

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

January 2, 2007

Photos for writers

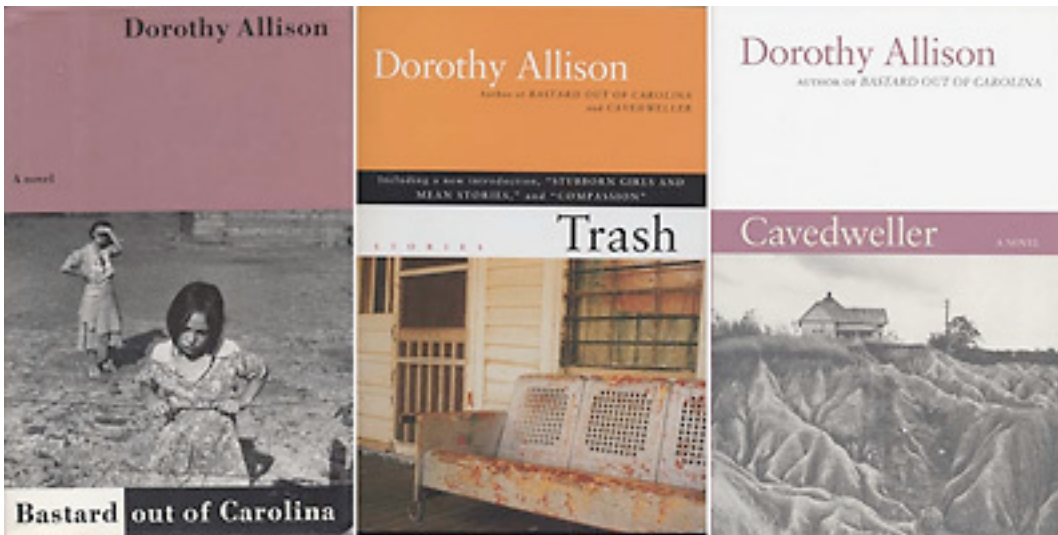
Filed under: [editorial photo](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:43 am

A couple of months ago a publisher approached my agency about using one of my photographs as a book cover. It was a snow scene with a houseboat and a laundry line (see the image [here](#)). "There is just one catch," my agent told me, "they want to add a child running through the snow." While I'm no purist, it just felt wrong. He asked me if I would just look at a couple of their layouts. I wish I could post them here. The Photoshop work was amazing. But I still said I couldn't do it.

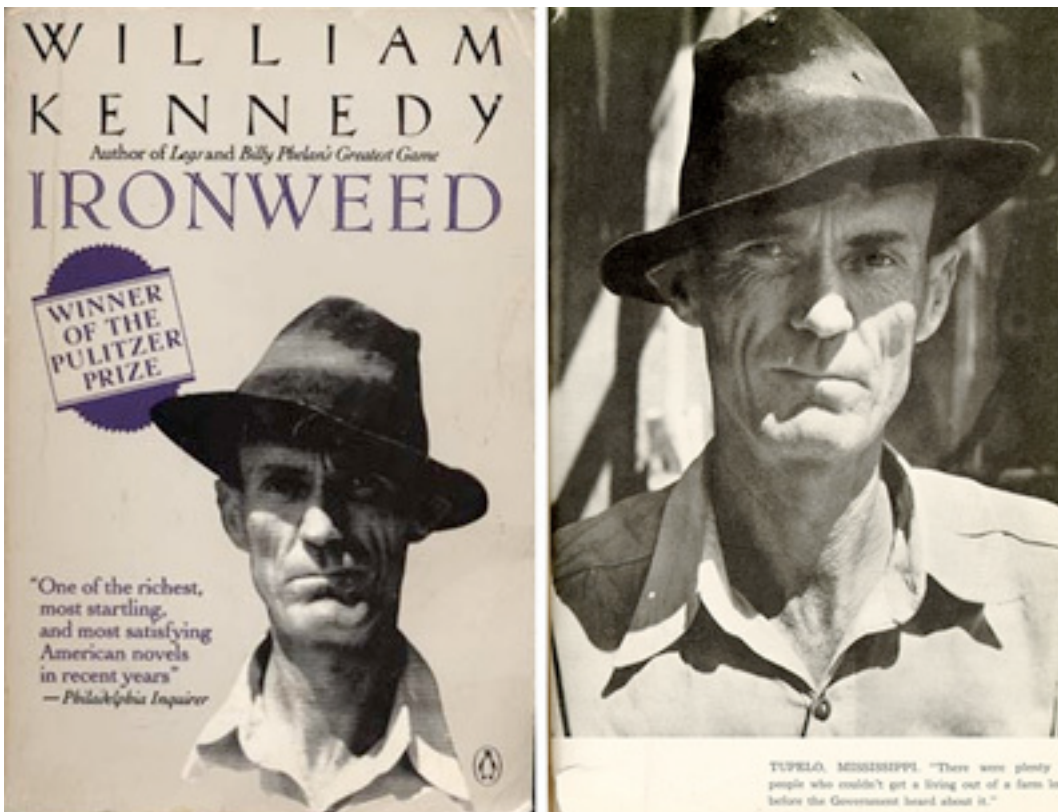
If it weren't for the kid running in the snow, I'm sure I would have agreed. I like the use of photographs on book covers. I recently came across a website called [Covering Photography](#) that documents this phenomenon (whew, what a specialty). It is interesting to see which images work as book covers. Clearly a lot of people think this photograph by Nan Goldin makes a good cover:



