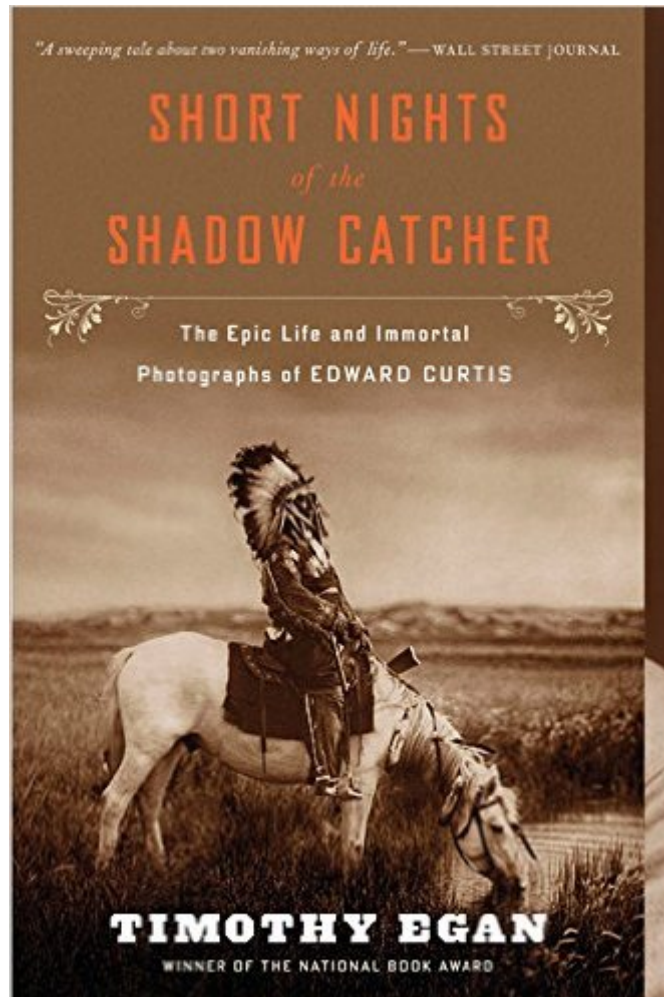


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Short Nights Of The Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life And Immortal Photographs Of Edward Curtis



Synopsis

“A vivid exploration of one man’s lifelong obsession with an idea . . . Egan’s spirited biography might just bring [Curtis] the recognition that eluded him in life.” Washington Post

Edward Curtis was charismatic, handsome, a passionate mountaineer, and a famous portrait photographer, the Annie Leibovitz of his time. He moved in rarefied circles, a friend to presidents, vaudeville stars, leading thinkers. But when he was thirty-two years old, in 1900, he gave it all up to pursue his Great Idea: to capture on film the continent’s original inhabitants before the old ways disappeared. Curtis spent the next three decades documenting the stories and rituals of more than eighty North American tribes. It took tremendous perseverance – ten years alone to persuade the Hopi to allow him to observe their Snake Dance ceremony. And the undertaking changed him profoundly, from detached observer to outraged advocate. Curtis would amass more than 40,000 photographs and 10,000 audio recordings, and he is credited with making the first narrative documentary film. In the process, the charming rogue with the grade school education created the most definitive archive of the American Indian. “A darn good yarn. Egan is a muscular storyteller and his book is a rollicking page-turner with a colorfully drawn hero.” San Francisco Chronicle

“A riveting biography of an American original.” Boston Globe

Book Information

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; Reprint edition (August 6, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0544102762

ISBN-13: 978-0544102767

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 1 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars – See all reviews (504 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #21,718 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #36 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Artists, Architects & Photographers #42 in Books > History > Americas > Native American #136 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Travelers & Explorers

Customer Reviews

I had heard of Edward Curtis but knew only that he was a photographer, and that he took many pictures of American Indians in the early 1900’s. That should make me ashamed, since I lived in Seattle, Curtis’s home town, for many years. Timothy Egan’s book gives a detailed, balanced look at

Curtis's life and his life's work: Publication of a 20-volume look at American Indian communities in the early 20th century. Just thinking about such a venture makes me tired, but Curtis was tireless (hence the "short nights" in the title -- he rarely slept). The series would include not just photographs but a lexicon preserving languages, and in the making of this Curtis would make film and audio records of songs and ceremonies that would have been lost forever. His ambition seems quite unrealistic, almost delusional, to someone from present day. Traveling thousands of miles with bulky photographic equipment, in unmapped territory without the benefit of conveniences we take for granted -- GPS, airplanes, cell phones, overnight delivery, fax machines. He and his team made a photographic and textual record that has never been equalled, and probably never will be. And during this time he made a movie and developed a stage presentation that wowed even the most sophisticated audiences. Even if you're not particularly interested in photography or American Indians, Egan's book is fascinating as a look at the early 1900's, movers and shakers, people like J. P. Morgan and Theodore Roosevelt. Egan's writing is brisk, his descriptions evocative. It never bogged down, even when things weren't going well for Curtis. The book is full of flavor and color, success and hardship, but more important, Egan, through showing us Curtis's life and his work, has brought home the devastation and loss of American's First People. Destruction and loss of their cultures has hurt every American, not just Indians. That's what I took from this book. The epilogue was heartening, and it's also heartening that Curtis knew the value of his work, even if it wasn't fully realized until after he was dead.

