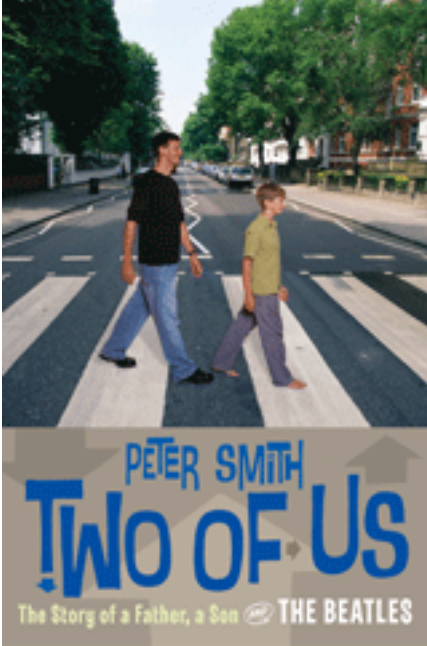


## Press Release



# Two of Us

by Peter Smith

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## About the Book

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"Guys usually can't go it alone, one-on-one. We need a topic, a medium, a way in, a third party in the room to spark conversation. Video games, chess, baseball, movies, a hike up a mountain, women of course. But I'd hardly expected a rock group to take on that role."

At the ages of forty and seven, Peter Smith and his son, Sam, were struggling to find common ground. But as Smith recounts in *Two of Us: The Story of a Father, a Son, and the Beatles*, the two discover a new depth to their relationship when Sam encounters the Fab Four. The book "charts new territory in the country of fathers and sons," says Mary Gordon.

With its appealing music, personalities, and trivia, the Beatles' universe easily draws Sam in as soon as his parents introduce him to it. The band quickly becomes an all-out obsession for him, "his first-ever love affair." The seven-year-old impresses his dad with his knowledge of Beatles' data — names, dates, working titles of songs — that even Peter, a devoted fan himself, doesn't know.

Beyond the trivia, though, are the truly significant issues of the band's songs and exploits — teamwork, romance, art, religion, fame, betrayal, mortality — all of which inspire meaningful discussions between Peter and Sam. The Beatles open the door to a great many subjects and succeed in opening the two Smiths to each other. Their awkward relationship evolves into a loving friendship.

With their shared passion and newfound closeness, the pair even become traveling companions, with destinations like Beatlefest, London, and Liverpool. But on their pilgrimage to Liverpool, ironically, two years of Beatlemania finally reach a plateau for Sam, forcing Peter to confront his fear that the distance between father and son, bridged during Sam's

infatuation with the band, will soon reappear. It doesn't, of course, because as Peter comes to realize, "the Beatles were a portal." They led the two Smiths to each other, they fostered the connection, but the connection transcended them.

*Two of Us* is a book that any parent searching for a way to communicate with a child will appreciate. With its touching tribute to fanaticism, it is a story that any fan of *anything* can relate to, and one that music enthusiasts will especially enjoy. Through his celebration of the Beatles' enduring cross-generational appeal, Peter Smith reminds us all of the unique ways that the Beatles enriched our own lives and helped us understand one another, and still do.

## About the Author

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Peter Smith is a contributing editor for *O, the Oprah Magazine* and has written for *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *Travel and Leisure*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. He is the author of three novels, most recently *A Good Family*. He lives in Northampton, Massachusetts.

## An interview with Peter Smith, the author of *Two of Us*

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**Q) How did you get the idea for *Two of Us*?**

**A)** It started off as a magazine piece I pitched to the *New York Times Sophisticated Traveler* — a father-and-son jaunt to Liverpool. Sam, my son, was three-quarters of the way through a major-league Beatles obsession, and the *Times* told me, "Yes, go for it," so Sam and I flew to London, then to Liverpool, then back home to Massachusetts, where we live. Before I could write a single word, the magazine killed the article, after I made the mistake of telling the photo editor that Liverpool was "kind of depressing." So I thought, Well, Liverpool is kind of the climax of what's been a pretty enormous two-year arc, both personally for my son and for our relationship in general. Why not write a book about it?