One can't help but wonder how much say the authors have in these covers. Did Dorothy Allison help select these images by Dorothea Lange, William Eggleston and Wright Morris:



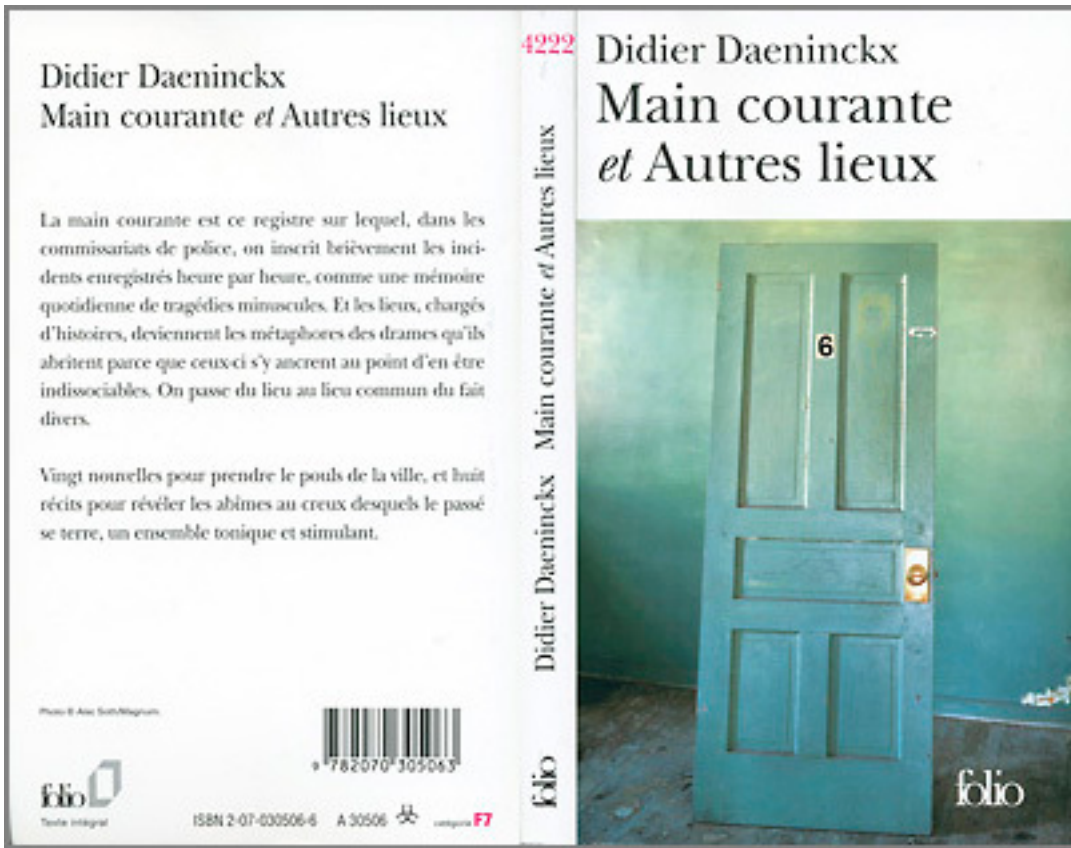
Moreover, did Allison know how powerfully the Lange image would shape the perception of her book? The two seem inseparable. This probably has something to do with using a recognizable face on the cover. This is a rarity in fiction. But there are some notable exceptions. Like the Lange image, it is hard to separate Margaret Bourke-White's image from the lead character in William Kennedy's classic, *Ironweed*:



