

Punk Elegies: True Tales of Death Trip Kids, Wrongful Sex, and Trial by Angel Dust

Allan MacDonell

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Sometimes dizzying but always exciting, this punk memoir is a microcosm of a musical moment.

A memoir of chaos, punk rock, and drugs, *Punk Elegies* by Allan MacDonell delivers an experience without a message. MacDonell, punk rock journalist, lives a roiling life of sex, drugs, and shady music-hall dives. Like everyone in his circle, he looks forward to the day that he will be a famous millionaire, recognized for his writing. But he isn't actually making progress toward this goal. In fact, he's just getting older, trying new substances, and alienating his wife, the only person who loves him for himself.

The book, a series of vignettes set between roughly 1975 and 1981, evokes the gonzo style of Hunter S. Thompson. Drug-fueled, firsthand adventures on the rock scene often seem unbelievable, and in fact, there's no way to ascertain their veracity in the context of the book. Vignettes blur into one hyperactive, surreal stream of kinetic madness. Scenes often end abruptly, though the story will sometimes pick up again in another chapter. The result is sometimes dizzying, often confusing, but always exciting. Rockers whose youth was tamer than MacDonell's definitely might appreciate this seat in the stands.

Substance abuse represents a stronger theme within the book than punk rock. In fact, music occurs almost incidentally, as though its purpose was to be a backdrop for chemical experimentation. MacDonell struggles to have everything he wants—a wife *and* a range of sexual experiences; a career *and* a drug hobby. Oddly, the disillusioned author holds on to numerous illusions; as jaded as he is, he's still convinced of his potential to be famous. This book takes place before MacDonell's ascension to editor status at *Hustler* magazine, which he documented in his previous published work, *Prisoner of X*. But at the point in his life covered by *Punk Elegies*, he seems to be waiting for greatness to hit him, meteor-like, despite his own constant evasions.

Eventually, MacDonell makes motions toward kicking his drug habit and focusing on his wife, and the book barely makes it there by its conclusion. His redemption isn't complete or even particularly realistic. In fact, the possibility that he'll backslide into debauchery is so pronounced that it's hard to imagine he'll be able to keep that new leaf from turning back over again at the close of the story. The result is a memoir that doesn't demonstrate its subject evolving, progressing, or growing in any personal or professional way. This lack of development gives the work an aimless feel.

Punk Elegies is a microcosm of a musical moment. Outsiders to the rock scene might not recognize the landscape. Punk rockers who lived it up in the 1970s may find that they have the necessary context to find it nostalgic, hilarious, or bittersweet. Fans who enjoy being shocked might also enjoy the whiskey-saturated self-destruction.

ANNA CALL (April 6, 2015)

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