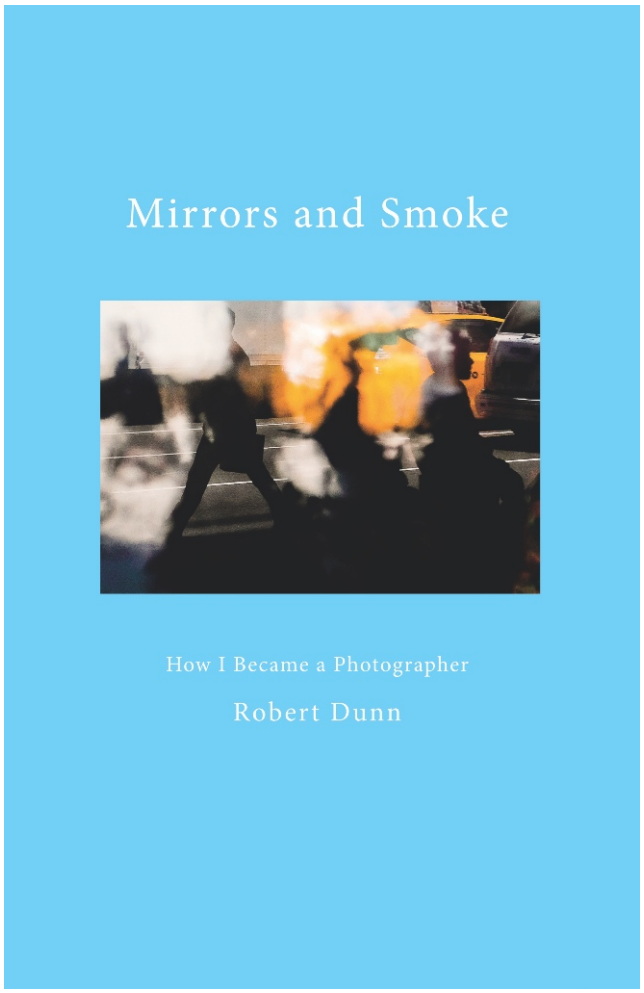

Mirrors and Smoke is a book of reinvention, how novelist Robert Dunn became a successful photographer, his photobooks in MoMA and ICP. Learn to see with a camera the world in rich, new ways, discovering a bounty of beauty and revelation.

Mirrors and Smoke: How I Became a Photographer
By Robert Dunn

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Mirrors and Smoke

How I Became a Photographer

Robert Dunn

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HONESTLY, I HAVE NO idea how I became a photographer.

O.K., it's probably a good idea not to trust anyone who begins a sentence with *honestly*, but that's just the way the first sentence came to me; and the longer I write and take photos, the more I trust what simply comes to me. What's unavoidable, what's simply there. And it's true: I really don't know how I became a photographer. Indeed part of the reason to write this book is to go over what happened, to talk about how I came to take pictures (and perhaps capture how you, if you're reading this, came to love your own photographs). Also how I got reasonably good at it, and became inspired enough to set down my tale.

I do know how I became a novelist, which I've been for all of my adult life. I was eighteen and sitting on a beach in San Diego, California, reading *Moby Dick*, when I came to a sentence so astonishing and beautiful I actually saw light pour down from the heavens. Yes, a sheet of sparkling light flowing down above me. I don't know how else to explain this other than as a religious experience, light ecstatic, the power and magic of words opening up new visions, new worlds.

I began to write back in those late-teenage years with new fervor, though it wasn't for another near decade until I actually completed a novel. Back in those early days simply filling up pages was a tough, hard climb. The blank page of paper sitting in my typewriter (just the same as the blank page on my computer today) … what do I do? Where do the words come from? The story? Characters? Sentences then paragraphs?

I can't recall all the feints and starts, just that I somehow trained myself all those years ago to get up each morning and write. No

matter what. Cross-legged on the floor, my typewriter on a turned-to-its-side speaker cabinet, when I was poor and lost between college and grad school. Then at my desk in my first New York City apartment, when I moved there in my mid-twenties and ended up in a turn-of-the-19-century three-room tenement in the East Village, bathtub in the kitchen, for $90 a month. Yes, ninety dollars a month rent. It was a wonderful flat most of the time, the whole top of the Empire State Building gleaming out my front window, though there were times when the heat went out in winter, and to keep writing I'd have to run my hands under hot water in the sink to warm them up enough to hit the keys of my typewriter.

