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Patti Smith

Photo by Steven Sebring

Patti Smith Shares Her *Devotion*: "I'm Always Writing. Always."

MINHAE SHIM ROTH | NOVEMBER 7, 2017 | 8:00AM

"Writing is such a strong impulse. I always take a notebook and pen with me. I often find myself at an opera, writing in the dark. It's hard to unravel what I've written because I've written word over word. Inspiration can come from anywhere."

Patti Smith knows a thing or two about inspiration. The punk rock queen, rock and Roll Hall of Famer, writer, and artist will return to the Miami Book Fair this year with her latest book, *Devotion*. Smith is an unmatched figure in American culture, remaining relevant across decades of boundary-pushing artistic pursuits seemingly through sheer, well, devotion to the creative process. But with her new book, the inimitable artist has invited the rest of the world to imitate her, or at least her writing methods.

Smith first participated in the book fair in 2010 while promoting her memoir, *Just Kids*, a reflection on her relationship with artist Robert Mapplethorpe. *Just Kids* received wide critical and public acclaim, winning the National Book Award for Fiction and topping the charts as a *New York Times* best seller.

“The Miami Book Fair has always supported me. When I did my earlier book in 2010... I had done poetry readings and book signings locally in the New York area, but the bigger book events were something new. It was really fun, so I enjoy coming back... You support those who support you,” Smith says. “I like coming to Miami and visiting the ocean. I enjoy being there.”

Next, Smith says, will come a sister project to *Just Kids*. But first, she'll tour in support of *Devotion*, a slim book coming in at just over 100 pages. Published in September by Yale University Press, the work is the inaugural volume of the *Why I Write* series, based on the Windham-Campbell Lectures that are delivered annually at Yale University.

Devotion is part short story and part personal essay. Bookended by reflections on her creative process, the work guides the reader through how she developed and wrote the story that rests in the middle pages. The essay documents how Smith's creativity comes in spurts and bursts, striking during travel through Europe and physical exhaustion; over eggs and coffee at breakfast or watching TV programs in hotel rooms; and even during peripatetic meanderings through streets and graveyards.

“It was an interesting task because I'm not an essay writer, and it was supposed to be a long essay about writing. I chose to do it by not writing about but showing the reader the mechanics of the process: the serendipitous process, intentional study, unexpected inspiration. How all of these tie together to produce a work.”

The title comes from a trip she took to the city of Sète in the South of France. She strolled to a cemetery on a hill to look for the grave of the French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry. Instead, her eye was drawn to the tombstone of a girl who loved horses, which read, “*Dévouement*.” Translation: “Devotion.”

Despite being awarded “Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres” by the French Republic and traveling extensively through France, Smith admits she does not speak French. “I’m very poor at language. I’m multidisciplined, but I’m not good at languages, math, chess, or grammar. That’s an area of my brain that’s not my forte,” she says. But she’s drawn to the challenge of the unfamiliar. For her, creativity can arrive in any language and any form.



Cover art
for Patti
Smith's
Devotion

**Yale
University
Press**

The teenage protagonist in *Devotion* is a figure skater who, as an uprooted immigrant, moves fluidly through various spoken languages. The almost-16-year-old Eugenia, a precocious but academically disinterested girl, would rather commit her time to skating on the frozen pond behind her house. She's another example of Smith embracing experiences outside her own expertise. “My heroine has many abilities that I don’t have... I’ve never skated in my life, but I’ve been watching skaters since I was a child because my father loved skating and he was very athletic. I’ve always admired it.”

While cutting class and heading to the pond to skate, Eugenia catches the eye of Alexander, a cultured man in his late 30s who collects and curates rare manuscripts, artifacts, and firearms. He watches her voyeuristically and eventually entices her with a luxurious vintage fur coat, the training and resources necessary for elite figure skating, and the promise of artistic greatness. Alexander persuades Eugenia to live with him, and they begin a passionate sexual relationship. Under the guise of obtaining her passport for further training in Vienna, Alexander whisks her away to Geneva for a short trip that transforms into an extended stay abroad. Then the story comes to a surprising, violent climax.

Smith says of the story’s twist: “It wasn’t supposed to end like that. I didn’t plan it. It was written in such a fervor. I was surprised at the way it was unfolding. I didn’t know what she would do, and then something snapped [in her]. Perhaps something snapped in myself too.”

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But don't think of *Devotion* as a feminist screed. Smith's art refuses to conform to imposed expectations. "I just do what is right for me. The big step is to go beyond gender, not feel chained by it but not afraid of it either. I'm happy to be female, but I don't operate as a female artist. I operate as an artist," she says. "I have never let gender, except when I embrace it, get in the way of how I produce and do my work. I do my work as I see fit, but some of my work shows a lot of femininity and sacrifice."

And part of that sacrifice is simply putting in the time. Smith recites a poetic meditation, a mantra even:

"I'm always writing. Always. I was writing when you called. I'm always writing."

An Evening With Patti Smith. *Part of the 2017 Miami Book Fair. 8 p.m. Monday, November 13, at the Chapman Conference Center, 300 NE Second Ave., Building 3, Second Floor, Room 3210, Miami; miamibookfair.com. Tickets cost \$35 and include a copy of *Devotion*.*

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