



The Rise, The Fall, and The Rise

Brix Smith Start

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The Rise, The Fall, and The Rise is the extraordinary story, in her own words, of Brix Smith Start. Best known for her work in The Fall at the time when they were perhaps the most powerful and influential anti-authoritarian postpunk band in the world -- *This Nation's Saving Grace, The Wonderful and Frightening World Of...* -- Brix spent ten years in the band before a violent disintegration led to her exit and the end of her marriage with Mark E Smith.

But Brix's story is much more than rock 'n' roll highs and lows in one of the most radically dysfunctional bands around. Growing up in the Hollywood Hills in the '60s in a dilapidated pink mansion her life has taken her from luxury to destitution, from the cover of the NME to waitressing in California, via the industrial wasteland of Manchester in the 1980s. What emerges is a story of constant reinvention, jubilant highs and depressive ebbs; a singular journey of a teenage American girl on a collision course with English radicalism on her way to mid-life success on TV and in fashion.

Too bizarre, extreme and unlikely to exist in the pages of fiction, *The Rise, The Fall, and The Rise* could only exist in the pages of a memoir.

The Rise, The Fall, and The Rise Details

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From Reader Review The Rise, The Fall, and The Rise for online ebook

Paula says

Bottom line, this is a riveting read, but for a more layered opinion, see below...

For the first 268 pages (more than halfway through), I had a simple, undiluted enthusiasm for this book and its author. As rock memoirs go, this one is very well written, and Brix comes across as a sweet, complicated, creative, and relatable person with lots of great stories about her crazy childhood in LA/Chicago, and the beginnings of her musical career. She provides a complex portrait of the famously irascible Mark E. Smith, shines some light on the less-well-known members of the Fall, and writes with equanimity about the joys and sorrows of the unglamorous side of the music world.

All that relatability goes to smash after she is kicked out of the Fall (and her marriage) in her late-mid-20s, and embarks on a jet-setting lifestyle, hobnobbing with famous classical musicians, Princess Di, and various members of the '90s LA glitterati. The second half of the book is about her lost years searching for self-esteem and a solid identity/career.

In another context, this would be a highly resonant theme, but my sympathy for her waned as she continually and unselfconsciously describes all kinds of support (financial, emotional, creative, etc) she received from record labels, agents, celebrity friends, rich family members, etc. She ends up in fashion, a field I have zero interest in, and becomes a retailer and TV presenter, which seem the epitome of icky superficiality, again erasing much of my identification with her. (She throws in mentions of "spirit guides" and angels and whatnot, which is also distancing.) Hardly an inspiring tale of talent and moxie triumphing over limitations, which is the kind of rock bio I love, but this is her story, and she tells it true. If nothing else, Brix spins a good yarn, and her sincere love for music (and animals) are appealing.

Isabel says

On the coffee table next to the piano sat a series of books that had been loaned out of the library. As a music addict and a child of the 70s, my friend is gorging on bios and autobios from those who shaped his musical landscape. For me the name was familiar but nothing else. The cover attracted my eyes and as he was studying and I was in need of a book, I started to read it.

Turns out the name was familiar indeed, but not because of the music but because of the fashion. It's a book filled with sadness and ups and downs but it shines through the whole book and the way she writes makes it for a page turner. I may have read it in barely more than 24hours.

The chapters in the first part are short-stories and could easily be read as stand alones. The second part maps The Fall and the last part takes it back to the now.

Whether or not you know her name, whether or not you know for her riffs or her fashion tips, it is a really thoroughly enjoyable memoir.

James Hartley says

This is a strange book: fascinating in parts, shocking, tedious, boring, hilarious, moving, gripping, sickening and illuminating. All in all, it's a biography: a person in full. You can't put the book down without feeling like you know Brix, for better and for worse.

Brix is a California girl, born Laura, whose odd journey is told over many short, punchy, well-written chapters. Early parts of the book reminded me of Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, which I read recently, and whom Brix went to college with (also in the writing class, Brett Easton Ellis). By the end of the book you realise that Brix knows more or less everyone in the celebrity world - there's so much name dropping going on you almost feel sorry for her.

I'll confess that my interest in the book was Brix's time with The Fall and I skipped many parts which weren't directly related to this. They bored me, to be honest. Brix seems to guess most people will do this as there are stuck-on chapters at the start and end about Mark E. Smith, but this doesn't stop her bookending the good stuff with her other relationships. Her time with Nigel Kennedy was cringingly readable but the rest was dull, for me. I guess if you've ever seen Brix on TV or heard her music or met her, these other parts might appeal to you. You can't help feeling you're being sold a line, though - a "look at me!" line - while the more detailed chapters on Smith or Kennedy are fascinating for their details, as if even Brix can't believe it happened.