(Curiously, my apartment, at least all the actual fixtures and furniture in it, ended up as a set in Stanley Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*. Long story short: I was being booted out for no longer actually living there, the landlord was going to gut the place to refurbish it, and a production assistant for the film who had somehow photographed the apartment, catching Kubrick's interest, bought everything in it for $100 and had it shipped to England, where it ended up as the set for the prostitute Tom Cruise has an affair with. Yep, my sink, my stove, my cabinets … just not my flimsies hanging above the claw-foot tub.)

The apartment, of course, didn't make me a photographer, though being a writer possibly did. I've always seen the best photobooks as a form of literature, and I try to bring my own understanding of how I write novels to every photobook I create.

What do the two disciplines share? At bottom, the job of a novelist, after telling a good story and creating strong characters, is to make us take in the world as richly as possible: all the creatures in it, the good and the evil, and all the complexities in-between. As Joseph Conrad put it: "My task is to make you hear, to make you feel, and, above all, to make you see. That is all, and it is everything."

Likewise with the serious photographer. The task is just that: to use our images to rouse all the senses; yet above all, to make us see.

I recall a lunch years ago with the then Knopf editor, later *New Yorker* magazine poetry editor, Alice Quinn. I was still in my twenties, and doing everything I could to become a better writer. I told

Alice, "I think I'm starting to see not only just what's in front of me, but also what's behind that." I moved my hands in a circle. "I'm starting to see the whole thing."

Alice simply nodded and said, "Good."

How do you see not only what's in front of you? How about imagination. Obviously, imagination is key for a fiction writer, because you're telling stories that only exist in your own mind, inventing nearly everything as you go along. I don't think most photographers think about their craft this way. They see their task as taking a picture of what's before them. I mean, what else can you do? You move the camera, focus the lens, set the aperture, snap the shutter; what you or the camera is pointed at is what you get.

So where does imagination come in?

The lesson I learned from Alice Quinn was to see not just what's there but what *could* be there. To see around corners. To see shadows and depth. Above all, to imagine what's about to happen so you can photograph what does happen.

To imagine worlds, then fill them.

That's what I'm always trying to do with my photography. In my shots, I often like a dreamy quality, something Impressionistic, even Expressionistic (using art history terms cautiously). On the street I'm always trying to be ahead of the shot, anticipate it if I can, or at least be ready and fast enough to capture the most interesting photograph possible.

In my work, I'm not imagining something then setting out physically to create it so I can shoot it. My work is not that realistic or rational. No, this quality of imagination in photography is something more mystical, fluid, amorphous, evanescent.

What it comes down to is that the more of what's before me that I can see, or simply intuit, the more I can get into a photograph. What I'm calling imagination is the ability to see all that is *not* there in the midst of what is.

If by following imagination the photo is richer, more magical and interesting, then I'm doing my job.

I'm making you see.

✶ ✶ ✶ ✶ ✶

I moved to New York City in the mid-'70s, when the city was broke and falling apart. I wrote about this time in my novel *Savage Joy*, my most autobiographical work. It was hard times in New York town, as Bob Dylan put it. Crime was everywhere, there were whole blocks of the city you simply did not walk down. Ditto parks, even major ones such as Bryant Park behind the New York Public Library, and Union Square on 14th Street. You simply did not go there.

And everywhere you did go, you kept your eyes moving, looking for threats, danger, crime. You had to have a good street sense, or you might as well move back to the suburbs. (A lot of people had: From 1970 to 1976, the New York City population had dropped by 5.6%, over 400,000 souls—and created a lot of open apartments.) With a mix of luck and savvy, I never got robbed or mugged. At parties back then most conversation revolved around personal crimes: bag snatchings, robberies at knife point, the kind of burglary when you come home and find your front door swinging wide. The worst that happened to me was an old guy tried to pee on me as I was walking down my East Village block to take the subway to work.

Which meant I was pretty damn lucky.

