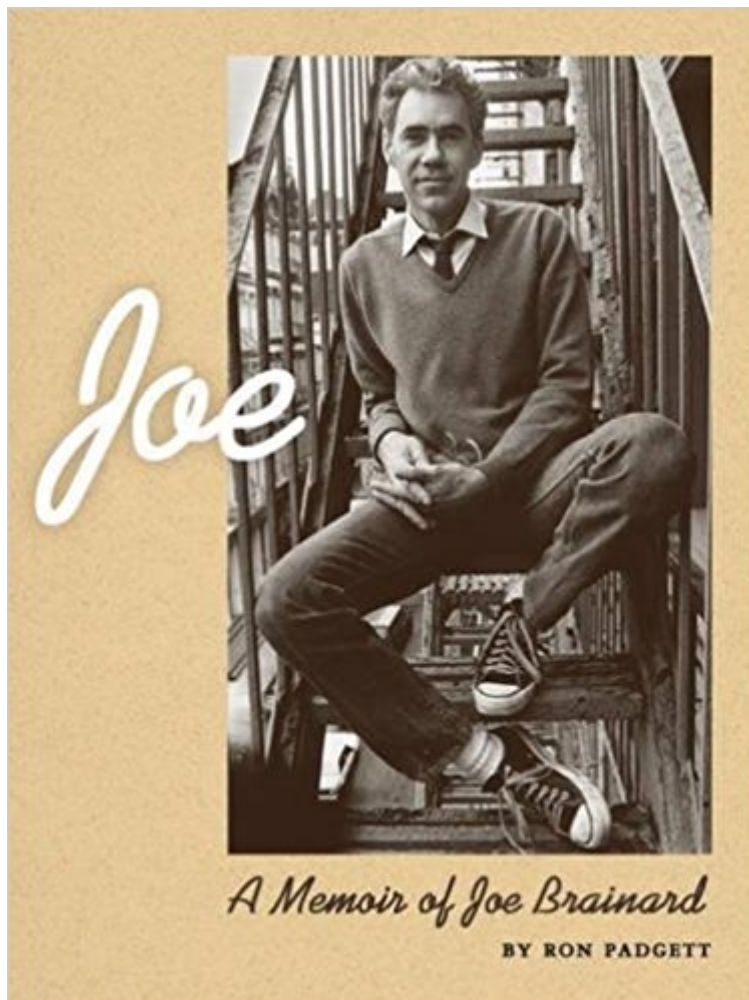


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Joe: A Memoir Of Joe Brainard



Synopsis

When someone we love dies, most of us do something to keep them from completely vanishing. We summon up memories of them, we talk about them, we visit their graves, we treasure photographs of them, we dream about them, and we cry, and for those brief moments they are in some way with us. But when my friend Joe Brainard died, I knew I was going to have to do something beyond all these. So begins Ron Padgett's warm, conversational memoir "the unlikely and true story of two childhood friends, one straight and one gay, who grew up in 1950s Oklahoma, surprised their families by moving to New York City in search of art and poetry, and became a part of the dynamic community of artists and writers whose work continues to shape American culture. Much of this intimate memoir is told in Joe's own direct and unforgettable voice. Dozens of letters, journal entries, poems, photographs, and artworks create a stirring portrait of the times—one that illuminates not only Joe Brainard's life and art, but the influence that his kindness and insight had on the lives of his contemporaries, including Alex Katz, Andy Warhol, Frank O'Hara, Joe LeSueur, Anne Waldman, John Ashbery, Kenward Elmslie, and countless other friends, lovers, and admirers. As Ron Padgett generously shares his memories, he allows us all to get to know Joe Brainard, a truly great person who just happened to be a brilliant artist and poet. Above all, Joe is a gentle reminder that love, life, and art matter every second. Poet Ron Padgett, the son of an Oklahoma bootlegger, grew up in Tulsa where he met Joe Brainard at the age of 6. His recent books include the memoir, *Oklahoma Tough: My Father, King of the Tulsa Bootleggers* and the collection of poems *You Never Know*.

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Customer Reviews

Padgett (Oklahoma Tough) offers an affectionate memoir of New York artist Joe Brainard, his friend for nearly four decades. It may be that very familiarity, though, that keeps Padgett from crafting a lean, cohesive narrative. While the author hints at intriguing aspects of Brainard's character (how, for example, did this supposedly shy, repressed artist carry on so many different sexual relationships at the same time?), he never fully fleshes them out. Instead, in episodic sections that vary in length, Padgett concentrates on the day-to-day aspects of their friendship, charting their early years in New York, Brainard's artistic growth, his travels, his friends and lovers, his drug use and his " 'start-over' binges." Padgett is occasionally transfixed by minutiae; he includes one of Brainard's summer reading lists as well as an itemized accounting of one of his breakfasts. But despite "or perhaps because of" his obsession with details, Padgett's portrait of Brainard feels personal and authentic. And while he doesn't provide deep insight into the mind of Brainard, who died in 1994 of complications from AIDS, Padgett deftly captures the feel of mid-1960s New York, with its endless parade of celebrities, near-celebrities, hangers-on, has-beens and never-wases. And certainly he has done a brilliant job of assembling the raw material "countless letters and several dozen photographs" for a further study of his subject. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Part biography, part memoir, Ron Padgett's "Joe" is a deeply moving and tender portrait of one of the most original artists and writers who ever graced the New York scene. Ten years after Joe Brainard's death, we need this book to remember the man who remembered everything, who followed his own unique path into the hearts of those who loved and continue to love his work. And who better to tell this story than poet Ron Padgett, Brainard's fellow Tulsan and lifelong friend? The book he has written is a precious gift to all of us."--Paul Auster

