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Patti is back!

**WOOLGATHERING, by Patti Smith,
HanumanBooks, New York. \$7**

by Wickie Stamps

Poet and rocker Patti Smith is busy doing her housewife things these days. But for most of her life, she pushed every limit she slammed into. A working-class kid from New Jersey, Patti was raised on the Bible and UFO magazines. In the early part of the seventies this scrawny kid, accompanied by the then penniless and unknown gay artist, Robert Mapplethorpe, wandered into the New York poetry scene.

Rapidly, her poetry readings-turned-rock-concerts blew up the literary and music worlds. Patti Smith's life and work, described in *New Musical Express* as "irresponsible and contagious" echoed the life of comic Lenny Bruce. Everything about her — her writing, her music, her very existence — defied censorship. When her radio interviews were blacked out, as happened in 1976, Patti hit back with *You Can't Say Fuck in Radio Free America*, an indictment of the so-called progressive rock radio stations. Even potential publishers, horrified at the content and form of her submissions, would not touch her.

"They said I had sick attitudes about women," said Patti in a 1976 *Penthouse* interview. One publisher sent her a letter stating "we find your thinking, ideals and morals very immature." Shortly thereafter, when Patti Smith galvanized the attention of rebellious youth internationally, these same publishers came crawling back, "knockin' at my door with bags of money." True to her defiant spirit, Smith said "Fuck 'em."



But Patti Smith was more than art and outrage. She was on the cutting edge of gender-fuck, quickly evolving into a hero among queer teens. Performing in black jeans, T-shirts and boots, she was the quintessential tomboy. Described as a mix of Huck Finn and Alice in Wonderland, gender-fuck also permeated her art. "Female feel male," she says in *Seventh Heaven*, her 1971 poetry book filled with

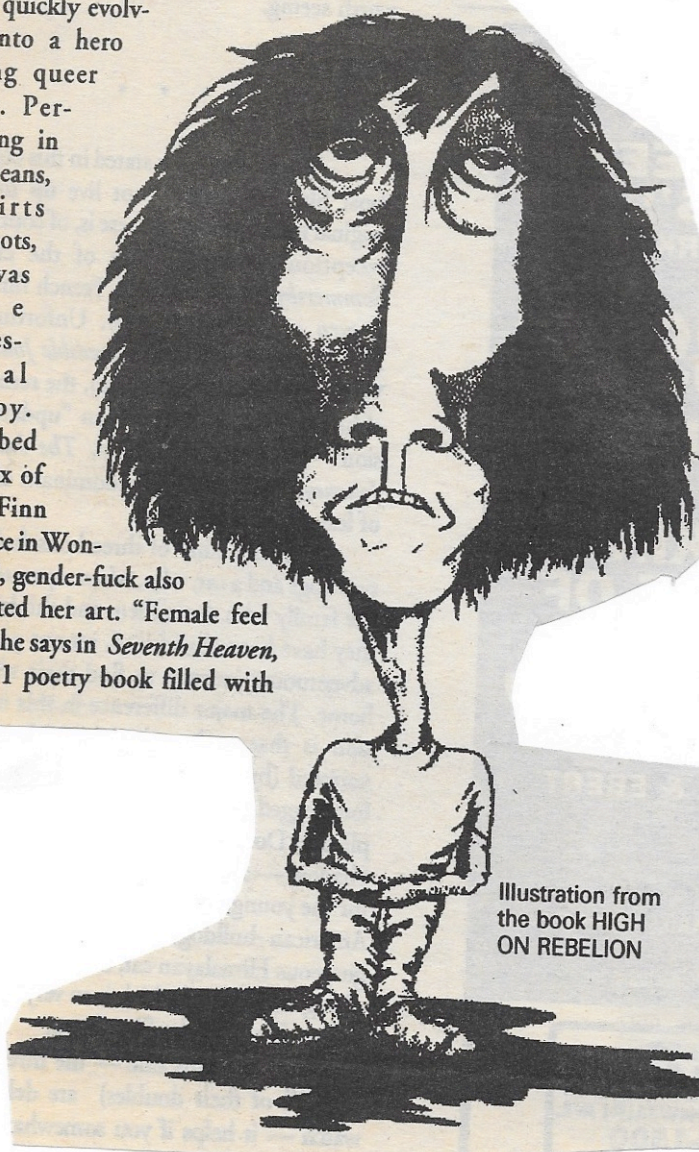


Illustration from
the book HIGH
ON REBELION

strong lesbian images. According to *The New York Times* reviewer Jonathan Cott, her 1978 poetry book, *Babel* (which he thought was lousy) is also riddled with "cooked lesbian encounters."

Patti probably loved that review, as she had a thing for bad reviews. People writing mean things about her turned her on.

Unfortunately, I must disappoint Patti. *Woolgathering*, her first book in fourteen years, which in size measures only three inches by two, is wonderful.

In this work, which is named after the small creatures that populate her early years, she, as always, stays close to her hallucinatory childhood. But her youthful ruminations do not fall prey to New Age inner child mawkishness. In *Woolgathering*, Patti captures the essence of childhood, that world we live in before we build walls between time, thought and sensation.

"And the image of the woolgathers in that sleepy field drew me to sleep as well. And I wandered among them, through thistle and thorn, with no task more exceptional than to rescue a fleeting thought, as a tuft of wool, from the comb of the wind."

As always her work is what she calls "pure energy." But you'll find no angry rocker here. Instead, her eight pieces, with muted titles like "barndance" and "a farewell," which also refers to Mapplethorpe, are mournful murmurs. They are not the better-known Patti Smith maelstroms. Even her *Woolgatherings* punctuation, is less angry, unlike her earlier works where periods are sprayed across a poem with such force you can almost feel their indentation in the page.

My only complaint is the book's binding. It's cheap. But Patti — at least the old Patti — probably would have said "Fuck it!"

But the new Patti? Read *Woolgathering*. It's a

long-awaited missive from the mind of a gender-fucking genius. ★