As a Fall-related memoir, this is worth every penny. The saddest part, really, is the decline in the health (mental and physical) of Smith, although Brix notes that even early on in their marriage she'd have to pick him up off the floor and take him up to bed most nights, pissed up on whiskey.

Smith comes out of this as a fascinating, frightening character: easily the most talented poet Britain has produced in decades, but one who must be impossible to work with or live with, let alone be married to. While others play at poet, he is one, and this is a portrait of what that really means: and it ain't pretty. His work will survive him and he knows it. It's all that really matters. Dylan Thomas's boozing is almost funny now, but wasn't if you were a victim of it.

You get the feeling that, like Prince, or Morrissey, Smith's art depicts exactly who he is. And while that might be nice from a distance - amusing even - up close you would be nothing but kindle for their artistic fire. On record you can pick and choose your songs. At the concerts you can take a step back, but up close and personal, unless you're ready, you're going to get burned.

Facinating for me were the Fall-y revelations such as Cruiser's Creek being the name of the library where Smith hid when he was taken on a luxury cruise by Brix and family (he hated it - ha!). His freakout on the Matterhorn ride at Disneyland which led to Disney's Dream Debased on *The Wonderful and Frightening...* is fascinating - after turning white on the ride and calling it evil, someone was killed not seconds later (shades of his IRA-related police interview years later).

Descriptions of his flat in Manchester and his favourite dish - fried everything - are wonderful (yes, and frightening). Drinking strong tea til eleven every day before switching to beer was his wont. Snapshots: turning up on stage in later years with a snout for a nose, after being beaten up for being a loudmouth, and playing a great gig. Biting his hands, trying to bite out the evil he felt he'd been contaminated with when a disabled fan shook his hand backstage...

Brix doesn't hold back - but it's hard to deny that Mark Smith, and even Nigel "Monster" Kennedy - are the real heroes of her book. They are the real larger-than-life characters, the ones you want to know more about, vile as they are: they are the talent. Even Donna Tartt or Susannah Hoffs (the Bangles singer) seem to shine brighter than Brix in her own book, no matter how much she plays them down or plays her own achievements up.

It all adds up to a feeling, at the end, as you skim read the last few pages of how wonderful life is (again), that there is another bout of darkness coming. You kind of feel sorry for her in the end: her life seems to be defined by other people.

Stephen McQuiggan says

I had such a crush on Brix when she was in The Fall and this book has reignited it. The first thing to note here is just how well written this is - whereas a lot of autobiographies drag until the moment that made the author worthy of a book in the first place, Brix's reminiscences of her early life is riveting, endearing stuff - dysfunction, disease, parental assault, a Mickey Mouse addiction and schooldays with Bret Easton Ellis. The section on her time in the mighty Fall is as tawdry and sad as you might fear, though Brix is very generous to the car wreck genius that is Mark E Smith. The last section dealing with her reinvention as a socialite and fashion guru dragged a little for me, having no interest whatsoever in that world, but overall a fantastic insight for any Kurious Oranj.

Kate Dansette says

She's so LA!

Huw Rees says

Well written, interesting read. The best work by the Fall was done when she was in the band. But the synopsis could have been "somewhat talented poor little rich girl has life happen to her" There is never any acknowledgement that she has a very privileged life. The two relationships she fell out of, both times rich, influential friends and family could get her 1. an apartment in Holland Park and not have to work and just hang around until she felt better and 2. an apartment in Marina Del Rey on the LA beach, and again not have to work, just hang around the beach til she felt better. this may be judgemental but for all the "spiritualistic analysis" she does throughout the book, there is never any thought about how easy she has had it! A little self absorbed but still a good read. i stopped at 361 pages, I just couldn't take the pain of her having to go to the beach each day and hang around with directors, members of the Bangles in LA until she got over her relationship with Nigel Kennedy.

Colin says

Brix had a privileged upbringing in California but a difficult relationship with her volatile father. She attended one of the best liberal art colleges in America where she was classmates with Brett Easton Ellis and Donna Tartt.

The chapters on her ill fated relationships to Mark E. Smith of indie band The Fall and violin prodigy Nigel Kennedy are what will interest most readers. When she joined the band their sound became poppier and they had some chart success. The contrast between sunny California and Manchester of the early 80's is hilarious. Well written in short chapters I zipped through this book in two days.

