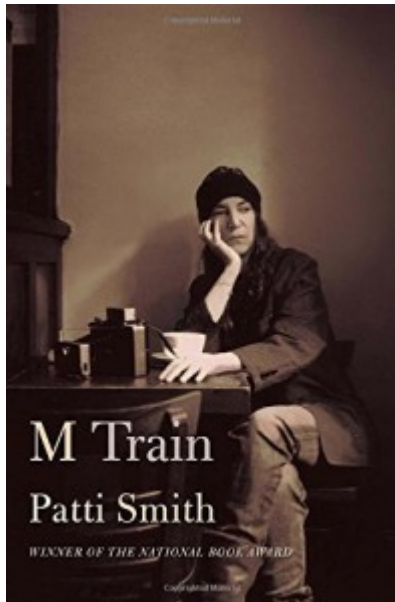


Book review: 2 inspired takes on survival

By Kim Wyatt



"M Train"

By Patti Smith

Knopf, 272 pages, \$25 hardcover

One-line review: Transcendent.

It seemed fitting to begin "M Train" by Patti Smith at a diner, the kind with Formica counters and only 10 items on the menu. Smith is a diner and—more significantly—coffee aficionado, so I felt a kinship with her before I even cracked the spine.

Eating alone at a diner with a book is a pleasure for those for whom it is a choice. "M Train" is an impressionistic meditation on many things, but most skillfully on navigating grief. Rock n' Roll Hall of Famer Smith won the National Book Award in 2010 for her memoir "Just Kids," chronicling the writer's early years in New York and her relationship with

photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. This book is an incandescent departure, both elegy and ode to the powers of reflection.

What makes a memoir compelling is not just an author's skill with language, or the series of events that make up a life; it's their lens, the particular way in which they see the world. Who else goes to a prison in French Guiana for their honeymoon, and later joins the Continental Drift Club? Smith is a person worth traveling with. You won't be staying at the Best Western and hanging at the pool. Her obsessions turn into journeys, and we are along for the ride.

The book begins with a dream and an unusual guide, a sardonic cowpoke. Don't let this put you off; by the end of the book we are looking forward to his visitations. Although "M Train" is steeped in loss—her husband, mother, brother and beloved café—each luminous chapter is a stop in which Smith departs to capture writers and artists who have guided her throughout her life. This aspect of the book was like catnip to me.

Smith finds magic and mysticism in books. Her mother began gifting her with books at a young age, and they have exerted lifelong power and influence. Roberto Bolano, Virginia Woolf, William Burroughs, Sylvia Plath, Jean Genet, Paul Bowles and, to my delight, a roster of Japanese authors including Mishima and Murakami are among those who appear in Smith's travels. At each rendezvous, she visits a home, grave, or an object; the effect is not morbid, but rather, insight into the cumulative passions that make up a life. Polaroid photos add to the spell cast by each chapter, and I soon found myself contemplating my own relationships with books and people.

Although grounded by ritualistic visits to her café for coffee and writing, Smith is powered by her fascinations, and there are many. But she's also unfailingly human: She loves detective shows; when Lennie Briscoe on "Law & Order" falls off the wagon, she worries about him. She's a cat lady. We see her hemming pants and sewing curtains and listening to Detroit

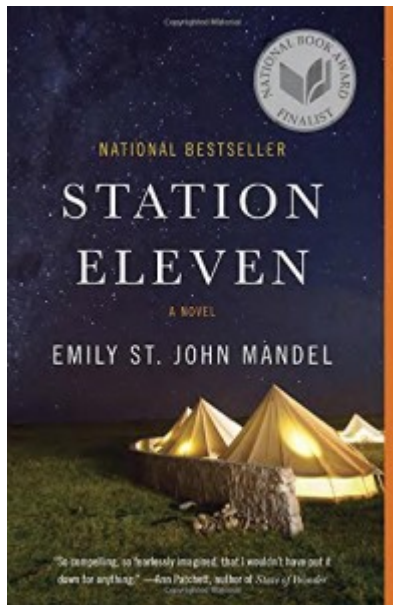
Tiger ball games on the radio with her husband. But she also has friends named Ace and Dice, and when she chokes on a fish bone in Mexico, she sticks it in her pocket to consider later.

I loved Smith's minimalist gustatory tour of New York: coffee, a slice of pizza, more coffee, a tin of sardines, coffee. And her uniform: Dungarees, T-shirt, long coat and watch cap, an affectionate object from her childhood. She doesn't have time for fussy clothes, nor, apparently, vegetables. Not complicating her life with busy food or dictates about fashion, she frees her mind for other pursuits.

But her reflections aren't navel gazing: they open up the world to us as well. When she literally buys into a young man's dream of owning a café at the shore, you recognize the impulse to connect and feel alive, a remarkable impulse after a life of loss. But isn't that the story for all of us?

"The transformation of the heart is a wondrous thing, no matter how you land there," she writes. And she does it again and again.

When grief does surface in the book, it's random and devastating, just like in real life. It might happen at a stop sign or while crossing the street; it comes mid-flight, and the tears are already there. Yet "M Train" inspires. Smith, at almost seventy years old, shares with us insights that come only through a lifetime of contemplation. You could do much worse than spend an afternoon in a café reading "M Train."



“Station Eleven”

By Emily St. John Mandel

Vintage; 352 pages, \$15.95 paperback

One-line review: A wildly inventive spin on what makes life worth living.

We’re plunged into the action on the first page of “Station Eleven.” It’s mid-production in Toronto during “King Lear,” and something terrible happens. And then something even more terrible happens. Emily St. John Mandel has crafted a weird and spellbinding tale, a fresh take on dystopia that elevates the human spirit while skewering celebrities and making us grateful for the here and now.

Twenty years after a virus has unpeopled the world, the Traveling Symphony, a roaming band of actors and musicians, brings Shakespeare to makeshift towns. “Survival is insufficient” is the troupe’s motto, a nod to nostalgic memories of “Star Trek: Voyager,” but more so to the power of art. The worst has already happened, and we enter a world with nature intact: people routinely hunt for deer and rabbit in the woods, build fires for heat. Those left have figured out how to survive.

When a prophet—why is there always a prophet? Even *after* the

end of the world?—threatens the ensemble's small hold on survival, they move toward an airport in Michigan where they find the Museum of Civilization, which contains the objects we loved, like iPhones and stilettos, that no longer serve any purpose.

As the world collapsed, many planes were diverted to this landing strip in Michigan; passengers disembarked, and there they remained. A plane at the end of the runway, which landed but remained sealed, is a bone-chilling reminder of what has transpired and all that has been lost.

Author Mandel so skillfully weaves the plots and subplots that I didn't see the big reveal coming, as anticlimactic as it was. And in skewering our love of celebrity, she reveals to us our desire for human connection. A neat trick.

Sentences, one by one, filled me with dread. Mandel must have been positively gleeful when writing them, and she certainly has a knack for the cliffhangers at the end of the chapters. Characters are complex, mostly original and fully realized. The subplots between them shift back and forth in time, and I found myself equally enjoying both worlds, pre-and post-apocalypse.

Although entertaining, weird and original, there is an occasional heavy-handedness that seems more authorial than character-based; it's almost as if the author didn't trust us to know what we'd miss in a world gone bad. Even so, if you need some good escapist fiction, "Station Eleven" is more fantastic than disturbing, in the end, making us look at what we already have with new eyes.

Kim Wyatt is the owner of the independent press Bona Fide Books.