But I'd also picked up some street smarts. The way you did it was always to be paying attention to everything on the street, letting your eyes sweep constantly back and forth, checking out faces, groupings, postures … trying to read interest, intent, any potential threats. If you let your guard down for a moment, they'd get you … yes, they would. Walking along I would actually swing my head from side-to-side. New York City streets can be wide, there was a lot to take in. I also had to be ready to act if I saw something, to speed up, slow down, affect a wholly disinterested air or shoot out a sharp glower, always ready to move, cross the street, stop and feign looking into a shop window … all the moves that kept me from being a casualty, a victim. (I was a novelist, remember, working out my fingers more than my biceps, and not like one of my mentors, John Irving, who was a dedicated wrestler; I was more interested in avoiding trouble than seeking it out.)

So my head kept swinging, my eyes kept sweeping, taking everything in. What's the most basic quality of a good street photographer? Well, there are many, and I'll be talking about all of them in this book—imagination, as I've already touched upon; speed; fearlessness (I've learned a few things about that over the years); and simply a good eye—but I'd say most important is to see the whole street and everything going down in it at all times. There are always pictures to be taken, interesting ones, even astonishing ones, but it all comes from taking in the whole street and every person and gesture and shape filling it.

And also how it all fits together. Arguably the most important street photograph ever is Cartier-Bresson's shot of a man leaping over a puddle in Paris, "Behind the Gare St. Lazare." This is the shot in which the leaping man is perfectly reflected in the shallow water, whose farthest foot is a quick couple millimeters above the water, where the barrel hoops in the water form perfectly compatible arcs, where the crosses atop a building to the left mimic the top of the iron fence behind the water, and where—the ideal cap—there is a poster, behind and to the left of the man, of a dancer mimicking almost exactly his leap.

There is some discussion how planned this shot was, but even if the situation partially existed in Cartier-Bresson's mind before he actually shot it, he still fills the photographic frame with eerily perfect details, more than anyone else can ever hope to slip into one photograph, yet not too many, either.

Cartier-Bresson, to his bemusement, was labeled with the sobriquet the Man of the Decisive Moment, and what that means is that the most powerful street photographs are just that, a capture of a moment that is redolent of meaning, depth, inexplicable magic … that means something, is more important than other surrounding moments, that is, in that word, for better or worse, *decisive*.

I don't know that in my own street photography I'm shooting for decisive moments (I certainly wouldn't call them that), but I am taking in everything I can and flicking my camera's shutter button when I think I've stumbled upon a moment that, if I'm quick enough, will make a startling, surprising photograph. To do this I

need to see everything, and then move fast enough when the constant flow of people and images before me are about to coalesce into a moment worth snapping.

I'm glad these days New York is a far safer place; that I don't have to walk down the streets worrying about the clink of brass knuckles against a belt buckle behind me, the sharp snap of a knife blade. But I am glad for what I endured those decades back for what it taught me as a photographer.

Street smarts are essential.

* * * * *

I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOVE about my photography without saying anything further about how I even began to think about being a photographer; it's like I jumped ahead in the storyline. Well, I expect I'll be jumping around a fair amount, because this book is not an autobiography, not a how-to guide in any way; neither will it be linear in construction, nor with any kind of clear and obvious plot. It will simply get as close as I can to trying to understand how I became a photographer, and all I've learned in taking photos and writing about photobooks. I assure you it will all add up.

But, yes, before I even decided I could be a photographer, there I was in the previous section out taking pictures. Actually when I got going seriously, Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans were key, especially a book of their work brought together under the title *Photographing America: 1929–1947*, compiled by Agnés Sire.

Photographing America … that's what I wanted to do. (Robert Frank's *The Americans* has always been my key text.) I keep the Evans–Cartier-Bresson book on the bookshelf nearest to my front door, and for my first couple years of serious street photography, every day that I went out shooting, I would pull it off the shelf on my way out the door with my camera, thumb through it, try to glean a new lesson from one or more of the classic shots. A few randomly opened pages: Cartier-Bresson's bewhiskered man in a straw hat and a MONEY ORDERS sign hung around his neck, below the admonition GET A LITTLE FUN OUT OF LIFE painted on a window; Evans's man and woman in a convertible jalopy, exactly the right startled and curious expression on their faces; Cartier-Bresson's

equally curious yet wary African-American woman below a Beale Ave. street sign, her head just below that rule-of-thirds line at the bottom (composition is all!); Evans's memorable studio window, with hundreds of small portraits in its fifteen frames (you mean you can just shoot a window on the street?); Cartier-Bresson's one-legged Black man turning a corner in Brooklyn. So many great, stirring photos. Lifting it off the shelf as I was going out to take pictures always inspired me.

