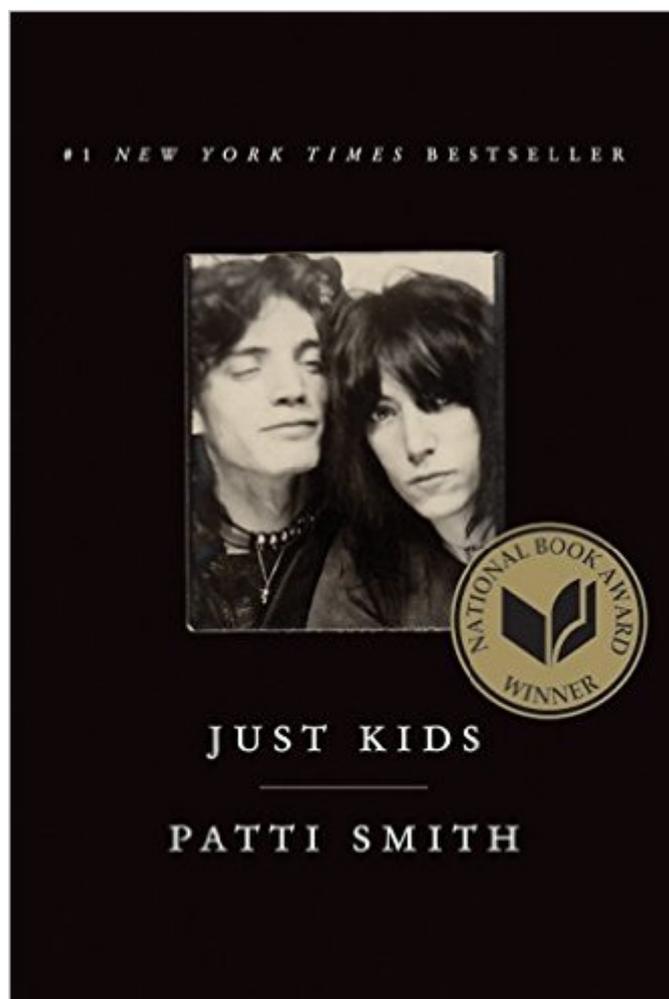


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Just Kids



Synopsis

In *Just Kids*, Patti Smith's first book of prose, the legendary American artist offers a never-before-seen glimpse of her remarkable relationship with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe in the epochal days of New York City and the Chelsea Hotel in the late sixties and seventies. An honest and moving story of youth and friendship, Smith brings the same unique, lyrical quality to *Just Kids* as she has to the rest of her formidable body of work—from her influential 1975 album *Horses* to her visual art and poetry.

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Customer Reviews

Before she became the Godmother of Punk, Patti Smith was just some girl who came to New York in search of herself. We have a tendency to view her as always having been a rebel, guitar in hand, spouting her distinctive mix of poetry and invective at society. But the reality was that Smith came to New York as a refugee, uncertain of who she was and what she wanted to be. That's sometimes a bit hard to believe or realize, but in "Just Kids" Smith reveals just that: she wasn't one half as confident then as she is now, and that she had no idea what she was going to do once she arrived in New York. While this is true of almost everyone from her generation, it is somehow shocking and bizarre to ponder. More interesting was that her first lover and partner in New York was none other than future photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. The bulk of "Just Kids" is Smith's recollection of Smith's early years in New York with Mapplethorpe and how they came to create their own image as artists and auteurs and to craft their image and art. Again, it seems weird to think of either of

them as being anything other than fully formed individuals, and that, in and of itself, seems supremely bizarre. We seldom think of the intervening events that came to create them as artists, yet here is Patti Smith lying bare exactly how she came to be what she became. The result is a fascinating and spellbinding narrative that you can scarcely set down. Ultimately Smith learns that Mapplethorpe is gay and both go on to find their own loves and their own directions in life and in art. In that degree "Just Kids" feels like only the beginning of a captivating story, the transition to another chapter, and I sincerely hope, a transition to another volume of memories, as I'm no doubt certain that Smith has a wealth of other memories than span well into the 80s, 90s and beyond. But for now I'm heartened to hear what she has to say as for now, the era before she became Patti Smith. And rather than being a trip down memory lane, "Just Kids" reminds us that everyone had to start somewhere, and success is never easy or certain. Smith's prose also wonderfully captures an era of New York City that has largely faded to the mists of time and memory. It is a time and place I was glad to revisit for a while. Immensely enjoyable and quite readable "Just Kids" is probably one of the best rock autobiographies I've ever read!

Just Kids is Patti Smith's memoir of her and Robert Mapplethorpe's time on the edge, two kids who found each other on streets of New York and were determined to become artists. Just Kids doesn't inundate the reader with biographical details about Mapplethorpe or too many of Smith, it's not a diarist's memoir but more of an impressionistic one. Smith writes like her prose is poetry, it flows easily over the page, and flows easily from scene to scene as she and Mapplethorpe struggle to define themselves and their art. What it does give is a sense of the person Mapplethorpe was, a person who cared about Smith, and she about him. Her insight into Mapplethorpe is both sympathetic and empathetic, without seeming to have the forced perspective of hindsight. It may be, but Smith's understanding and acceptance of Mapplethorpe's dualities seem contemporaneous to the moment. We're witness to the portentous moment Mapplethorpe is given his first camera, and when Smith was releasing her first album, *Horses*, she knew no one else but Mapplethorpe could do the cover photograph. Just Kids is interspersed with Mapplethorpe's photographs of Smith. Smith has a good sense of humor about herself in this period, living at the Chelsea Hotel, Allen Ginsburg tried to pick her up because he thought she a good looking young man. Or how no one in her and Mapplethorpe's circle believed she was neither a heroin addict nor a lesbian. Smith who claims among her influences, Rimbaud and Baudelaire, is firmly in the romantic vein, down to the presentation of the book with rough hewn page cuts and sepia wash, all combine to the nostalgic feel of the book. If someone were to write a memoir for me, this is what I would wish it to be.

