



# Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood

*Kate Simon*

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## **Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood** Kate Simon

"As an account of growing up female, it is a fit companion piece to Mary McCarthy's classic *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood*."--Le Anne Schreiber, *The New York Times*.

## **Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood Details**

Date : Published August 1st 1997 by Penguin Books (first published 1982)

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Author : Kate Simon

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# From Reader Review Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood for online ebook

## Judy G says

This is a fascinating tale not sure if it is for all. Kate Simon wrote this in 1982 about growing up Jewish in Bronx and she was born in 1912 and died in 1990 in NYC. Its quite disturbing about her relationship with her parents and brother. This is a child who will have to fight to maintain her path herSelf. Various people tried to use her sexually and these people are family. Her father she says was early maybe later yes involved sexually with his niece who he brought to US from Warsaw Poland.

Kate became a known writer and this was first of three part tale of her growing up. Finishing this book I am waiting for second from our SF Public Library - A Wider World.

This is a very good book. She had to take on her own life without getting family support. This is a very good book and I look forward to the second book which is about her high school years and I know the school James Monroe HS

I grew up in Brooklyn and Brooklyn and Bronx are suburbs of Manhattan.

I thank Carol Flanagan for talking about this book.

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## Bap says

Between 3 and 4 stars. Kate Simon grew up poor in the Bronx. This is an unsentimental and unvarnished account of her childhood in an insular Jewish home in which she clashed with her parent especially her tyrannical father who encouraged her to drop out of school to focus on playing the piano. There are many nice touches to her story which makes it a satisfying read but one comes away with a sense that she was bitter with a burgeoning conviction that rebellion was necessary to rupture the ties of family and neighborhood.

It is extraordinary that Kate would grow up to become a journalist and travel writer from these inauspicious beginnings.

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## Danielle says

3.5/5 enjoyed this very much.

Kate Simon's Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood is a wonderfully evocative memoir of growing up in New York City in the 1920s. She tells her story not only from the perspective of a girl and young woman but also of an immigrant. It was published in 1982 and was one of the New York Times Book Review's twelve best books of the year as well as one of Time magazine's five best. She continues her story in A Wider World: Portraits in an Adolescence and Etchings in an Hourglass, both of which I will be reading at some point and am hopeful they will be equally as engrossing as this has been. Bronx Primitive is made up of fourteen chapters that read more like a series of interconnected essays touching on various aspects of growing up--her family and friends, school and life in general on 178th Street and Lafontaine Avenue, and the reader gets a snapshot view of Simon's life up to the age of fourteen.

In some ways her childhood experiences are somewhat harrowing as she was at the mercy of relatives and family friends who thought nothing of taking advantage of a young girl, but this is in no way a misery memoir. Although never explicit you get the feeling her family was poor--her father made shoes and each nice thing the family bought was the result of many hours of hard work. She writes about her youth in a completely unsentimental manner and quite matter of factly, even if some of her stories are cringe-worthy. In Poland Kate was Kaila, named after her grandmother, but her name was changed to Caroline upon her arrival to America when she was only six, and eventually she became Kate. She emigrated with her mother and younger brother, but her father had traveled ahead to find a job and a place to live. You get the sense he was happy to live the life of a bachelor, if only temporarily. I'm not sure Kate was particularly close to either parent, and certainly her mother and father had their own difficulties with each other, but she frequently butted heads with her father who was very rigid and unyielding in his ways and expectations.

Although Kate's family was Jewish, they seemed to practice more out of tradition rather than a stringent belief. Her mother rarely went to the synagogue, and while there were things they did or didn't do according to their faith, Kate often didn't understand the reasons why. She spent at least as much time, maybe more, with the Italian families on her block and in her tenement building getting an entirely different sort of education than that which she received in P.S. 58, 57 and 59. She was a good student, but just missed getting into a "rapid advance" school where junior high could be accomplished in two years rather than three, which caused a huge rift with her father who was sure her failure was on purpose and to embarrass him. When she was ready to go to high school he would have been happy for her to leave school altogether and attempt to become a concert pianist, but she had other dreams.