I was also aware I was using *Photographing America* as a talisman; just fanning its pages would set me off in the right mind-set. Because as much as having a see-everything street-smart vision was key to what I was up to, there were other things in the mix, too.

The most basic? Simply: I'm going out to take pictures.

I know, how obvious. But that's the thing, I've always loved walking the city, block after block, this neighborhood and that neighborhood; and with my love for bookstores, especially the Strand, at 12th St. and Broadway, it was always, Hmnn, I'm downtown, why don't I walk up through Soho, then keep going, hit the Strand (maybe pick up a photobook from their Rare Book Room; more on this later), then just keep heading north. It's all interesting.

When I started taking pictures, these walks became vastly more interesting. The walks weren't just pleasant strolls but creative endeavors. It wasn't just, Look at that, that's intriguing; it became, Look at that, and that, and that … and did I get that picture? Or that one? What about that one over there?

If part of the joy of a good walk are those pleasures of rhythm; and not thinking, just looking; and letting your mind be both present and not present … well, doing this with a camera as a photographer on the street simply enhances all these qualities. I'm going to the store, but I'm not simply going to the store; I'm after something far richer, creamier, delicious. I'm after the thrill of taking a vivid, unexpected photograph.

Joel Meyerowitz puts it well: "The camera is saying, 'Go, go, take me somewhere—take me on an adventure.' "

That's the difference between just a walk, and a walk with a camera. I'm on an adventure, day after day, just strolling down the street.

What could be more exciting than that.

There's also that simple joy of being fully present—actually, beyond wholly present. If a good long walk helps put you fully present in the world, then hoping to grab telling, magical moments from it makes you even more present.

Indeed, when taking photos on the street you simply cannot be too present. Let me say this again. The job is to be so fully in the street that, again, you see everything, sense everything, feel everything, and are ready at a millisecond's snap to capture in your camera the most redolent aspects of that fullness.

Yet as much as you have to be fully present, in effect to be everywhere, you also have to in equal measure simply be nowhere.

This is essential. At bottom being an artist is being both fully present and also fully not there. Wholly engaged and yet far enough back to see what that engagement is like, judge it, capture the best parts of it, then make something of it.

My best way to explain it is to be like a hummingbird's wings. That's what I always tell young writers. One wing creates; that is, puts something down on paper. The other wing destroys; that is, trims back and shapes that which you've just created.

Same with photographs. You're fully in the scene around you, this plethora of faces, gestures, objects, patterns; and yet you have to always be fully outside it, too, saying to yourself, in microsecond moments, That's interesting, that's not interesting, and, oh, wow, look, that's something I've never seen before … *snap*!

Creating then judging and destroying (or keeping).

All so fast it's a blur—that wondrous blur of inspiration and creation and achievement—all as fast as a hummingbird's wings.

* * * * *

THESE PHOTOGRAPHIC WALKS aren't simply about the richness of self-concentration and sensual fullness, they're also an aspect of faith. In one's self, surely, but also faith in the mysterious forces of light and beauty that inspire any great art.

Let me explain. When I go out walking with my camera, I expect that I'll get good pictures, that the world, even with all its confusions, obfuscations, and orneriness will nonetheless offer up

strong images, again and again if I'm attuned enough with it, and fast enough on my shutter. Toting my camera leads to a comfort in the world, not that things will necessarily go my way, but that I'll be able always to see the innumerable pictures the world contains. This is not a belief that something extraordinary will happen in front of me, for me to photograph. Indeed, the world, even here in New York City, is often a mush of tedium and dullness. Yet with my camera around my neck I keep the simple faith that I'll be able to see the extraordinary in what's in front of me, and be able to photograph it.

Even the dullest of vistas can be charged, at its corners or odd angles or behind the scrim of banality, with the exceptional. At least that's the faith I bear.

How does all this work? Again, it's all about keen and rich seeing, about noting detail, and an imagination able to tease out new ways of looking at the world even in the most commonplace of scenes. I'm not hoping for anything newsworthy to play out in front of me, a crime, a disaster, an upheaval, a conflagration. I don't usually go to places where those kinds of photos are possible. I stay close to home, wander about the city, keep my eyes moving. I'm looking for a subtle but deep flicker of human emotion. A small gesture of manifest significance. A particularly profound play of shadow and light. A concatenation of shapes and angles. A dazzle of colors.