Have you ever awoken from a dream and yearned to tell someone close by all the seemingly concrete details that made so much sense in unconsciousness, but upon consciousness are rendered incomprehensible, even worse, banal when spoken? Or, have you ever had to retreat midway through a story about how interesting a scene or city was to have experienced with that sad qualifying statement: "Well, I guess you had to be there," those blank stares and yawns from listeners way too much to bear? Well, I have. Patti Smith has not, at least not in the case of her exquisite new memoir, "Just Kids". The difference between me and her is that my attempts to transcend mere description when writing about my past always deflates either into senseless name dropping or banal "my summer vacation essay" style explorations, whereas Smith, in "Just Kids," transcends all the pitfalls of the memoir genre and tells a poignant tale of two struggling artists in the late 60s - 70s in New York City--her and Robert Mapplethorpe--without sounding pompous, pretentious or boring. It's always the inexplicable that's most interesting. If you strip away what's ineffable about the spirit of a defining period of time you are left mainly with the banal: eating, sitting, hanging out, arguing, making money, paying rent, and so on. That's why memoirs are so difficult to execute and only a talented writer tempered with restraint, such as Patti Smith, can adequately do the genre any justice. As I was reading "Just Kids" I was continually struck with just how easy this book could have degenerated into a self-absorbed, indulgent tale of bohemianism and name dropping. The story itself is set up to lend itself to this sort of abuse. The fact is that Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe were in New York City during an especially vibrant and exciting time for art and artists and otherwise bohemian types. The beats, rock and roll, which was still relatively new and exciting, Andy Warhol, the Velvet Underground: the list goes on: see, I'm name dropping; it's hard not to do! Instead, Smith uses a contemplative voice to recount her and Mapplethorpe's travails as they both went from two unknown starving artists to the great stars they later became. Where it could have been an appallingly boring story of braggadocio, such as telling the story of their ascendancy from front of the house to the "round table" at Max's Kansas City, instead is done masterfully through Smith's self-depreciation and reluctance. As much as the reader gets an insight into Robert Mapplethorpe, his personality, sexuality, and art, he still never lets the mystery of his character bleed through, certainly not a two dimensional character. In a way, he's the one holding the reader in suspense throughout the book. This demonstrates just how talented Smith was to carry this off--and how telling! for it was ultimately Smith who never completely came to an understanding of him. For instance, on numerous occasions she states her bewilderment at a finished piece of art, or his subject matter (the gay S&M underworld of New York City, e.g.) or the

sudden choices he would make, for instance running off to San Francisco. The true nature of the cohesion in their relationship was not in the things Mapplethorpe did, per se, but in the transparency of the processes behind Mapplethorpe's art and life. Isn't it the processes of an artist that other artists are most drawn to? In some key ways, the two were very different. He was supremely ambitious and she was content at creating her art in obscurity, at least in the beginning. In a way, she was the grounding figure, ultimately benefiting him with some stability, whereas he was the ambitious figure ultimately benefiting her with some will to achieve. What a perfect match! They were each other's greatest champions! and it's this element that is the most important narrative thread throughout the book. Could they have done it without each other? Smith's perspective on this fascinating period in New York's art-bohemian scene is insightful. Having an avid interest in this cultural phenomenon, I especially enjoyed it. I am familiar with many of the people who fill these pages and the intimacy with which Smith tells the story brings me closer to their cultural milieu. In the end, the two (as happens so often in life) drifted apart: not out of transgression, betrayal, loss of interest, but because they were maturing and finding their own ways to carry on the art and life they dreamed of together, that they promised one another they would never abandon. She eventually moved to Detroit to marry Fred Sonic Smith of MC5 and he stayed in NYC. The last chapter describing Mapplethorpe's death and Smith's presence during it is nothing less than heart wrenching. I knew it was coming, but was not prepared for the impact his death would have on me that afternoon. This is where Smith really shines! Her tender ruminations on the dying and death of her lover and friend, her soul mate, is perfect. She adroitly straddles the line between sentimentality and description masterfully, never letting you stray too far into the sadness of it (as she did not let herself get lost in the despair of his death) while also avoiding mere description, leaving you to perhaps, say to yourself: "Ah, drag," close the book and go on about your business. This book sticks with you. As a side note: God! how I would have loved being there in New York City at this time! I grew up in North Jersey in the seventies. I was too young to have had access to NYC during most of the period discussed in this book. But, even if I did, I was unlucky to have been a philistine Jersey redneck (which is different than any other redneck, but not necessarily in a good way). I did actually go to NYC often in the late-late 70s and early 80s, but thought it was bohemian enough to walk around the West Village and hang out in Washington Square Park doing whippets until one in the morning. How sad. What a squandered opportunity! Oh well, I guess there's a reason why I went to diesel school, instead. Reading Patti Smith's book, at least, allowed me to live vicariously for awhile. I also recommend seeing Patti Smith live. She drew blood for us, literally. I will never forget her.

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