

# Miami Book Fair: Love, loss and 'Devotion' with Patti Smith



Patti Smith will appear Monday, Nov. 13, at the Miami Book Fair at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus. (Miami Book Fair / Courtesy)



By **Phillip Valys**  
SouthFlorida.com

NOVEMBER 8, 2017, 12:35 PM

**A**t the **Nobel Prize** ceremony last December in Sweden, punk-rock icon and author **Patti Smith** climbed onstage, nerves shattered, and sang the opening verse of **Bob Dylan's** protest epic "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." On the second verse, Smith stumbled, her voice trembling, her face reddening, and she said, managing a broad smile, "I'm sorry. I'm so nervous."

Smith was there to perform and accept the Nobel Prize for Literature on behalf of Dylan, her songwriting peer and longtime idol, who notoriously declined to accept the award himself. Speaking from a Cleveland hotel midway through her book tour, Smith recalls how the grandness of the moment paralyzed her ability to cover a classic. The following morning, she says, Nobel laureates approached her in the hotel lobby and admitted how Smith's trepidation validated their own.

“It was a very painful moment. The king and queen staring at you, the laureates looking at you,” Smith recalls. “I used to throw up onstage all the time when I forgot my lyrics. But that particular night was not my night. It was Bob Dylan’s night. I just had to claw my way through it. I didn’t give the best performance. But I found out the next morning that I was able to connect emotionally with more people than if I had done it perfectly.”

Smith, who will appear Monday, Nov. 13, at the [Miami Book Fair](#) to discuss her new book, “Devotion,” sounds modest and unflinching over the phone, willing to discuss music as much as writing memoirs and poetry. For example, Smith says she owes Dylan, a friend, a debt of gratitude for taking her on tour with him in 1995. After a decade of semi-retirement that ended with the 1994 death of her husband, guitarist Fred “Sonic” Smith of the Detroit proto-punk band MC5, Smith says touring with Dylan helped “restart my career and regain my confidence.”

Not that celebrity was something Smith ever sought. An inimitable punk-rock poet whose fusion of rock and literature yielded her seminal 1975 album “Horses,” Smith these days resists descriptions of her as a pop-culture icon, even if her recent works have helped cement this status: The audiobook for her 2015 bestselling memoir, “M Train,” won a Grammy for Best Spoken Word Album, while her 2010 book, “Just Kids,” which recounts her relationship with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, won the National Book Award.

“I’ve been looked upon as obsolete and as really cool, but I’ve always been the same, regular person,” Smith says. “I’m more concerned with what I’ve written today. Have I done something that served humankind, served my children, served my imagination?”

For Smith, “Devotion,” released in September, serves all three. A slim meditation on the act of creative writing, the 93-page book is broken into three sections, starting with a short essay on visiting the grave of French philosopher Simone Weil and ending with a stop at the home of Albert Camus. Both essays inform the title piece, a story of obsession following a teenage figure skater who is spied on and ultimately possessed by a wealthy, Svengali-like man.

The book, Smith says, began as an assignment. Invited to lecture about the writing process at [Yale University](#), Smith was asked to write an essay based on the talk. Of course, Smith broke the rules: “Devotion” isn’t an essay, but an odd interplay of fact and fiction, inspired by Smith’s dreams and the everyday elements of her life, such as coffee shops, train rides and TV shows that stave off boredom. “Most often the alchemy that produces a poem or a work of fiction is hidden within the work itself, if not embedded in the coiling ridges of the mind,” Smith writes in one “Devotion” essay.

“What triggered the [‘Devotion’ short story] was I watched this Russian figure skater on TV, and I had just read Simone Weil,” Smith says. “I could be washing dishes and I’ll write a fairy tale in my head. That’s how I’m made. I’ve operated like that all my life, moving seamlessly back and forth from daydreams and real life. I need to write because my mind is so active.”

The theme is also explored in “M Train”: Three weeks after purchasing an oceanfront bungalow in Rockaway Beach in 2012, [Hurricane Sandy](#) tore through New York and nearly destroyed it. Smith turned the experience

into a meditation on resilience. “My Alamo,” she calls the place, a refuge against death, loss and sorrows new and old.

To find inspiration, Smith says she takes comfort in making pilgrimages to the graveyards of her favorite authors, an act also recounted in “M Train.” (While visiting Silvia Plath’s grave, she left a talisman on the poet’s tombstone.) Smith insists her reasons aren’t morbid, but a throwback to her 20-year-old self, an aspiring but homeless folksinger who was enchanted by Dylan’s music. For security, she slept at the foot of Herman Melville’s grave in New York’s Woodlawn Cemetery.

“When I was 20 and had nowhere to sleep in New York, I slept in graveyards,” Smith says. “And believe me, when you sleep by the statue of a beautiful guardian angel, you feel safe. There’s something nice about going to [an author’s] resting place and thanking them for their work. I don’t find cemeteries bad or depressing. They’re a place where people have their deepest thoughts.”

*Patti Smith will appear 8 p.m. Monday, Nov. 13, at Chapman Conference Center on [Miami Dade College’s Wolfson Campus, 300 NE Second Ave., Building 3, Room 3210, in Miami. Admission costs \\$35. Call 305-237-3258 or download the festival schedule at \[MiamiBookFair.com\]\(#\).](#)*

**[pvalys@southflorida.com](mailto:pvalys@southflorida.com) or 954-356-4364**

Copyright © 2017, South Florida

**This article is related to:** [Bob Dylan](#), [Patti Smith](#), [Nobel Prize Awards](#), [Miami Dade College](#), [Yale University](#), [Hurricane Sandy \(2012\)](#)