Timothy Egan has done it again. He is a columnist for the New York Times, often writing articles on the American West. Thanks to the Vine program, I've read a couple of others of his works: *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire that Saved America* and *The Worst Hard Time*. Both were well-written and well-researched accounts of some aspect of American history that had largely eluded me. The latter book even "changed my life," well, at least led me to be a "tourist" in Dalhart, Texas, for a day, which was an epicenter for the Dust Bowl catastrophe. Fortunately, the skies were clear that day. So, when this book popped up in my Vine offerings, I had to say YES, please, and once again was not disappointed, and now I am even a bit more informed. Alas, I had never heard of Edward Curtis, ('Tis embarrassing to say), a/k/a, "The Shadow Catcher," an apt name for a photographer. Sure, there were Joseph Stieglitz, and Ansel Adams, brilliant photographers, both, but in terms of life achievement, Curtis at least equaled, and perhaps even surpassed them. I had seen his photographs before, for example, the seven horsemen in the Canyon de Chelly, but it took Egan to make me realize the whole. With the death of his father, at a youthful age, he became the

principal support of his family. They moved to Seattle in the late 1800's. He became successful in the new medium of photography, operating the studio that catered to the "rich and famous," in a new boom town. And that could have been that. But no, Curtis developed an obsession, the magnificent obsession even, of capturing representative samples of all the Indian tribes of North American, both in photographs, as well as recordings of their languages, before they were completely overwhelmed by the forces of "modernity," often as exemplified by going, "war bonnet" in hand, to meet "the man," the government agent. It wasn't easy. Curtis was poor all of his life, hounded by creditors, and though he often had a "good press," and friends in high places, including President Theodore Roosevelt and JP Morgan, he was usually begging for money. His "mistress," the Indians, cost him his wife, though three of his children sided with him. But for sheer achievement, though he was an unappreciated prophet in the wilderness, decades before his time, he delivered in spades, many times over. He saw what was immediately before him, taking a haunting picture of a "beggar woman," Princess Angeline, last surviving child of Chief Seattle, a year before she died. (We have a similar woman who wanders our neighborhoods...should not this book be the catalyst to ask why, and even take her picture?). He got a lucky break, hiking another obsession of his, Mt. Rainer, and meeting, and helping a hiking party which included Bird Grinnell, founder of the Audubon Society, and Clint Merriam, co-founder of National Geographic. With suitable introductions in place, he was invited as the photographer for an expedition funded by the railroad magnet, E. H. Harriman, to Alaska. In 1900 he was with the Blackfeet, on their reservation near Glacier National Park. He witnessed, and photographed their encampment, ready for the Sun Dance. Perhaps the most tragic of all Indian tribes is the Nez Perce, who had constantly befriended the white man, and truly saving Lewis and Clark, only to be repaid with constantly broken promises. Curtis took an achingly beautiful picture, which captures their tragedy, in Chief Joseph, a year before he died. Curtis also spent much time in the Southwest, with the Hopi, and was even included in their Snake Dance. He was at the oldest continuously inhabited city in North America, Acoma, and again "scored," photographically, with women drawing water from a pool. He got an Apache medicine man to open up about their religion, one that the "experts" back east claimed they did not have. He took an excellent picture of Geronimo before his death. Curtis bore witness to the demise of the Indians along the Columbia River. He spent time with the fragmented tribes in Oklahoma and California. He did a movie entitled "In the Land of the Head-Hunters," about the coastal Indians of British Columbia. Some of his very best work, among happy people, was with the Eskimo, near Nome, Alaska, just before the Great Depression rolled in. With persistence, basic respect, a knack for picking good interpreters, and yes, some money, he was able to have virtually all the tribes open

up to him, and reveal much of their inner life. He was auto-didactic, as so many of us are. His formal education stopped in 6th-grade, and thus his accomplishments were often ignored by the PhD "experts." Overall, it took him almost three decades. He produced a high quality, 20 volume edition, which sold around 300 copies. Truly, the Sorrow and the Pity. The Morgan library obtained all the rights, but lost interest, and sold them all, including the plates, for a thousand bucks. And now fragments of his work are sold for millions in auction. Personally, his obsession resonated with me. Over a similar period of approximately three decades I watched the demise of the Bedouin of Saudi Arabia, whose old ways are gone forever. Fragments, and it is only that, the flakes of their lives, have been captures by various amateurs, but none with the singular obsession of Edward Curtis. Timothy Egan's prose style is lucid and informative, and he manages to capture the ironic twists of life. Another excellent, worthwhile history. Many thanks. 5-stars, plus. [Note: As with all Vine offerings, there is the usual caveat that this copy is a "proof" copy, and corrections may be made prior to actual publication. I hope so! Otherwise, there may be a "recall." Pages 15 and 223 were duplicated twice, and since the text did not appear correct, it would appear that two pages are missing]

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