Reviewed By: Oceane Hooks-Camilleri

*Overview*: *Just Kids* is a haunting chronicle of love, a guide to aspiring artists, and a history of artists in New York in the 70s and 80s. Patti Smith takes the reader by the hand as a gentle guide through the streets of Brooklyn, the halls of the Chelsea Hotel, the extravagant parties of New York’s elite and the small pleasures taken by struggling artists. She is not only telling her story but also the story of Robert Mapplethorpe who was her friend, and lover, her artistic backbone when she needed strength as she was to him. Smith guides us through her life with reference to key moments in American History and their relevance and emotional effects on her, events such as the arrival of the first man on the moon, and the Kent State student killings. She is constantly referencing popular culture and the artists who had a hand in shaping it, many of whom also shaped her and most of who died young. She wrote a poem for Janis Joplin, was uplifted by a brief encounter with Jimi Hendrix and was inspired by poets, musicians and visual artists.

As Smith guides us through this portion of her life we are granted a window into the development of an artist who began working with visual arts, was then drawn to the written and spoken word and finally with the fervent urging of friends put poetry into song. We also see the development of Robert Mapplethorpe’s work through her descriptions from drawing to instillation art and gradually photography. Through her discussion of the way in which Robert discovered photography she gives the reader insights into the role class plays on the lives of artists. Robert worked rarely in photography for a time because film was far too expensive but this eventually pushed him to develop a strong eye for his desired work and he needed very few shots to achieve his desired effect. Robert’s work pushed the bounds of sexual expression and while widely
acknowledged as good work was denied exhibitions because of the level of risk he took in his work.

Smith also addresses the advent of HIV/AIDS from which Robert and several other friends of hers died. She discusses HIV/AIDS from a personal standpoint in connection to Robert but does not convey the social stigma or panic surrounding it at that time. Smith brings Robert back to life through the telling of their adventures and their love. The way in which she establishes their relationship as an “us” and not a “you” and “I” follows through to the very end leaving a piece of Robert alive in her work, in this book, even though his physical body may have perished in 1989. This book does homage to art, love, friendship, fear, fearlessness, and the struggle to stay true to work that sets the artist free.

This work is interesting to the field of American Studies from a vantage point of art and popular culture. It is important however to remember that Smith does not give extensive historical context to her telling of this story. Her narrative is simply her recollection and retelling of her lived experience and they are rich in personal development but limited in historical context. This book is powerful, captivating and interdisciplinary between art forms but gives only one view of the complexity that was New York in the 70's and 80's.