

# SERVICE95 BOOK CLUB

## Discussion Guide

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER



JUST KIDS

PATTI SMITH

BLOOMSBURY

SEPTEMBER 2023



BOOK CLUB

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patti Smith is a writer, performer and visual artist. She gained recognition in the 1970s for her revolutionary merging of poetry and rock, and has released 12 albums, including *Horses* (1975), which has been hailed as one of the top 100 albums of all time by *Rolling Stone*. Smith had her first exhibition of drawings at the Gotham Book Mart in 1973 and has been represented by the Robert Miller Gallery since 1978. Her books include *Just Kids* – winner of the National Book Award in 2010 – *Witt, Babel, Woolgathering, The Coral Sea, Auguries Of Innocence, M Train, Year Of The Monkey* and, most recently, *A Book Of Days*. In 2005, the French Ministry of Culture awarded Smith the prestigious title of *Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres*, the highest honour given to an artist by the French Republic. She was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007. Smith married Fred Sonic Smith in Detroit in 1980. They had a son, Jackson, and a daughter, Jesse. Smith resides in New York City.

## JUST KIDS SYNOPSIS

Winner of the 2010 Non-Fiction National Book Award and now a modern classic, *Just Kids* is the book that defined the rock 'n' roll memoir. In 1967, a chance meeting between two young people led to a romance and a lifelong friendship that would carry each to a level of international success they never dreamed of. The backdrop is New York City – whether Brooklyn, the Chelsea Hotel, Max's Kansas City, Scribner's Bookstore, Coney Island or Andy Warhol's Factory, the whole city is resplendent. Among their friends are literary lights, musicians, and artists such as Harry Smith, Bobby Neuwirth, Allen Ginsberg, Sandy Daley, Sam Shepherd and William Burroughs. It was a heightened time politically and culturally; the art and music worlds exploding and colliding. In the midst of all this, two kids made a pact to always care for one another. Scrappy, romantic and committed to making art, they prodded and provided each other with faith and confidence during the hungry years – the days of couscous and lettuce soup.

*Just Kids* begins as a love story and ends as an elegy. Beautifully written, this is a profound portrait of two young artists, often hungry, sated only by art and experience. And an unforgettable portrait of New York, her rich and poor, hustlers and hellions, those who made it and those whose memory lingers near.

## WHY WE LOVED IT

"It's hard to define Patti – she is a singer, a songwriter, a poet, a painter and, of course, an author. It's safe to say that we get something of all of these personas through this beautiful book. Prior to being at the heart of the New York City punk scene, Patti was pushing boundaries in the art world with her lover and best friend, the controversial photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Their enduring love story – which navigates both romantic and platonic love – forms the warm heart of this book and, along the way, we meet artists and musicians such as Andy Warhol and Janis Joplin, literary giants including William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, to say nothing of the drag queens and socialites that pass through the doors of the Chelsea Hotel.

"I'd love to have been part of such a cool era. Patti gives us the next best thing – possibly the most spellbinding account of New York in the '70s ever written. As we witness the ascent of two legendary artists, both Robert and Patti, it's clear that her respect and love for artistry never dims" – *Dua Lipa*

## WHAT OTHERS SAY

"A tender, harrowing, often hilarious portrait of young lovers forging their paths in an eccentric milieu of Beat poets, Warhol socialites, and transvestites, rock stars and artists... Much has been written about that time, but *Just Kids* offers new insight" – *Vogue*

"This book is so honest and pure as to count as a true rapture" – *Joan Didion*

"Terrifically evocative... The most spellbinding and diverting portrait of funky-but-chic New York in the late '60s and '70s that any alumnus has committed to print" – *New York Times*

## THE CHELSEA HOTEL: A 'DESPERATE HAVEN' FOR NEW YORK'S CREATIVES

Turn onto 23rd Street in New York City and you'll see a neon sign that reads '[Hotel Chelsea](#)'. Once upon a time you could gaze at big paintings in its grotty lobby, watching [Stanley Bard](#), the manager and part-owner; his son, [David](#), and the many legendary Chelsea guests passing through. You could sit in [El Quijote bar](#) and breathe in the ghosts of over a century of resident artists, musicians and writers.

Built between 1883–85, the 12–storey, 250–room red brick Hotel Chelsea (also commonly known as the Chelsea Hotel) was one of New York City's first cooperative apartment buildings. Soundproofed walls meant composers wouldn't bother writers; so while Mark Twain wrote, Isadora Duncan danced on the ornate staircase. Over 60% of the hotel's rooms were occupied by long-term residents. To this date, some 40 tenants remain. Perhaps we know [some of their stories](#). The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas drafted [Under Milk Wood](#) here, and through pneumonia or whiskey imbibed at [The White Horse Tavern](#) (or both) fell into a coma and died. [William Burroughs](#) wrote *The Naked Lunch*; Andy Warhol shot [Chelsea Girls](#), his split-screen experimental film. Bob Dylan composed *Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands* in room 211. Actress and Warhol 'superstar' [Edie Sedgwick](#) set fire to her room. Janis Joplin rode the lift to room 411, looking for Kris Kristofferson. Instead, [she found Leonard Cohen](#), and Cohen composed [Chelsea Hotel #2](#). Playwright [Arthur Miller](#) wrote *After The Fall* in room 614 following his divorce from Marilyn Monroe. When Robert Mapplethorpe had his nipple pierced, it was filmed by Sandy Daley as [Robert Having His Nipple Pierced](#). Life is art in the Chelsea Hotel.

