

# [***Opinion: E. Jean Carroll's victory over Trump is every survivor's victory***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B6B-9XW1-JBSS-S06M-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; The [*$83.3 million verdict*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/trump-trial-e-jean-carroll-01-26-24/index.html) handed down in E. Jean Carroll's defamation case against former President Donald Trump on Friday is far more than a judgment against Trump. Crucially, it's a vindication of Carroll - and a statement in favor of every survivor who ever questioned whether what happened to them was "bad enough" to count as sexual assault.

The verdict marked [*the second time in less than a year a jury has awarded Carroll millions of dollars*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/09/politics/e-jean-carroll-trump-lawsuit-battery-defamation-verdict/index.html) in damages from Trump. In May, a Manhattan federal jury found Trump sexually abused Carroll in 1996. The former president denies all wrongdoing and, as he did in May, took his frustration to Truth Social. "I fully disagree with both verdicts, and will be appealing this whole Biden Directed Witch Hunt focused on me and the Republican Party," he posted shortly after the latest verdict was announced Friday.

There are many shades of gray inside the silver lining of this decision. Legally, the award is an attempt to quantify the damages Trump wreaked on Carroll's reputation, her sense of self and her life. I think most humans, including everyone on that jury, recognize that what Trump took from Carroll can't be quantified. A further dimming of the light: the inevitable lengthy process of getting Trump to pay and how much that final amount will be.

As a person who writes about ***politics***, I can find some other shades of gray. I am disappointed that the mechanism of justice here was a civil court and not a criminal one. Criminal courts also deliver imperfect justice, but I know I'd like to have at least a single instance where I could drop "accused" and "alleged" from my descriptions of the president's repeated predatory behavior.

What's more, I've seen the Trumpist right blithely deny reality over and over again, so I am doubtful of the Carroll verdict's ability to change their minds. Even more to the point, I fear the upshot of an additional application of a slap-dash veneer of martyrdom upon the Trump brand. Supporters brandish mugshots of him as badges of honor; I fear his fans won't reject his attitude toward Carroll - and other survivors. Instead, they'll lionize and echo it.

Yet, I'm going to celebrate this verdict, because I am a survivor of sexual assault and while I cannot speak to what the verdict means for Carroll, I can tell you what it means for me: What happened to me matters, even if - as Carroll did - I initially hesitated to call it what it was.

In her book detailing the incident, Carroll [*refused to call what Trump did "rape."*](https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/6/27/18761024/e-jean-carroll-donald-trump-accusation-rape) Yes, her description of the incident includes him penetrating her ("halfway - or completely, I'm not certain") after subduing her using violence, but she did not want to call it rape. (In May, while the jury found that Trump sexually abused Carroll, [*it did not find*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/09/politics/e-jean-carroll-trump-lawsuit-battery-defamation-verdict/index.html) that she proved he raped her.)

At the time, observers tried to parse this demurral every which way. Carroll's testimony wasn't a neat narrative. She claimed agency: "Every woman gets to choose her word," [*she told Megan Twohey of the New York Times*](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/27/podcasts/the-daily/e-jean-carroll-trump-interview.html?showTranscript=1), "Something has not been done to me. I fought." At the same time, she seemed to discount the severity of what happened: "I was not thrown on the ground and ravished," [*she told CNN's Anderson Cooper*](http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1906/24/acd.01.html). She also strove to remind people that rape has nothing to do with attraction: "The word rape carries so many sexual connotations. This was not sexual. It just hurt."

But if Carroll's story wasn't easily slotted onto some universally understood, objective spectrum of sexual violence, that's because there is no objective spectrum of sexual violence.

There are, perhaps, categories of outward-facing physical damage one could triage in an emergency room: Does this person need medical treatment before that person?

But the damage done to a whole person (in physical, mental, emotional and spiritual senses) by sexual violence can't be put in a spectrum or charted on an X-Y axis. You can't judge it as a percentage of a whole, or give it a grade or measure it on a scale of 1 to 10. Not even $83.3 million can really tell us that much about what Carroll has experienced. It's not enough, that's all we know.

One could be disappointed that the award is, legally, a function of Trump's behavior after the incident and not what he did to her in the dressing room of Bergdorf Goodman in 1996. But it's in the aftermath of an assault that survivors discover how much pain they're going to have to live with; it's in context of the stories that other people tell about those assaults that we have to discover what the truth is for us.

Carroll shouldn't ever have to talk again about what happened in that dressing room. Her story is hers to keep to herself. But this verdict changes the story I've been telling in my head. This decision means that people who belittle an experience like mine should pay consequences... so I really should stop belittling it myself.

Opinion by Ana Marie Cox

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