**Q) What's *Two of Us* about?**

**A)** It's about bonding with your son over something amazingly great that's cultural rather than, say, sports-related. I was looking for a way in with Sam. I wasn't very happy with our relationship. I was kind of stiff and formal, and I hated being that way. I love playing sports, but I'm not really a jock, and Sam isn't either, so the *Field of Dreams* playing-catch thing wasn't going to work for us. Plus I was kind of teed off at all the empty crap I was hearing on the radio, so my wife and I decided to introduce our kids to the Beatles, and it took off from there. The group came into our lives, and suddenly Sam and I had this enormously rich, complicated world to talk about. He was seven at the time.

**Q) How do you mean, it took off?**

**A)** Thanks to the Beatles, our relationship started zooming. A whole universe opened up. Topics like music and songwriting and friendship and friendships souring and England and Italy and death and what happens to a guy when he gets married and hard work and the importance of practicing what you're good at — just to name a few right off the bat. I guess it was also a way of telling Sam about me in a sideways fashion. Anyhow, Sam became

completely and totally obsessed with the group. He learned all the songs. He started reading about the band, watching every single movie, playing their songs on the piano, quizzing my wife and me. After a while he knew more about the Beatles than I did, which (modestly) is saying a lot.

**Q) Where did your joint love of the Beatles take you?**

**A)** Well, let's see. Naturally, we went to the Dakota, though I was a little reluctant at first. We went to this nutty fan-event called Beatlefest, which takes place all over the country — which is kind of amazing, if you think about it. We went to London, where a man named Richard Porter leads two separate Beatles walks through the city, both ending up at Abbey Road. We went to the British Library, which maintains original Beatles lyrics in its permanent collection. We went finally to Liverpool — the real Penny Lane, Strawberry Fields, the Beatles' childhood houses, and all that. By then, we sort of didn't need the Beatles anymore.

**Q) What do you mean?**

**A)** The Beatles had glued Sam and me together. We were two peas in a pod. And we could survive very well without them as a focus.

**Q) You found Liverpool a bit of a disappointment?**

**A)** I did. My expectations were way too high. Whether you know it or not, your mind paints a scene when you listen to a song. Take "Penny Lane." A jolly, fun-sounding place, right? The real Penny Lane was just a busy, honking, traffic-jammed street. I had to make peace with my own overwrought imagination.

**Q) Were you a big Beatles fan, growing up?**

**A)** Yeah, absolutely. Though probably no more than the next person. There's never been another band like them. I think it was the actor John Cusack who put it best: the Beatles are the soundtrack to our consciousness. And they're the only rock band most parents ages thirty-five to forty-five would even consider introducing their kids to. I love Led Zeppelin and the Who and the Clash and Patti Smith and the Talking Heads, but those bands aren't exactly what you'd call child-friendly.

**Q) The Beatles were the top-grossing band of the year 2000, earning \$150 million, largely on the sales of their "1" compilation, which sold mostly to kids. The band broke up thirty-five years ago. Why do you think the Beatles still appeal to the under-twenty set?**

**A)** There's no right answer, but I do have a bunch of theories. The Beatles were a lot of fun, remember? They were sporty, and they weren't afraid to be goofy. They weren't hostile, or nasty, or pouty, or complete personal messes. They evolved in smart, complicated, interesting ways. Kids are able to understand 99 percent of the lyrics. The songs are incredibly varied, and so are the instruments, from the sitar to the piccolo trumpet to the stride piano in "Lady Madonna." Aside from some songs that would appeal naturally to kids, like "Octopus's Garden," and "Yellow Submarine," some of the melodies seem to me deliberately lullaby-like. To me, the Beatles universe is a complete, slightly off-kilter, candy-colored, very mysterious place. It's a bit like a dream or a fairy tale. There are characters

like the Sun King and Polythene Pam and Dr. Robert and lots of animals — the octopus I just mentioned, plus Rocky Raccoon, a bulldog, a sheepdog (Martha), a kitten, a bird, piggies, not to mention all those animals barking and screeching at the end of "Good Morning, Good Morning." And each of the Beatles had a distinct (or rather, incredibly well marketed) personality. The main thing, though, is that the music is still great and doesn't sound remotely dated.