Simply, a way of snapping the commonplace that renders it surprising and new.

There are an awful lot of photos out there. In truth, an unknowable number. That's part of the faith, that the world is teeming with fascinating, compelling, awe-lifting details. They're out there, every day, almost everywhere.

And yet my faith is not that the world will hand out photos to me; it's faith in my ability to tease out strong photos *from* the world.

This is all important, because, again, it's all about seeing. We always see the world we see. So how do we see it better? We work to divine its fullness, its breadth, its boundless depths. We learn to see what's in front of us, and what's behind. What's there and,

sometimes, what's not there but which we can see anyway, or at least our cameras can, which when it comes to photography is all that matters.

That my camera will see the world's plenitude and magic, and record it.

Faith.

* * * * *

NOW BEARING THIS FAITH day in and day out, that of course takes energy and focus; and high energy and vivid focus are always changing, fleeting at the best of times. So part of being a good photographer is knowing when you're on, when your concentration and breadth of vision is as deep and wide as it can be. It's also knowing when your concentration slips; that is, when it's time to push the camera back in your bag and go home.

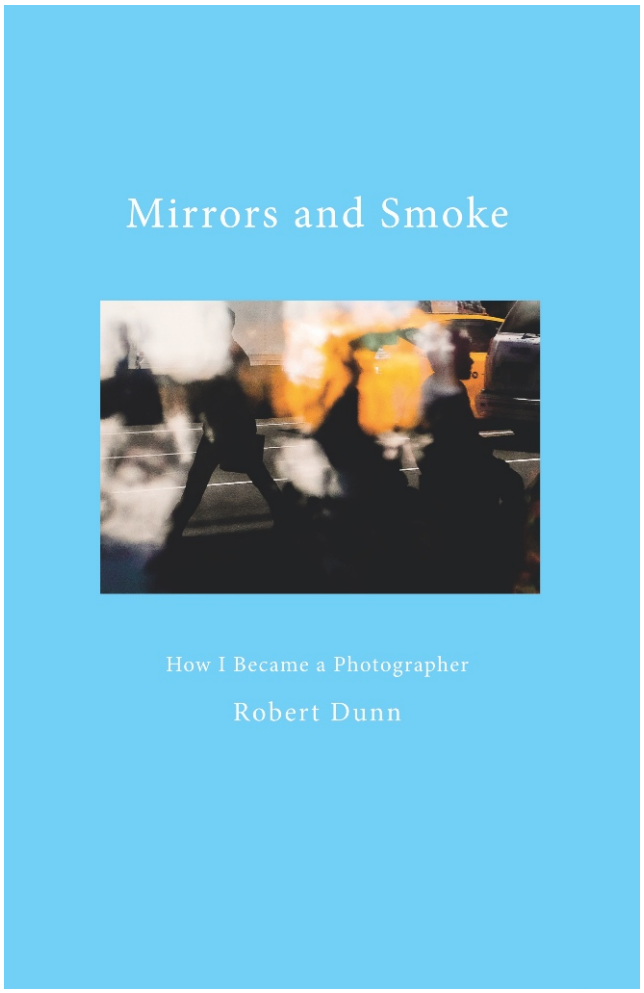
Which is another joy of photography: It demands that you know yourself, how you work, when you work best, when to stick it out and when to bail. This can be called experience, perhaps even wisdom. But simply understanding how you work comes from doing the work over and over, and always paying attention to how it's going, what you can control and what you can't.

It's also all about intuition, as so much of photography on the street is.

I'm trying to remember, when I plunged deep into taking pictures, to what extent I had to learn to trust my intuition. I think I already had it; decades of writing fiction, the endless sitting before my IBM Selectric typewriter, then my first computer (a huge, metal, literally built-for-tanks Kaypro II), then my succession of Macs taught me to know when I was writing well, and when I could barely put words together. It also taught me to trust the wisps and currents and invisible threads that could yank a day's work in any number of directions. It taught me when to have a plan and when to give up any idea of a plan and just riff.

Following intuition, and trusting it, is important in fiction writing. I know it's also invaluable in music composition, and I'm sure all forms of art.

In taking photographs it's simply essential, especially on the street.



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