To Patti Smith, the Chelsea was the ultimate refuge. She and Robert arrived penniless, Robert gravely ill. They were given a tiny room by Stanley. "The hotel is an energetic, desperate haven for scores of gifted hustling children from every rung of the ladder. Guitar bums and stoned-out beauties in Victorian dresses. Junkie poets, playwrights, broken-down filmmakers, and French actors. Everybody passing through here is somebody, if nobody in the outside world" (*Just Kids*). In the 2022 documentary [Dreaming Walls](#), it's Patti we see on the roof of the Chelsea. "Dylan Thomas used to hang out on this very roof! I've always wanted to be where the big guys were, you know?" She is: when William Burroughs stumbles out of El Quijote bar, it's Patti who straightens his tie and pops him in a cab.

"I don't think people realise how strange it really is," a resident says in the 1981 BBC documentary [Chelsea Hotel. Stanley Bard](#) 'the Robin Hood of inn keepers' takes us, with discretion, into this world. The singer Nico growls her [Chelsea Girls](#) song in the half-light of one room. The English writer and actor [Quentin Crisp](#) unpacks his lavender hair dye: "The very first time I came, I only stayed five days and there was a robbery and a fire and [murder](#)," he said. Bohemia had shifted to anarchy at the Chelsea.

Bard was ousted by the hotel board in 2007. Under reconstruction for 10 years, Hotel Chelsea recently reopened as an upscale boutique hotel. The current hotelier-owners call out the surnames of past residents in bold capitals on their website – a shamanic litany of their '[notable denizens](#)'. Time will tell how the ghosts will dance.

## BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

**Here are a few questions to help you think about the book from different angles, whether you do that on your own, discuss it with your friends or take it to your local or virtual book club.**

1. How familiar were you with the work of Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe before reading *Just Kids*? Has your understanding of their art been altered by reading their lives?
2. *“Robert and I were always ourselves – ‘til the day he died, we were just exactly as we were when we met. And we loved each other. Everybody wants to define everything. Is it necessary to define love?”* Is *Just Kids* a love story?
3. *“Rimbaud held the keys to a mystical language that I devoured even as I could not fully decipher it. My unrequited love for him was as real to me as anything I had experienced.”* How does Patti Smith weave the figures of the poet Arthur Rimbaud and Robert through *Just Kids*? Do you think this pairing is intentional in the art of the book?
4. *“Robert was concerned with how to make the photograph, and I with how to be the photograph.”* How does Patti Smith explore the relationship between artist and muse?
5. *“There were days, rainy gray days, when the streets of Brooklyn were worthy of a photograph, every window the lens of a Leica, the view grainy and immobile. We gathered our colored pencils and sheets of paper and drew like wild, feral children into the night, until, exhausted, we fell into bed. We lay in each other’s arms, still awkward but happy, exchanging breathless kisses into sleep.”* Yes, *Just Kids* is Romantic with a capital ‘R’ but how does Patti Smith also show us the often-grim realities of day-to-day living in New York?
6. *“Later he would say that the Church led him to God, and LSD led him to the universe. He also said that art led him to the devil, and sex kept him with the devil.”* How does the young Patti Smith deal with Robert’s obsessions?
7. *“We used to laugh at our small selves, saying that I was a bad girl trying to be good and that he was a good boy trying to be bad. Through the years these roles would reverse, then reverse again, until we came to accept our dual natures. We contained opposing principles, light and dark.”* What ‘light and dark’ do you find in both Robert and Patti in *Just Kids*?
8. *“I didn’t feel for Warhol the way Robert did. His work reflected a culture I wanted to avoid. I hated the soup and felt little for the can. I preferred an artist who transformed his time, not mirrored it.”* How does Patti and Robert’s world compare to the world of Andy Warhol and the Factory?
9. New York: is the city a character in *Just Kids*?
10. *“The light poured through the windows upon his photographs and the poem of us sitting together a last time. Robert dying: creating silence. Myself, destined to live, listening closely to a silence that would take a lifetime to express.”* Why do you think it took 20 years for Patti Smith to write their story?

## INTERVIEWS WITH PATTI SMITH

### WATCH

#### [Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, 2010](#)

*Patti Smith discusses Just Kids at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC*

### LISTEN

#### [Patti Smith, NPR](#)

*Access the archive of interviews with Patti Smith over the years at NPR*

### READ

#### [Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe, Interview, 2010](#)

*Patti Smith discusses Just Kids with Interview magazine*

## FURTHER READING

#### [Dreaming Walls: Inside The Chelsea Hotel, 2022](#)

*Produced by Martin Scorsese, this film focuses on the ageing bohemians, libertine artists, and passionate preservationists who still maintain a permanent address at the Chelsea at the time of its recent renovation.*

#### [The rebirth of New York's legendary Hotel Chelsea – Condé Nast Traveller](#)

*A spin back through the Hotel Chelsea's rock 'n' roll history.*

#### [Patti Smith – Substack](#)

*An extraordinary archive from Patti Smith, including poetry, climate change, touring, her cat, and reflections on her beloved Arthur Rimbaud.*

#### [The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe – Tate](#)

*An excellent summary of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic career spanning his early work with Patti Smith to his controversial S&M portraits.*

#### [The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation](#)

*Mapplethorpe established the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation in 1988 to promote photography, support museums that exhibit photographic art, and to fund medical research in the fight against HIV/Aids.*