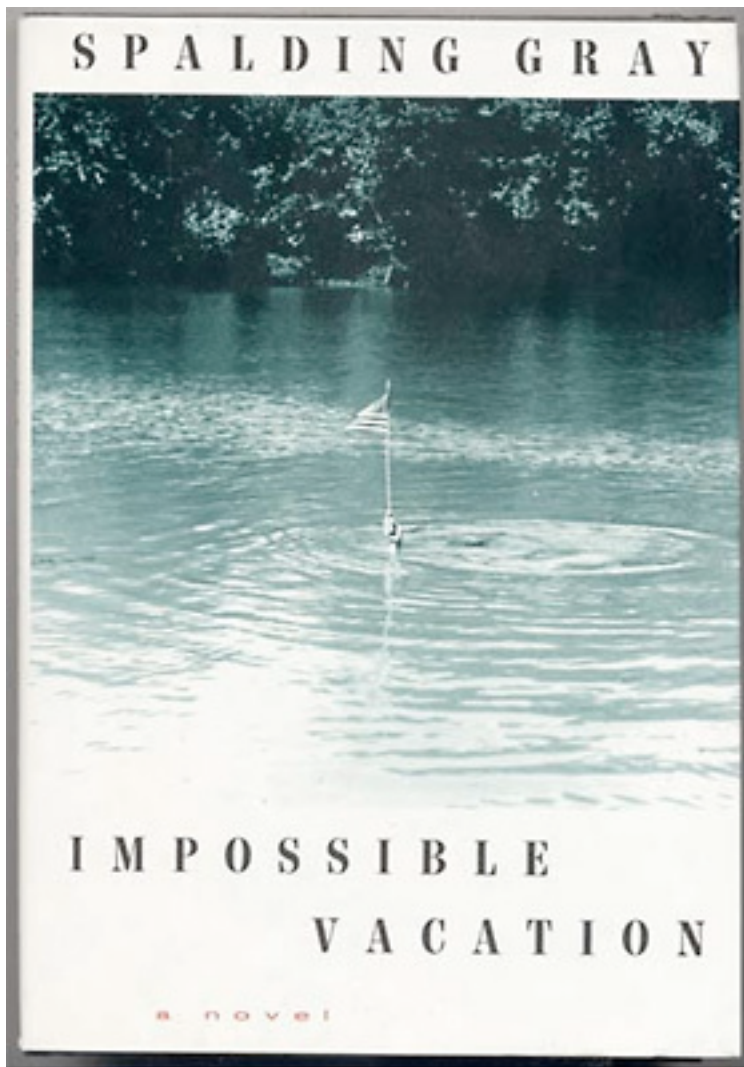
It is interesting how the flipped version on *Ironweed* seems so much gentler than Bourke-White's original (from the book [You Have Seen Their Faces](#)).

Most covers go for atmosphere and avoid specificity. It is no accident that the very popular image by Goldin hides both faces. This is interesting given the fact that nearly every magazine cover shows a face looking at the

camera. But it makes sense. By keeping things less specific, the reader is allowed to create the characters in their mind. But even with these more generic images, I wonder how much say the writer has in the selection. I suspect the writer Didier Daeninckx knows as little about me (and [my picture](#)) as I know about him:



I wonder if Spalding Gray helped choose the image for his novel *Impossible Vacation*. The book draws on Gray's own life experience, including his mother's suicide. Gray himself committed suicide 11 years after the publication of the book – by drowning. Did he help select this image by Ralph Eugene Meatyard:



It is interesting how the cover images affect our reading of the book. But equally influential is the author photograph. In discussing the under-appreciation of Alice Munro in the New York Times, [Johnathan Franzen](#) [wrote](#), "her jacket photos show her smiling pleasantly, as if the reader were a friend, rather than wearing the kind of woeful scowl that signifies really serious literary intent." Franzen makes a good point. Compare Munro's portrait to his own:



This over-the-top image of Franzen was taken by

[Marion Ettliger](#). Ettliger is so successful as a photographer that she has her own verb. "To be 'Ettligered' means to have imparted to you an aura of distinction and renown, regardless of whether anyone besides your mother and your cat knows who you are," [wrote the New York Times](#).

