

M Train

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This absorbing new memoir by artist, poet, performer, and rock star Patti Smith provides a personal take on her daily life: her dreams, philosophical musings, friendships and myriad exotic journeys. Favorite black jacket, check. Watch cap, check. Black coffee at Café ?Ino, check.

Unlike *Just Kids*, which focused on her past, her life with artist Mapplethorpe in the famous Chelsea Hotel, in this book the past and present intertwine. Coffee, the connecting themes.

Appropriately enough, it begins with a dream. One of many that thread through the book. Next Patti describes her trip to French Guiana in the 70s. After her husband promised her a trip anyway in the world. Patti--idiosyncratic as always--chose the place where French writer Genet was imprisoned. They were almost jailed themselves on the way back when their driver was caught ferrying a man in the trunk to the airport.

Early in the book, Patti reveals a romantic author-worshipping streak. Many of her journeys are memorial ones to writers' graves including those of Sylvia Plath, Bertolt Brecht, and Yukio Mishima. At each site she takes pictures with a very old Polaroid (these images illustrate the book), and leaves something behind that she values.

Brief scenes impart her feeling for family life. Fondly, she recalls the boat moored in their Michigan yard where she and her husband, Fred, listened to baseball games all season until a great tree fell in a storm and smashed it. Patti also hung a photography of Albert Camus in the kitchen, and her son believed that person to be a favorite uncle.

In one poignant passage, Patti says how fleeting time is and how she misses her husband's love and the period when her children were young when she could hold their little feet in her hands.

One fact you may not know about Smith is that she was an esteemed member of the CDC, the Continental Drift Club, an esoteric group that met in places around the world connected to Alfred Wegener, the scientist who first proposed the theory of moving continentals. At a recent meeting in Germany of the small group, Patti gave the keynote speech, but forgot her notes (made on café napkins). Patti made most of her speech up on the spot and almost started a brawl among attendees, arguing over Wegener's real last days.

Another funny scene occurred at Frida Kahlo's house in Mexico City, where Smith became violently ill and had to recuperate in Diego's room. Her improvised speech there--half song, half poetry--received a standing ovation.

Less than a year before Hurricane Sandy struck, Patti fell in love with a tumbled-down, hundred-year old house in Rockaway Beach near the boardwalk. On a whim, she bought it against the advice of her lawyer.

Several questions are not answered in this book. For instance, what happened to the beloved black jacket, and the old conundrum ?why is a raven like a writing desk? is never answered. Yet this heartfelt memoir will inspire you, and perhaps send you to the kitchen to brew more coffee.

Posted by Dory L. on January 14, 2016

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