A year or two ago, I sat with my teacher, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, as she spoke of her friend, Joe Brainard. So much love and tenderness came into her face and her voice as she spoke. "You two would have loved each other," she said, with real frustration, as if he'd stepped out of the room just before I arrived. She spoke of his kindness, humor, generosity and directness -- all qualities found abundantly in this book. Bless Ron Padgett for

recognizing he had to write this book. This is a book that had to happen -- and it did. How perfectly appropriate that the book is direct, soft-spoken, a little curmudgeonly, even occasionally awkward -- it's the real thing, a life of Joe Brainard from the perspective of his straight best friend. Brainard is well on his way to being canonized -- thanks in great part to *The Collected Writings* -- also masterminded by Ron Padgett. If you love the work of Joe Brainard, get this book, and save it for a day when you are running low on hope for love and hope and art.

Ron Padgett's biography of his life-long friend Joe Brainard is a real treat for someone like myself. I encountered this group of poets in the 1960s in obscure lit mags such as *Mother* and thoroughly enjoyed their cosmopolitan American expression that was nevertheless grounded in our weird American psyche. Some of the collaborations with poets such as Ted Berrigan and the second-generation of New York School poets (a myriad of names) were fire-storms of improvisatory poetics. But Padgett's book is a great chronicle of all the New York poets and painters as they related to Brainard--including the original school of O'Hara and Ashbery, et al. Brainard himself had an amazing life that ranged from the alienating strictures of Tulsa, Oklahoma to the courageous years inside the New York art scene, years that were tremendously promising and simultaneously dangerous with drugs, infighting, self-doubts. Padgett's enduring friendship with Brainard results in a biography that is honest and enlightening. I sometimes felt like I was at once reliving the photographs of that chilling book of Oklahoma speed-freak photos (Tulsa--the hipsters will know) along the warmth and trials of companionship through thick and thin. Brainard was a most disarmingly poignant artist and poet (*I Remember*) that could make a straight like me love a gay man--just as Padgett, his biographer, does. A true 20th Century saga that brings joy and tears, carefully and completely rendered. Thank you, Mr. Padgett. The new Library of America edition of Joe Brainard is the boon companion to this book. Back-to-back home runs.

Poet Ron Padgett is also an interesting biographer and knows how to tell a good story. In *JOE* he does a fine job in recounting the basic facts of Joe Brainard's life, and his arrangements and paragraphs are written with a poet's eye to detail and piquancy. Everyone loves Brainard's art and his writing, and the difficulty insofar as I can see it is that the book loses a little something after Joe meets Kenward Elmslie and his career moves into high gear. As Padgett admits, his closeness to Joe began to unravel slightly at this juncture. (The two had been high school pals in Oklahoma and had moved to New York together, with the poets Dick Gallup and Ted Berrigan, from Tulsa very early in the 1960s.) Once Joe stops worrying about money, a little of the tension disappears from

the story. Until then it has the high drama of a Dickens tale, even down to the story of Joe reduced to begging in the Boston streets and being too embarrassed actually to ask people for money. After his success, he goes to Vermont every summer, he can afford tables at the finest restaurants, he meets Jackie Onassis and Willem De Kooning, the whole nine yards of NY social success and eventually he stops painting. His death from AIDS is briefly discussed. I have the feeling that Padgett did not want to make this into an AIDS story, and wanted instead to celebrate his gay friend's life and work, but as he admits many aspects of Joe's sexuality were occluded from himself and from Pat (Padgett's wife). Whenever Joe gets close to a woman he has fantasies about taking the next step into having sex with her, but this seems to have occurred seldom if at all. In the meantime he continues writing his book I REMEMBER and its many sequels and extensions, and launches into a longrunning affair with the actor Keith McDermott. Many other figures grace the book, including Andy Warhol and Frank O'Hara. Through every detail Padgett retains his equanimity, never letting the bathwater drown the baby. I wish he would write a memoir of all his friends (and relations, having enjoyed his book about his own father, a bootlegger and a real Oklahoma "character" like Curly or Jud.) Many anecdotes, many insights, in "Joe." I love the tale of Padgett asking Joe, a notoriously hard person to shop for, what he would like for Christmas. Joe says, "Stairs. I don't like sitting in chairs, but I always like sitting on stairs, and I'd buy some, only I never see them for sale in shops." That would be charming enough, but then amazingly Padgett gets out his carpenters' tools and builds Joe a set of four stairs each about thirty inches wide and hauls them over to Joe's loft a few days before Christmas. It is this kind of affection and amazement that pervades this book and indeed, pervades our reading of Ron Padgett, no matter what he writes, poetry, memoir, translation. It seems that on every page Joe is expressing his love for Pat and Ron by giving them painting after painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, you name it, they must have the world's biggest art collection. Good for them!

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