For the record, Franzen has updated his portrait. Just as he avoided the Oprah Book Club, he now shies away from Ettliger. I can understand why. Ettliger is a good photographer. But there is something off-putting about her relentless effort to make authors look like, well, Authors. Others have been more blunt in their criticism.

[Dennis Loy Johnson](#) writes:

If a picture is worth a thousand words, I'm not sure what words are behind Marion Ettliger's photographs, except perhaps "My shoes are too tight." You could say her photos represent yet another discouragement of intellectualism in modern literature. Or you could say they just prove the power of faceless storytelling — the story about that emperor who wore no clothes, for example.

The New York Times

[profile of Ettlinger](#) suggests the problem with her pictures is that they were produced specifically to market books:

A portrait's function is to have no function except the representation of the subject. Julia Margaret Cameron's celebrated photographs of Tennyson and Thomas Carlyle are portraits. So are Bernice Abbott's iconic pictures of James Joyce. The subjects of those pictures acquired, through their work — or through titanic expectation that became a kind of original work itself — reputations that had become larger than their writing. Thus their images could acceptably appear independent of a dust jacket. Ettlinger's pictures, however, are made expressly to adorn book jackets. Their function is to be, as it were, purely functional — informative, curiosity-satisfying. They are absolutely dependent on the publication of the book, which is a one-time event.

I'm not sure I agree, but it is an interesting argument. It gets me thinking about the portraits I've made of authors:

This picture on the left of Patricia Hampl was made specifically for her dust jacket. The picture of Jim Harrison was made for a French literary magazine and was later used by his publisher for a book of poems. Which is the better portrait? How do these portraits alter the way we read the author? I'm not sure. All I know is that pictures change words as much as words change pictures.

One of the best places to watch this dynamic is in the pages of the New Yorker. I'm specifically interested in the way they combine photography and fiction. Much like book covers, the use of a single image within the largely photo-free magazine is seductive. It serves to draw readers into the story.

Also like most book covers, these images are found by scavenging editors rather than producers. Every couple of months I get an email from the editors of the New Yorker that go something like this, "Do you have a picture of an older woman in a damp, Eastern European setting, preferable not with her face showing. We are also looking for a picture of a monkey, possibly sitting on a suitcase...."

These emails always have me scrambling through my archives. I invariably come up dry. While I've done editorial work for the magazine a number of times, I've never fulfilled one of these fiction requests. But I've come close. One time I received a call from the New Yorker photo editor who explained that the illustrator

[Maira Kalman](#) had done a painting based on one of my pictures. They wanted to use the illustration with a fiction story. I agreed. I'm a huge fan of the New Yorker. If they asked me to work in the mailroom I would agree. I was also flattered that a painter was inspired by one of my images. This is how it looked:

Here is my original:

After the magazine came out, I received dozens of emails by people who were outraged that my picture was 'ripped off.' I explained that the illustration was like a music sample or cover song. What people couldn't understand was that I wasn't credited. I didn't care, though I suppose it would have helped alleviate criticism.

As I now look back on that illustration from August 2004, I notice that the author of the short story was Richard Ford. Ford ended up writing an essay for my book NIAGARA. While it might have been nice to use my picture for his story, I'm much happier that his story was used for my pictures.

- Along with Marion Ettlinger, the other legendary author photographer is Jill Krementz. More information

[here](#)

- A related post by Christian Patterson on photographers and album covers

[here](#)

32 Comments

1. Funny I remember seeing that New Yorker illustration and thinking it reminded me of an image but I couldn't place it. One small mystery solved.

Comment by [raul](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [1:29 am](#)

2. painters was inspired by other artist's sublime works since ever so it seems...Leonardo from antiquity-for example and so on...
may i say that I've been touched by your photography (the landscape series as well as the portraits)

Comment by [moon](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [4:06 am](#)

3. [...] [alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » Photos for writers](#) The use of photographs on book covers and author photos. (tags: photography publishing design covers authorphotos) [...]

Pingback by [Heraclitean Fire » Links](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [6:19 am](#)

4. What an interesting article Alec! And the link to "Covering Photography" is great. I was often thinking about the use of photography for book covers and how a certain image influenced me not only when reading but also when choosing which book to take a closer look at when in the store.

Comment by [Martin Fuchs](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [6:45 am](#)

5. "It is interesting how the flipped version on Ironweed seems so much gentler than Bourke-White's original (from the book You Have Seen Their Faces)."