One more thing: kids love to compare and contrast, boys especially. They love trivia and putting together lists. The Beatles lend themselves very well to endless list-making.

**Q) When you were a kid, who was your favorite Beatle?**

**A)** That's a sneaky Rorschach test. I'll be conventional here: Paul. Sam actually wrote him a fan letter and got a reply back. Last year I bankrupted myself and took my whole family to see him at Madison Square Garden. It was an amazingly good concert, the closest I'll get to seeing the Beatles live.

**Q) Who's Sam's favorite Beatle?**

**A)** George. Sam was pretty sad when George died, even though he'd been preparing for the day.

**Q) Does your son still love the Beatles?**

**A)** I'd say the obsession is over, but the love remains. He's moved on to other music, other bands. He likes a lot of things now. That's another fantastic thing about the Beatles: they're a portal to other music.

## **An interview with Sam Smith, conducted by Peter Smith**

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**Q) Sam, I know it was a long time ago, but do you remember the first time you heard a Beatles song? Or when the group first came to your attention?**

**A)** [Long pause] I think it was *Abbey Road*. And then I remember hearing "A Hard Day's Night" at the end of a long car trip. I remember being very tired. I was in the back seat. I liked it right when I heard it — immediately, I mean. I remember wanting to hear more songs. Dad, I didn't even know what songs really were back then. I hadn't had any experiences in what people — you and Mom — called "songs."

**Q) Do you remember what you thought of when you heard the word "Beatles"?**

**A)** I thought of four dung beetles with their guitars.

**Q) Do you think listening to music like that made you feel more grown-up? After all, before that you'd been on a pretty steady diet of Burl Ives and Raffi.**

**A)** Oh, yeah, absolutely.

**Q) So when you look back at that time, why do you think the Beatles turned into this obsessive interest of yours?**

**A)** There was just so much information! I sort of wanted to be a part of the whole Beatles thing. There were all those great Paul-Is-Dead clues. And all those Beatles' songs that seemed made for kids — "Octopus's Garden," "Yellow Submarine," "With a Little Help from My Friends." It seemed the Beatles were like a good disease, a good plague. They spread. The funny thing is, I didn't really get into any of the other '60s groups until much later. The Who, groups like that.

**Q) So why the Beatles?**

**A)** That's a hard one. [long pause] I think mainly . . . it's because I could actually hear what they were singing. If I could ever make out what the Rolling Stones were saying, it would be something like, Have some heroin, or, I want to slap you, or something. And everything fit in. The words and the melodies and the members of the group. Everything fit together for me.

**Q) So think back on three of your favorite Beatles songs. Can you remember what it was you liked about them?**

**A)** Sure. Go ahead.

**Q) "In My Life."**

**A)** It was mainly the melody. There are some Beatles melodies that I really, really fell for. Now I've just started to like George Gershwin. Back then, if you'd played Gershwin, I would've left the room, but "In My Life" had a beautiful melody.

**Q) "Helter-Skelter."**

**A)** The coolest song. Paul just screaming out like that. The words "creepy" and "cool" keep coming to me.

**Q) "Everybody's Got Something to Hide Except for Me and My Monkey."**

**A)** Hmm. Some parts of it, the instrumentals. That's one of those songs where I really listened to the drums.

**Q) So was George always your favorite Beatle, or did you switch around?**

**A)** I'd say George, always. I always liked the second guy. I've never been into the lead, or the hero. For me, John and Paul combined as one. George was the second guy, and Ringo was on the drums. I have this thing about the second guy . . .