Sonya-Jayne says

Loved every minute of this book. Brix is an amazing woman and her story is well worth a read. Now I love her even more xxx

MJ Nicholls says

I tend to avoid music bios or rock books, except in the case of The Fall. The madcap soap opera yielding one solid post-punk record after another, each timestamped by the particular line-up of talented musicians, coerced and exploited as a means for MES to spit his (once) dazzling (now incoherent) verbal tirades, is irresistible for this once obsessive fan. Brix Smith pushed the band from their phase of snarling assault (cited as the highlight by most Fall nuts) into their mid-80s poppier phase (cited as the lowlight by most Fall nuts), and in this not-all-Fall-centred bio (the first half is on her childhood and parental schisms, the latter half on fashion boutiques), she offers a lucid and painful insight into having the double trauma of marrying and working with MES. The account of her brief return to the band at the height of MES's long drug-and-drink-induced meltdown is one of the most shocking moments, not leaning on the "loveable loon" tone favoured by fawning hacks, but a blunt account of what a repugnant human being MES became (always was?)—a much-needed slap in the face for those who still revere their Hip Priest. The reader leaves this charming book with respect for Brix's warmth and wit, and a renewed hatred for the *Cerebral Caustic* LP, and the other 90s LPs MES sabotaged on the sauce.

Jo Coleman says

Good fun! The bits about being in The Fall and giving up luxurious LA for a grimy flat in Manchester were excellent, and the shameless namedropping of all the celebrities she'd made a special connection with was a hoot. She came over as so guileless and positive that it was hard not to like her, though I did skip through all the bits about dream analysis and crystals.

Mimi says

Brix did some brilliant work as part of 'The Fall' and her project 'The Adult Net' did a cover of Strawberry Alarm Clock's 'Incense and Peppermints' that vastly improved on the original, and I think those should have remained my dominant impressions of her. Her autobiography is far less memorable - although anyone who could survive a relationship with Mark E. Smith must be applauded.

Blane says

I am torn on this one. Brix's period with The Fall was arguably their best (it certainly was the most commercially accessible--pretty much entirely the result of her influence on MES & the band). Being completely honest, without that relatively brief period in her life (which she looks back on with very complex mixed feelings), Brix would likely be a "nobody" despite her VERY privileged upbringing &

having been pretty much handed whatever she wanted out of life due to her connections and shrewd maneuvering.

Other reviewers have pointed out how likable she comes across in the book. I thought she came across as a manipulative rich girl who could afford to drop out of an exclusive college to run off to Europe to live "as Boho as she wanted to be" simply because she implicitly knew someone would be there to catch her if/when she fell.

Disappointing.

Nigeyb says

Mark E. Smith famously once said: *"If it's me and yer granny on bongos, it's The Fall"*. Which is quite true. Numerous bandmates came and went. Indeed, so many, that Dave Simpson wrote an entire book - 'The Fallen: Searching for the Missing Members of The Fall' - based around his quest to locate and talk to each and every one of them. It's a brilliant read too.

I followed The Fall pretty much continuously, from their inception in the white heat of punk, through to the bitter end, when Mark E. Smith died on 24 January 2018.

Most fans of The Fall would probably agree that the mid-1980s period in which Brix Smith Start was a member was both a creative and commercial highpoint.

I have always marvelled how anyone could want to live with Mark E. Smith, let alone get married to him. In 1983, Mark E. Smith married Brix Smith Start, then a member of The Fall. They divorced in 1989.

Mark E. Smith subsequently married Saffron Prior, who ran The Fall's fan club. When he died he had been married to Eleni Poulou since 2001 – she was also a member of the Fall between 2002 and 2016.

These women all appear to be attractive and intelligent. Mark E. Smith, on the other hand, clearly had addiction issues, and was notoriously contrary and volatile. On a good day, I daresay he was stimulating and agreeable company, but I am not sure how often he had good days. So, I was especially keen to read this eyewitness account from Brix Smith Start.

If the book had exclusively dwelt on her relationship with Mark, and her time in The Fall, then it would have been a five star read. These sections are riveting and essential for any fan of The Fall. Brix seems to realise this too, as this is around 60% of the book's content. Was their domestic life as bad as I had imagined? Absolutely, probably a bit worse if anything.

The rest of the book covers Brix Smith Start's family, childhood, and teenage years, meeting Mark and joining The Fall. She then describes her post-Mark relationship with Nigel Kennedy, and what happened afterwards, including finding a good man to marry, and opening a shop. A happy ending then.

I am pleased that she appears to have found contentment now, however these non-Fall sections were generally far less interesting, indeed some bordered on tedious.

Christopher McQuain says

Judging by what she's written here, Brix Smith Start is a kind-enough, sincere-enough person; and that she is a very talented person is a long-established fact (The Fall's very best albums encompass her first go-round with them). She is probably -- I have no trouble believing it -- a "better" person, all things considered, than the autocratic, sometimes-abusive Mark E. Smith, her ex-husband, whose band, The Fall, she was a prominent and vital member of throughout their marriage. And this book is a must-read for any Fall fan; it's packed with juicy behind-the-scenes recollections that are surprisingly even-handed, even generous, and never (or very rarely) just a one-sided revenge-telling.