Interesting. Keri Pickett and I see it exactly the other way around. The original (unflipped) image has a hint of a smile in it and one can see the man's eyes, making the original seem much gentler to us.

Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [7:15 am](#)

6. Interesting post Alec. I remember seeing Covering Photography linked on Design Observer some while ago.

You're no doubt familiar with Penguin's books but they released a book of their covers entitled [Penguin by Design](#). It's really interesting to see the evolution of their designs in tandem with the evolution of photography but constrained to a particular publishing house.

Comment by [Alex Black](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [9:03 am](#)

7. Great article Alec, but I'm curious about your thoughts on the impotence of an image after you've already read a book to change your sense of it. I won't disagree that seeing an image before reading a text will influence your mind's eye, but I read "Bastard Out of Carolina" in some other format (didn't see that image when I did) and it now has little to no resonance as belonging to that story (i.e., I have my own images of the characters already firmly planted in my mind).

Comment by [Edward](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [9:42 am](#)

8. This was fascinating. Thanks!

Comment by [Mary Akers](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [11:21 am](#)

9. I like seeing your photo next to the illustration based on it from the new yorker, and the (accurate I think) description of it as being like a cover song. Your photo obviously enhances the painting,

but I think the painting also enhances the photo and allows it to be looked at in new ways. Plus it brings up what is really important – it is not the subject matter (room with painting, chair and window) that makes the work – it is the feel of the piece that matters. And the 2 works have a totally different feel so in that way it is really not as much of a ripoff as, for example, Dana Schutz who doesn't use the image or subject matter of Judith Linhares but rather uses the style and feel of her work.

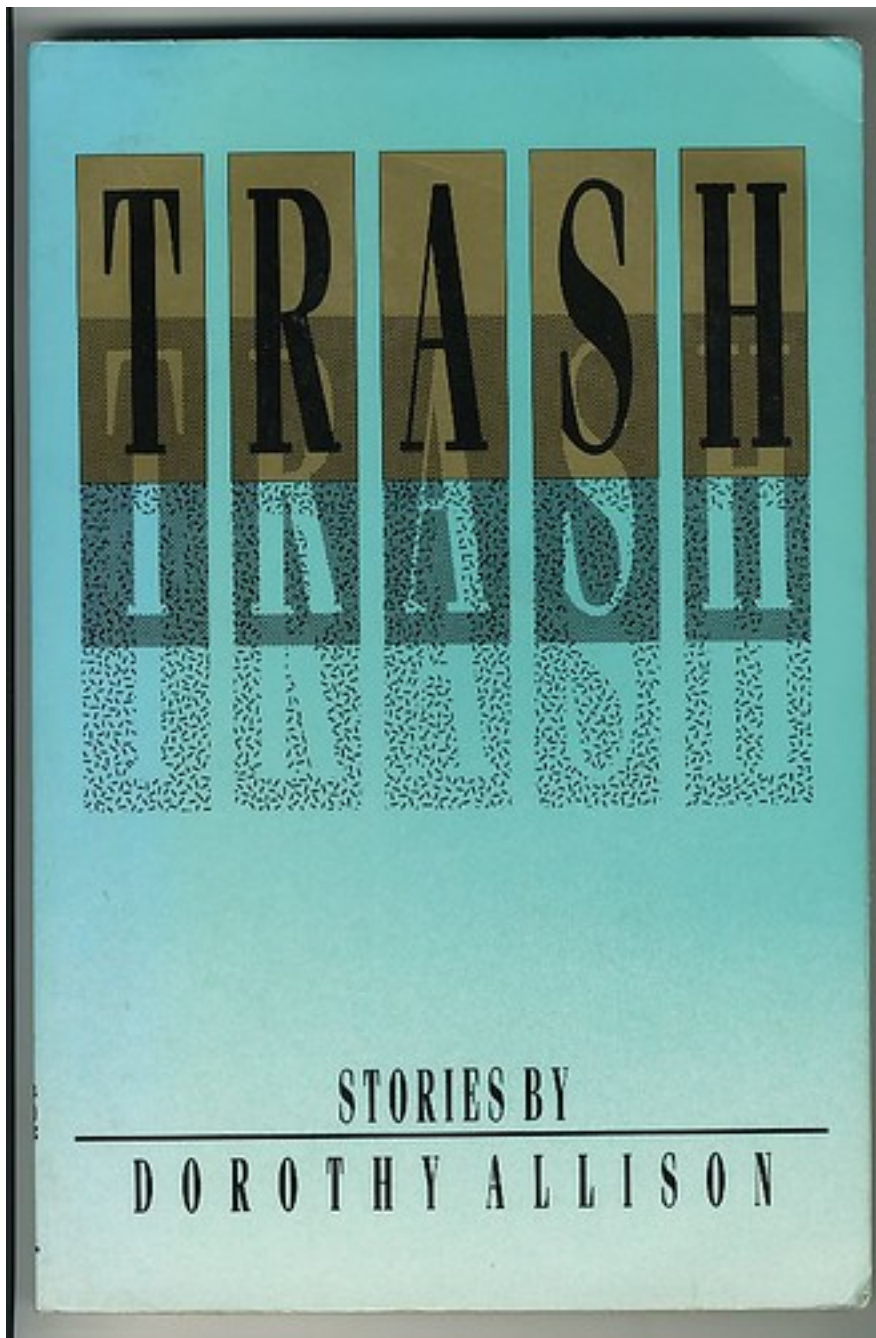
Comment by [long island city painter](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [12:27 pm](#)