**Q) Which is why Ed Harris is your favorite actor — because he's always playing the second banana . . .**

**A)** Right. I liked Ed Harris in *The Rock* — well, you're right, I like Ed Harris in everything, even *Pollack*. I liked the best friend in *The Perfect Storm*. I liked Trinity in *The Matrix*, more than Neo. And it was George I liked, not his songs necessarily. You know Alex [his best friend, currently ranked the seventh-fastest runner in the United States]? Paul and John are like Alex. They'll always win. But the person who comes in second is the one I really, really like. Not that Alex isn't my best friend, because he is. Does that make sense? [pause] After George, I started to like Ringo a lot, then I think I switched back to George.

I remember that time you couldn't come to Europe with us — you were working — but Mom took us all to Colonsay, in the Hebrides. We were in a hotel on this tiny island, and the woman who owned the hotel told us that Jackie Stewart . . .

**Q) — the racecar driver —**

**A)** — Right, Jackie Stewart's yacht had docked on the island. And, I don't know, I think Princess Anne was on it, and Sean Connery, and some other mystery people. We were going to go down to the docks and check it out, but then we were like, *Nahhh*. But I remember the only doctor on Colonsay was called onto the boat for a medical emergency. When he came back onshore, everybody on the island was asking him, So who did you treat? And the doctor said he couldn't say, he'd signed a hush-hush agreement, but he said, "All I can say is the person who's sick is more famous than the queen." Mom and I put it together afterward. It must have been George.

**Q) So when you were thinking about writing a letter to a Beatle, why didn't you write George a letter?**

**A)** Because I thought to myself, Who would be the best guy to get a letter back from? And it was Paul. I still loved Paul. He was just already so popular. And George didn't seem like the kind of person who would write a kid back. He hated being a Beatle. And I couldn't write to John, for obvious reasons.

**Q) Were your friends into the Beatles, too?**

**A)** I remember wanting to recommend the Beatles to all my friends, but a lot of them were already into them. Whether it was through their parents or whatever.

**Q) Do you have a favorite album, or are you a song person?**

**A)** I like all of *Abbey Road*. That's still my favorite. For me, that's like having an entire album of "In My Life"'s. Not melody-wise, since the songs go from quiet to catchy to exciting, then back to quiet again, but favorite-wise.

**Q) So what are you listening to nowadays?**

**A)** I don't know. I'm not really up-to-date with music. I like two songs of Eminem. One song of Limp Bizkit. I really hate John Mayer. I like the White Stripes — "Black Math." I play Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" over and over again, trying to figure out how to play it. I like the Who, late Who, not early Who. I like almost anything from the 1600s up, any piano period from baroque to modern. Someone from the classical period, like Clementi, not so much. A kid could make up what he wrote, it's so plain. Today, I was listening to someone

play Gershwin's Preludes. They seemed impossibly fabulous. They were just great. I love '40s music. It's so relaxing, no matter what it is, it's all good. I know I'm going to like it. I don't mind heavy metal. A little Ozzy Osbourne. Just not the TV show.

**Q) Did the Beatles teach you anything?**

**A)** Little things. How to act on stage. How to bow. Back when I first heard they broke up, I remember thinking, If you have a group, how could you ever break up? Now I know. I think the fact that I play the piano myself kept me going with the Beatles, because I always wanted to learn their songs.

**Q) So what's it like having a book written about you?**

**A)** I haven't really thought about it that much. Whenever I do, I can't really imagine it. I got a little nervous and embarrassed when you were writing it, especially when you were finishing up, but not anymore. It's not really anything to get nervous about. And I told you, I think it's a really good book.

**Q) Thanks. It'll be fun for you to read when you're fifty or sixty years old.**

**A)** Right. And you're —

**Q) Gonzo. Let's not go into it. So how do you feel about the Beatles now? Five years after you first heard them?**

**A)** I think I'll just always like them. They're still my favorite band. I think they'll always be the greatest band — in my mind, that is.

