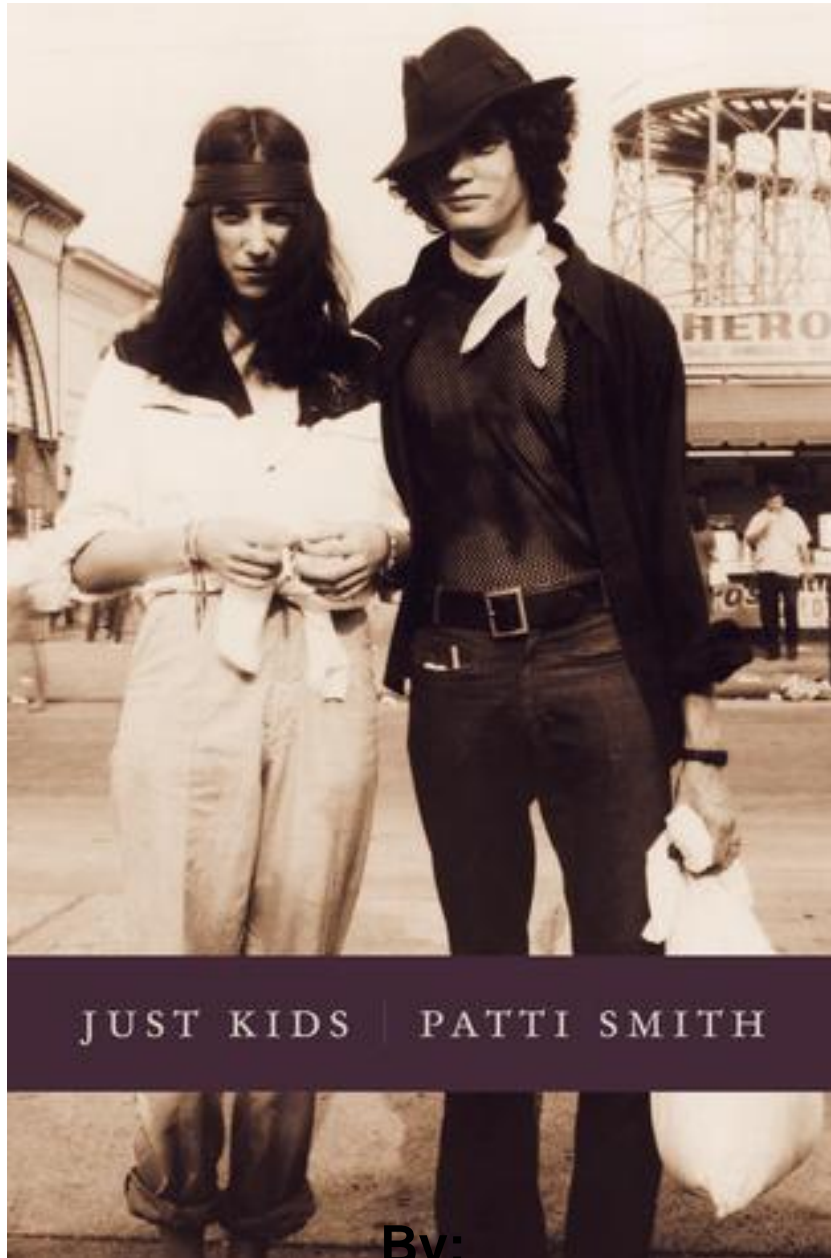


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What people Say:

Eddie Watkins

I never thought much about Patti Smith. The images I saw of her never attracted me, and what I knew of her Rimbaud fixation turned me off. I always had a problem with the Beat and Punk appropriation of Rimbaud as more a figure of rebellion than a sophisticated poet. For me poetry is a phenomenon of the page, not an outfit you wear down the street. I also never got into Punk Rock. Going to college in the fall of 1983 I had probably only heard of The Sex Pistols, though I had never listened to the

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... until a couple years ago. But what a great album! and I would say about it what I would say about other Punk I've gotten into since - such as Television and The Minutemen - that it is nothing other than simply great Rock & Roll. So I grew curious about Patti Smith and then this book came out and I snatched it up. It's a sweet and gritty account of her growing into maturity and how it coincided with her relationship with Robert Mapplethorpe. There's a wise naturalness in how she grew into the woman we now know. There was ambition, but only on her own terms, and there was no striving to be part of a scene outside of herself (& Robert), though she ended up in one fascinating scene after another as the grimy and vibrant New York art/bohemian landscape tumultuously morphed into the previously unknown seemingly by the hour in the late 1960's and early 1970's. She portrays these scenes as the outsider she always felt she was, yet they're portrayed head-on, not through a scrim of self-consciousness or psychic distance: she was in the thick of it, even acting as a nurturing figure to many, yet she was also strangely apart from it. Throughout there's a focus on her intimate relationships and how their effects radiated out into the situations she was involved in, which gives the feeling of a real

regardless of how crazy things were. But whoever she was with - Jim Carroll, Sam Shepard, a guy from Blue Oyster Cult - Mapplethorpe still permeated her consciousness. In many ways they were alike, but in even more important ways they were very different, and part of the fascination of this book is pondering the duality they set up - Robert alienated from his family and erasing his past to find the future while Patti was always firmly bedded in her past and in her family, Robert's wild drug

use and Patti's basically straight life, Patti's Victorian sloppiness and Robert's decadent minimalism, and of course the sexual complications. This book is not only entertaining but lovely and wise too.