It was with a certain nostalgia (even though this is a period I am only familiar with through books and movies) that I approached this book, but in the telling of her childhood memories, I'm not so sure nostalgia is the right word to use. Going to Coney Island with a nickel and buying hotdogs and Baby Ruths does convey a certain vanished world that makes me wonder about life in another era--better than my own? And I found the stories where children kept mum about behavior not meant to be shared with grown-ups fascinating. Maybe all children have that unwritten code they must adhere to--things they know but can't and won't tell. Spending the afternoon with gypsies on those same Coney Island afternoons and not admitting the fact to parents is understandable. But not being able to turn to a parent, or worse a parent's collusion with other adults, when inappropriate behavior is occurring in such a small place as the family apartment is very disturbing. Childhood seemed a different world in the tenements of 1920s New York.

I found this a fascinating read despite some very uncomfortable moments. Kate Simon writes about her childhood with honesty and eloquence and even a certain humor. It may not always have been a happy place, but you still get a sense of her excitement to meet the world and all it had to offer her.

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### **Vanessa says**

Didn't actually read it...I did listen attentively to the in-depth discussion of this book in my New York Studies class...oh and I can't tell you what this was about...

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### **Tom Stanton says**

This slender memoir beautifully evokes a New York childhood around the time of the Great War. It came out

three decades ago. Glad I finally got around to reading it. Without nostalgia, she wonderfully captures an era when many immigration was a fact of life for many families.

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## **S says**

One of the terrific things to keep in mind when reading this book is that Kate Simon is writing about her teenage self somewhere around 60 years later. As an old woman, she looks back on her Jewish immigrant upbringing with nostalgia but doesn't let the memory of youth keep her from portraying the time with brutal honesty.

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## **Christine says**

For anyone who loves a good autobiography of a non-celebrity, this book is a must. The author has such an appealing and attractive voice, and writes in such an honest and unpretentious fashion that you wish she wrote about everything. Growing up in the Bronx, her relationship with her parents, their relationship with each other, becoming a woman, all dealt with unforgettably.

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## **Lydia says**

Kate Simon was one tough broad, growing up in the Bronx among groping relatives and a soul-crushing father who ignored her fierce spirit and her many intellectual gifts. This memoir demonstrates from its first pages that she was always exceptional -- enough to end up as a world-renowned travel writer, living as a sophisticate in Rome. But it doesn't answer my question: why her? She had no mentor, no one took a vast interest in her. Her mother defended her against a closed-minded and unimaginative patriarch but was not her champion. Kate Simon, like so many remarkable people, seems to have been born with a mark on her soul that was her ticket out of a life of drudgery.

And it's a GREAT read. She's hilarious and biting. No self-pity for all the times she is left to her own devices, or to fight off molesters (and boy, there were a lot!). Check her out.

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## **Karen says**

An incredible memoir of a young immigrant girl's childhood in the Bronx in the 1920s. Kaila/Kate is just four when she, her mother and her younger brother arrive in New York City from Poland to join her father. She captures the feel of a neighborhood made up of different ethnic groups (Polish, Irish, Italian) and the small anguishes and delights of childhood. A compelling portrait of a Polish Jewish family trying to adjust to life in a new world. My only disappointment was that the book ended so abruptly when Kate was 13, but she wrote two subsequent memoirs so it's just an incentive for further reading.

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## **Kate says**

Very good memoir - an incredible portrait of a time and place. Reminded me of a harder edged Tree Grows in Brooklyn.

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**Ms. Chedwick says**

good read

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**Elaine says**

A good solid memoir. Very interesting.

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**Jselk says**

A brazenly told story that offers a peek into an adolescence's formative years during one of the world's great cities formation.

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**Steph says**

Growing Up Jewish in World War I Bronx. I appreciated the similarities to my growing up in 1950's Brooklyn.

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