

BOOK REVIEW

A BOOK OF DAYS, PATTI SMITH (2022)

London: Bloomsbury, 400pp.,

ISBN: 978-1526650986, h/bk, £25

SURRENDER: 40 SONGS, ONE STORY, BONO (2022)

London: Hutchinson Heinemann, 576pp.,

ISBN: 978-1529151787, h/bk, £25

Reviewed by Rupert Loydell, Falmouth University [1]

Patti Smith's version of New York punk, inspired by poetry, artistic self-assuredness and feminist attitude as much as music, produced the astonishing *Horses* album (Smith 1975) and other great albums such as *Easter* (Smith 1978b) as well as a number of books of poetry/lyrics, memoir and reflection. *A Book of Days* (Smith 2022) is somewhat different, as it offers up 366 images – one for each day of a leap year – with a brief caption below. Most of the photographs are reprinted from Smith's Instagram account, a few of them by other people, all offering a personal insight into Smith's world.

Many of them are of Smith's heroes and inspirations, from Martin Luther King to Kurt Cobain, others are friends and creative advisors such as author William Burroughs, bandmate Lenny Kaye and the Red Hot Chilli Peppers' bass player, Flea. Smith's family and pets appear too, as well as travel snapshots from her tours and journeys around the world: the red sunlit rock of Uluru, the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens, the Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima. There are art objects too, such as Joseph Beuys' felt suit and a bust of Apollo in a Moscow museum, but mostly the photos relate more directly to Smith's own life.

I may be misconstruing things but for me the book gives off an overwhelming sense of constructed self. Sure, when it comes to Polaroids of Smith's discarded worn-out cowboy boots and disorganized bookshelves; yes to the childhood snapshots and images of guitars and friends like Lou Reed and Tom Verlaine; but the hipster fixations seem more questionable and come across as evidence of a protracted adolescent hangover. Let me offer up a list of some of the names involved: Rimbaud, Artaud, Sylvia Plath, Camus, Virginia Woolf, Gérard de Neval, Joan of Arc, Apollinaire, Tarkovsky, Shelley, Lovecraft, Simone Weil, Jim Morrison... and Joan Didion. Didion wouldn't, I suspect, be impressed by much of the company she keeps here, or by the far too many slightly-out-of-focus shots of graves, cherubs, statues, icons and churches.

I don't want to totally dismiss the members of that list above (though I've got little time for Plath's, Lovecraft's or Woolf's writing), indeed I think Artaud and Joan Didion are exemplary, and Jim Morrison can be highly entertaining when I'm in the mood for drunken shamanistic posturing (him, not me). But the more recent photos of Notre Dame, post-fire, and 9/11 rubble, along with references to Samuel Beckett, Ginsberg, Hendrix, Frank Zappa and Rutger Hauer as Roy Batty

in *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), seem more contemporary and relevant, less part of an artistic attitude or pose.

We all understand that writers, musicians and artists need a public face as well as a private one, we're all sucked into nonsensical and irrelevant questions about whether things are 'true' or not, and Patti Smith is certainly a strong, assertive and seemingly honest troubadour and author, but this book doesn't feel right. It feels mannered and awkward whilst attempting to be precious and open-hearted, sharing secrets and dreams. Maybe it's simply too much at once, gathered together rather than delivered through the daily drip-feed of Instagram, or maybe I don't share all the same heroes or Smith's somewhat mystical ideas about creativity. Whatever it is, it had me reaching for my copy of *Babel* (Smith 1978a) and pulling out my Patti Smith albums instead.

Bono, lead singer of U2, long ago realised he could play a number of different roles, one of them being rock star as devil incarnate, complete with gold suit, white pancake face makeup and little red horns. As MacPhisto he could express his darker side, lusting after, insulting, flirting and arguing with, the audience, before abandoning his persona, along with his with his stage outfit, backstage. He could also appear in the guise of a charity worker or political persuader, a party animal, husband and father, and as an author and visual artist – the role he has currently adopted.

Sensibly organising *Surrender* (Bono 2022) around forty of U2's mostly better-known songs, Bono takes time to reflect upon and reconsider his past. From schoolboy to wannabee popstar, from pub stages to the world's busiest stadiums, from local radio to the roof of the BBC, from mullet to shaved head, from loud-mouthed gobshite to cod-philosopher, Bono has thrown everything he can into these pages.

He is not, it has to be said, the most fluent or natural writer, and his drawings are best forgotten, but Bono does have the gift of the gab. It takes a few chapters, but the book gradually charms you with its self-analysis, nostalgia, regret and emotion. He's at his best when giving it large about how albums were made or nearly not made, usually because of group dynamics; and at his worst when he comes over all religious and preachy, or tries to reflect upon some of the dodgier rock'n'roll antics he and his bandmates have at times indulged in.

As you might expect, however much Bono attempts to play it down, there's some heavy duty namedropping here. (I guess you have to ask if you could why wouldn't you?) Who else has experienced a Russian president dropping in for breakfast and has so many rock star friends? Who else could write about conversations with Brian Eno, Bill Clinton and the Pope in the same book? Who else can be so charismatic one moment and such an annoying and pious lecturer the next? Who else can have you welling-up in response to stories about his Dad or his wife Ali, but within a few more pages make you want to fling the book across the room and shout out loud at the man's ego and delusional self-righteousness?

Rock stars, eh? It would be cynical of me to note that I am not alone in thinking U2 are way past their musical sell by date or that Bono's book tour has been handled like a concert tour, with merchandise, film and performances (not to mention sales and publicity) to the fore, so I won't. Nor will I deny that U2 were an important, successful and influential band for many years, and that many parts of this book are funny, engaging and enjoyable. But that word 'parts' is key here. When Bono is holding forth about spirituality, poetry or love, or indulging in Bible study, lecturing about charitable causes or deconstructing literary quotations, he is not at his best. Pub stories about rock music and musicians, making albums and playing live, dancing, partying and drinking, are his forté and that is what he should stick to. I think they call it blarney where he comes from.

NOTE

[1] This review includes material first published in *International Times* (Loydell 2022a, 2022b).

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Rupert Loydell is senior lecturer in the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University. He is a widely published poet, and has written about Eno, David Lynch, Cabaret Voltaire, Nurse with Wound, Christian rock, pedagogy and creative writing for academic journals and books.

Contact: Falmouth University, Woodlane, Falmouth, Cornwall, TR11 4RH, UK.
E-mail: rupert.loydell@falmouth.ac.uk