What makes the book middling at best, though, are two dimensions that probably can't be entirely distinguished one from the other, and cannot be mitigated by sincerity: However easily Smith Start fell onto and contributed so much to the Fall's subversive, abrasive wavelength, and however well she grasps post-punk aesthetics, her bourgeois-bohemianism goes, evidently, all the way to the bone, and there's not an iota of system-challenging (or even, really, -questioning) to be found here. The entirely unexpected lack of class consciousness on display throughout is a stark marker of the willfully un-conscious, high-upper-middle class into which she was born and luxuriously/obliviously, if turbulently, brought up -- the conspicuous status-markers of which, whether they be property or vacation spots or professions or schools, Smith Start places wall-to-wall.

That, to me, goes far toward explaining the second mediocritizing dimension: Smith Start's ridiculous, self-indulgent, sub-"Oprah" New Age-isms, which permeate the book, and which only someone as utterly, unusually squared away in the material realm as she (though she doesn't seem to know how unusual it is, having apparently never examined it or even given it a thought) could broadcast this earnestly. Her "struggles" are buoyed, always and permanently, by inadequately acknowledged class-based safety nets of family money, celebrity/wealth connection, and an instinct for name-dropping and string-pulling, none of which Smith Start seems to have any actual awareness of as such. This self-involvement and over-insulation disguised as enlightenment leads to overlong passages of sloppy, clunkily digressive writing, and Smith Start's use of buzzwords and lingo, whether "spiritual" or cultural, are often like the worst of magazine writing, hollow and embarrassing.

So, the book is a disappointment; less "Lifestyles of the Politicized Art-Terrorist Pop-Musical Avant-Garde" I was expecting based on the music the author made with The Fall, and more just "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," with no trace of irony. Still, her candor, real enthusiasm and eye/ear for the creative milieu she joined with Smith and his shambolic, dysfunctional band are fascinating and revealing. You just have to wade through a lot of daddy-bought ponies, indiscriminately dropped names/price tags (implied, at least), and Italian-villa weddings (post Smith, of course) to get there.

Johanna says

(Helmet 2018: #20 Taiteilijaelämäkerta, POPSUGAR 2018 #37 A book you meant to read in 2017 but didn't get to)

There's something utterly charming in the wide-eyed naivete Brix displays in her descriptions of her

childhood and teenage years. It could be jarring: the wealth, the name-dropping, *how are all these people so influential?*, the stunning houses and the sheltered privilege ("My public school days were over. At least I gave it a go.") -- but it's shown in vivid images of California wilderness, the sights and especially the smells of Los Angeles. Reading in dreary Finnish winter, the first part stands out to me as the strongest in this book; you could say it "vibrates" with something that is Brix through and through. (There are a lot of "vibrations" in this book, as well as: crystals, colours, astrological charts, Jungian therapy, positive psychology, life advice to the tune of *There is nothing you can't do* and *Love is always the answer*, and sensory deprivation tanks. Because of course there are.)

Like probably everyone else, I picked up this book because I love the music of The Fall. The records with Brix in the band are some of my favourites and I'd be lying if I claimed not to be curious as heck about how it all worked. Brix approaches the topic very graciously, and I guess IT. JUST. WORKS. OK? is about as much you can say about a partnership like this without making it sound banal. Unfortunately, Brix has the same kind of tendency to mystify MES' writing process that everyone else seems to have although, to her credit, there is some well-deserved criticism as well.

It's hard to separate Brix the 20 year old in love from Brix the rockstar, even reading the story in her own words. It's also hard to take, sometimes: disappointing to see someone come off so judgmental, even when you might have expected it. Her initial impression of Manchester is difficult to read, and while I tried to view it as simple culture shock and the pain of being so far removed from everything and everyone she knew, I couldn't really approach it with much sympathy. Instead of expressing the injustice of poverty, Brix expects us to feel her own sense of injustice in being forced to see it. That's probably healthier in the long run, and I suppose it's meant to show us the full extent of her self-transformation when postapocalyptic northern England is finally left in the dust, but all it did was sour me on her.

With that being said, the last section in the book is the weakest of the three, both in terms of content and narrative. Brix is still charming and the seemingly bottomless pool of friends and family with emotional and material support and connections is beyond my wildest dreams, but let's not pretend the story of START and the difficulty in winning over voters in *Gok's Fashion Fix* makes for riveting reading. I know it makes me sound like an annoying Fall fan who doesn't care about dressing well, but I would have hoped for a little more time spent on the Extricated experience. Maybe more about the individual songs -- she has a knack for describing the music, and knowing she was there, lived it and sensed it, had those drums and that bass engulf her guitar, I trust her take implicitly.