10. Oh, Alec Soth, why are you always on point? WHY???

I am huge fan of Dorothy Allison and have often wondered why that Dorothea Lange photo was chosen for "Bastard Out of Carolina." Did she choose it herself? Or was it suggested by the designer and approved by her? Although beautiful and compelling, Lange's seems narrow a description of what's in the novel. Yes, the photo and the novel seem inseparable now, but I want them separate! Separate, both the novel and the photo seem much more expansive to me. I am completely selfish in this, because Lange's photo is an amazing and perfect choice for the cover of "Bastard Out of Carolina."

And, as much as I love that William Eggleston photo on the cover of the Penguin printing of "Trash," I highly favor the original Firebrand cover (scanned straight from the Strauss collection of Allison literature). I'm not sure why, the Penguin cover is a beautiful design and the Firebrand cover is not. I think we hold fast with the image on the cover of our first reading of any writing.

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [12:28 pm](#)



11.

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [12:29 pm](#)

12. For mostly voyeuristic reasons, I'm partial to photographs of authors at their desks, like this one of Mamet by Bridgette Lacombe:

Same with photographs of artists in their studios or homes.

Comment by [Eric Z.](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [2:29 pm](#)

13. Or here's a better Mamet photo from the same series:

Nice chair, eh?

Comment by [Eric Z.](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [2:36 pm](#)

14. Incidentally, Maira Kalman's work is amazing. I was introduced to her through reading her children's books to my son. (She both writes and illustrates them.) I think she has a regular feature in the New York Times online she illustrates too.

I wish I could pinpoint exactly why I like her so much, but all I can come up with is "Nuts to Pete!" That's it right there. That dog will eat anything!

Thanks for the insightful article, Alec.

Comment by [ND Koster](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [3:09 pm](#)

15. <http://kalman.blogs.nytimes.com/>

Comment by [ND Koster](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [3:12 pm](#)

16. I'm glad someone finally put some of those Goldin covers together, though I was surprised you didn't include [this one](#).

Oh, and thanks for solving the *New Yorker* mystery — I was wondering about that image.

Great way to start out 2007, Alec. Happy new year.

Comment by [Shane Lavalette](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [4:43 pm](#)

17. Bravo Shane. I've never seen that book. Is it any good?

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [4:54 pm](#)

18. Alec, pleased to see you discovered Karl Baden's web site *Covering Photography*. Karl teaches photography at Boston College, and has been working on this site for some time now, updating it frequently.

Comment by [Stephen DiRado](#) — January 2, 2007 @ [5:12 pm](#)

19. Alec,

I'm so glad to find out I'm not the only one who eagerly awaits the photography as well as the writing in each week's *New Yorker*. Like you, I've especially enjoyed their pairing of photographs and fiction, but they use so many fine portraitists that the *New Yorker* has also become my favorite (and most inspiring) place to see portraits.

Comment by [Robin Dreyer](#) — January 3, 2007 @ [12:47 am](#)

20. Hey Alec,

To answer your question about the book *Cingula Images*...Based on the title, I was expecting one thing and sorta got another. There seemed to be more bio information than actual talk about the pictures. Although there were a few interesting things...wasn't a big fan.