Bonnie

Just Kids makes me feel so damn left out. If only I had been able to show up at the Chelsea in the early 1970s. I coulda been a contender, I could have lived for art. Oh yes, I would have been very naïve just like Patti had been at first. I totally get that. I don't think I could have been as brave tho'. Art is a harsh mistress.

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What I loved about this memoir is how it communicates (in a rough, rambley sort of way) what it was like to be there. In that milieu. It almost seems irrelevant that they all became famous.

Ian "Marvin" Graye

I can see why some reviews detect white-washing or sugar-coating in "Just Kids", but I wanted desperately to believe the story Patti Smith was telling about her relationship with Robert Mapplethorpe.

Patti admits to her naivete, but I don't think she was trying to hide stuff from her kids or anything.

Nor do I think she closed off her emotions about her past.

Ultimately, the book is a love story, only the love extended over a long period, and sometimes it

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Ultimately, the book is a love story, only the love extended over a long period, and sometimes it was requited, sometimes not.

Lots of things got in the way, sexuality for starters, drugs for main course, other partners for dessert.

But the book is about a love that they shared, and a youth that they both retained the whole of their lives, no matter what happened on the inside or the outside and no matter how poor or successful they were.

Nicholas

There are some moments of real poignancy here and some very deft turns of phrase, but I was also just bored stiff for most of it. Clearly Smith has led a really interesting life, but she's just not a great writer. The great bulk of the book was a long series of "Then this happened. Then that happened. Then Robert did this. Then I did that." And while there is a lot of reflection about art, there is very little on the subject of her relationship with Mapplethorpe, supposedly the purpose of writin

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Then Robert did this. Then I did that." And while there is a lot of reflection about art, there is very little on the subject of her relationship with Mapplethorpe, supposedly the purpose of writing the book. How and why did she stick with him -- as a lover -- through his gay hustling? What did she feel about this? She is by turns squeamish about his homosexuality and also fully accepting of everything he does. There's nothing inherently wrong with either reaction but I'd like to hear a little more about them.

Bottom line: had this not been Patti Smith writing about Robert Mapplethorpe, and had I not been in a book group where we were discussing the book, I wouldn't have kept reading past the 50th page.

Patrick Brown

This book is remarkably easy to parody. Here, I'll try:

"I was crossing Tompkins Square Park when I ran into a young man wearing a gabardine vest. He smiled at me and called me "Sister." It was a young George Carlin. Robert hated him because he frequently had flakes of rye bread in his beard, but I loved how he could make me laugh with his impressions of Mick Jagger. On this morning, though, we wept together at the news that Paul McCartney would have to sell his house in Cannes. It was a sort of

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between two pieces of crepe de chine, where it left a ghostly impression. Robert insisted on using it in a construction, and finally I relented, though I knew I'd never get it back. It was a sacrifice to art, the sort of thing Rimbaud would've done."

I think this parodic potential arises from the book's total and complete lack of irony. This is the most earnest, sincere book I've read in a long time, and that's what makes it so heartbreaking. Smith begins the book with an abundance of naivete, and in many ways, she never loses the idealism with which she begins her career. Written in a lyrical, elegiac tone, this is, at its heart, a book about the bond two artists develop. There's a remarkable amount of honest in the pages, and Smith's and Mapplethorpe's friendship is unique. They were lovers, collaborators, confidants, rivals... Their lives were the stuff of legend, and this book is a valiant effort to put that legend on the page.

If you've ever held the romantic "starving artist" cliché in esteem, this is the book for you. Smith spends paragraphs talking about how hungry she was when she first moved to New York, and she isn't using the word as a euphemism for ambition -- she really needed to eat. Upon her return from a season in Paris, Mapplethorpe greets her in a feverish state, suffering from abscessed wisdom teeth and gonorrhoea. And yet! They lived the lives of artists, staying up into the wee hours creating, writing, singing. They knew everyone. Harry Smith, Allen Ginsburg, Sam Shepard, Jim Carroll, Todd Rundgren, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin -- they all passed through Smith's life, and they all make memorable appearances in the book. It's a name-dropper's paradise, and yet, I didn't come away from the book feeling as though Smith was boasting or exaggerating her own life. I'm sure she's omitted some unfortunate moments on her rise to the top, but she seems honest about her own shortcomings (She freely admits that she acted like a jerk after her first big poetry reading, for instance).

I knew nothing of Robert Mapplethorpe beyond his work and the controversy it had caused in the late 80s (I was too young to understand much of what he was trying to say, though I could understand the controversy just fine). The portrait Smith paints of Mapplethorpe is one of a passionate, wildly creative artist, and also of a man driven by his ambition to become famous. Her friendship with him was clearly the defining moment of her life, and reading about it was a pleasure. I often felt lost in this book, and I suspect that that's the only way to read it -- to just plow through it. I don't think I share all of Smith's ideas about art, but I respect her passion and her talent as a writer. Her prose is clear and direct and eminently readable.

And maybe best of all, wherever I took this book, people would comment on it. "I just finished it. It's heartbreaking." Or "I wish I had her passion." I love when I read a book that inspires that kind of connection between people. It makes me feel, even if only for a moment, that I live in the kind of world that Patti Smith lives in.