, Valium, opium, hash, liquor of all kinds -- and morning-glory seeds (which didn't live up to their psychedelic promise). "Over 15 years, I had made a seemingly organic journey from pothead to party boy, from knockaround guy to friendless thug. At 31, I was washed out of my profession, morally and physically corrupt, but I still had almost a year left in the Life."

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#### EXCERPT

"The voice came from a long distance off, like a far-flung radio signal, all crackle and mystery with just an occasional word coming through. And then it was as if a hill had been crested and the signal locked. The voice was suddenly clear."

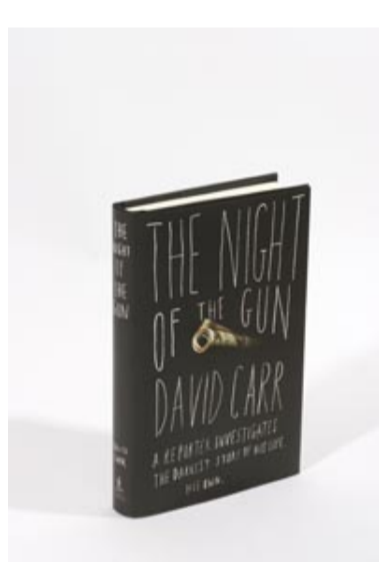
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On the way to the bottom, he deals drugs, beats up women, cheats on his young wife, steps out on one girlfriend with another -- conveniently enough, a flourishing drug dealer -- and knocks her up. They are blissfully sharing a crack pipe when her water breaks and they lurch off to the hospital, where their twin girls are born two months prematurely. Later, when Mr. Carr has taken over custody of the toddlers, he leaves them bundled in their snowsuits in his freezing car outside a crack house while he goes in to scavenge a pick-me-up.

There's much more: nine arrests in two years for DWI and worse, endless barfs and brawls, five stints in rehab, and nervy hassles with the unfortunate editors of the alternative newspaper and local business magazine he writes for. And then there is the episode that gives the book its title. When he was fired from his magazine job -- as Mr. Carr's memory had it -- he went on a toot with his wingman, got into an argument with him, and later showed up at his house oozing booze and belligerence -- to be confronted by the pal hefting a handgun. But Mr. Carr's reporting of his own life subsequently reveals that the villain with the gun in his hand that night was . . . the author himself.

He writes with grace and precision about the unmatched pleasure, at age 21, of that first snort of coke: "My endorphins leaped at this new opportunity, hugging it and feeling all its splendid corners. *My, that's better.*" And the fraught drudgery of the cokehead life: "All that ripping and running sparks a kind of corrosion -- no sleep, lots of booze to take the edge off -- that wears even the hardest souls down to a nub. It . . . leaves marks: the scar from the casual swipe of the box cutter during some beef, the burned extremity because he or she went to sleep with the blowtorch on, the eyes that saw too much because they did not close often enough."

Mr. Carr has devised an ingenious strategy to deal with objections to the solipsistic nature of his enterprise: He pleads guilty before the reader can bring charges. He details his own abasement without self-pity, seems extraordinarily fair to the other characters in his one-man show, and volunteers that reporting your own life is "a vainglorious endeavor that is presumptuous in the extreme." He even anticipates the problem embedded in the second, redeeming part of the book, quoting his Times boss's warning: "That s- is sooo booooooring. Nobody wants to read about that."



Perhaps, but Mr. Carr's deliverance has its surprises. In thrall to his waif daughters, he cleans up, wins legal custody, slaves at hackwork to break back into journalism, rebuilds a life for his girls with many helping hands, wins the love of a good woman (a conservative Republican!) and goes to Washington to edit the City Paper, a step on the yellow brick road to the New York Times. Even a terrifying brush with Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the immune system, can't derail him.

Mr. Carr is crafty, too. In the midst of recounting his uplifting Washington renaissance, he offhandedly mentions that he was still inviting crack home, often with the twins sleeping just upstairs. And near the end of the story, now remarried and with the Times, he relapses after 14 sober years, going on road benders and snorting coke now and then. In late September 2005, Mr. Carr is arrested for drunken driving in New Jersey while heading for one of the twins' college-recruitment nights at school. That prompts his latest and so far successful stab at recovery -- and the impulse to report his memoir.

True to his persona, Mr. Carr is at once a charming and an annoying narrator. He has a weakness for quoting other writers -- more than 30 counted, from Cervantes to Hunter Thompson -- and he calls nearly every flop a "face-plant." He also tends to overvalue his earlier journalistic coups at alternative papers -- even quoting staffers from his stint at Washington's City Paper about what a neat boss he was.

Slyness and self-regard are often markers of the junkie personality. With grit and a recovering user's candor, Mr. Carr has written an arresting tale of pleasure paid for with pain and humiliation and damage to others -- a more revealing story of an addict's fall and rise than perhaps even he realizes.

**Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News. His memoir, "It's News to Me," has been reissued in paperback.**

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