## **Praise for *Two of Us***

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"A lovely, surprising, warm-hearted book that will touch the heart of any parent or Beatlemaniac. Smith's touch is light, but his lesson enduring: that the love we give our children is shaped by the loves we learned in youth, and that the love we take from art helps us make the love we give our children." — Adam Gopnik, author of *Paris to the Moon*

"Peter Smith has achieved the near-impossible: he has written about the love of a parent for a child without descending into sentimentality or cliché. Rather, *Two of Us* is stylish, quirky, edgy — it charts new territory in the country of fathers and sons." — Mary Gordon, author of *The Shadow Man* and *Spending*

"Peter Smith's voice is so genuine, so entertaining, so wry and touching and irreverently paternal that I couldn't let this book out of my Smith-induced Beatle-crazed sight until I had devoured every page." — Elinor Lipman, author of *The Pursuit of Alice Thrift*

"I love this book; it's filled with wonderful writing that describes life and love and growing up and loss with as much insight and generosity as Salinger once did. What Peter Smith says

about becoming a parent and about the long and winding process of letting go of one's own childhood is simply extraordinary." — Meg Wolitzer, author of *The Wife and Surrender, Dorothy*

"Rarely does a coming-of-age story chart the emotional growth of a parent as well as a child, but *Two of Us* does exactly that. This is a moving, timeless story, one you'll want to read again and again." — Laura Zigman, author of *Animal Husbandry* and *Her*

"[A] winning memoir . . . Sweet as pie." — *Kirkus Reviews*

"Touching and hilarious . . . Full of gleeful trivia for young Beatles fans." — *Booklist*

"[Smith] provides excellent insights into the ongoing appeal of the Beatles for ever-younger audiences . . . More than enough poignant moments for any parent who has sung along with the children to 'Help!' or who cried when George Harrison died." — *Publishers Weekly*

## **"Have the Beatles helped to foster a connection in your life?"**

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**That's the question we posed to booksellers.**

**Here are some of the responses.**

"My daughter, Chloe, who is now seven, discovered the Beatles when she was five. Because I'm a lifelong fan, she found them partly to be closer to me and partly just because their special brand of gestalt magic touched something in her. It's still a kick to me to walk by her room and hear 'Help' coming out of it, or see her watching the tape of *Magical Mystery Tour*. Also, it didn't hurt when my wife bought us each — one for me, one for Chloe — a set of the Todd McFarlane Sergeant Pepper figures." — Corey Mesler, Burke's Book Store, Memphis, Tenn.

"My neighbor Silvia and I organized a neighborhood block party on a cool fall evening in 2000. The evening was great — a lot of people came out of their houses and ate and talked. One neighbor was happy to announce that she had finally learned the name of the woman who lived right across the way from her — after thirteen years!! Her name was Rita (as in meter maid . . . Rita is a Beatles fan). Rita's daughter is Michelle (my belle). She loves it that I named my son Jude.

As the sun went down and coffee was poured, my neighbor Bobby got out his guitar, and we all enjoyed an acoustic version of "Let It Be." I will not soon forget the night my neighbors met each other. We found a community that day. It had been waiting for us for quite some time. Since then we've been pretty good at making it an annual event, and now we call each other by name." — Mary Martiniak, Changing Hands Bookstore, Tempe, Ariz.

"When I was seventeen years old and a senior in high school — 1963, September — I became deathly ill. I was in a coma for a week, really out of it for several more weeks, and totally oblivious to the happenings of the world. One evening when I was feeling a little better, two friends of mine, Wayne and Allen, kind of danced into my hospital room singing 'I Want to Hold Your Hand.' I had no idea where the song came from, and they told me about the Beatles. I have been an avid fan ever since." — Sally, Bookshop, Pompton Plains, N.J.