Shane, did you read it? What did you think?

Comment by [Danny G](#) — January 3, 2007 @ [1:40 am](#)

21. Fascinating post. I'd be interested to know of any book/cover photo combinations which you think compliment one another particularly well.

George Saunders is an author whose writing I think echoes very well the strangeness and somewhat detached feeling of much contemporary (especially contemporary American) photography. In fact, his website includes a photo-challenge, to find the "most Saundersesque photographs in the known universe": <http://www.inpersuasionnation.com/photo.html> – and his story "Pastoralia" has inspired at least one photographer: <http://www.pastoralia.net/>

Comment by [Dan Sumption](#) — January 3, 2007 @ [5:50 am](#)

22. Another thought provoking post, fantastic work.

Penguin Classics has twice run an open contest through The Guardian newspaper to cover old classics with new photographs. Last year it was judged by the famous British photographer David Bailey and the writer Iain Sinclair. I found Sinclair's [account](#) of the cover selection process illuminating, especially Bailey's readiness for photoshop 'surgery'. "You can read it [the cover] any way you want. This cover shot won't crumble against the gravity of the text. ... too literal ... unwarranted complexity ... pastiche" ([2006 finalist covers](#)). Esther Freud's [account](#) of the 2004 contest was equally as interesting. I liked her summary that the photographic cover must "give a flavour of everything the book includes as well as tempting the reader, being beautiful, sumptuous, true to the story, and giving nothing of the actual characters away". ([2004 finalist covers](#)).

Comment by [rob](#) — January 3, 2007 @ [6:14 am](#)

23. Great post. Jason Fulford is the photographer I think of first when it comes to book covers:

<http://www.jasonfulford.com/jackets.html>

Comment by [Cary](#) — January 3, 2007 @ [11:31 pm](#)

24. [...] In a previous post I touched on the topic of author photos. I find these pictures irresistible. Part of the appeal is their peculiarity. They don't seem to function in the service of either commerce or art. Unlike book covers, author photos don't have much influence over my book buying decisions. And I certainly don't look at them for their artistry. They are a photographic anomaly. But they are also strangely satisfying. A dozen pages into a juicy novel, I invariably ask myself, "Who's this voice in my head." A quick flip to the back of the book and my curiosity is satisfied. [...]

Pingback by [alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » photo jacket photos](#) — January 4, 2007 @ [2:55 am](#)

25. "Along with Marion Ettlinger, the other legendary author photographer is Jill Kremenz." Jerry Bauer?

Comment by [Roy Belmont](#) — January 4, 2007 @ [5:23 am](#)

26. In regard to Shane Lavalette's comment; I wasn't aware of 'Singular Images', and I appreciate the reference. Goldin's image 'The Hug' is only the second 'art' photograph I've come across that has been used on at least four book covers.

This cover also poses an interesting dilemma for me in terms of including it on 'Covering Photography's website. My primary interest is in the metaphorical connection between cover image and book content, and I tend to shy away from books where the connection is literal, especially when the subject matter is so close to home (art criticism, in this case). On the other hand, I view the website as organic and protean, its parameters continually being adjusted. So, who knows..

Comment by [Karl Baden](#) — January 4, 2007 @ [10:52 am](#)

27. Alec,

This is terrific and your description of the emails from The New Yorker had me laughing out loud. Thanks very much. One interesting extension might be to look at how different photographers are used in different genres. For example, I can think of 3 or 4 social science books that use Salgado images on the covers.

Comment by [Jim Johnson](#) — January 5, 2007 @ [10:28 pm](#)

28. Alec,

Very nice topic, read it with great interest. Unfortunately, it seems as if not all images load correctly...

Comment by [Francois Hendrickx](#) — January 15, 2007 @ [6:19 am](#)

29. Alec (and Danny G),

Yes, the book really was less than exceptional. I, too, expected one thing and got another; finding the book was the exciting part — reading it, however, was a kind of a let down. The actual "singular images" were interesting to me, but the discussion fell short of what it could and should have been.

Nonetheless, I still got a few things out of it. It's worth reading if you've got the time, Alec.

Comment by [Shane Lavalette](#) — January 21, 2007 @ [12:32 pm](#)

30. [...] Launched in September 2006, Alec Soth has quickly become the author of one of the most popular art blogs today. I suppose it helps that he's an art superstar, but let's be honest — Wil Wheaton notwithstanding — most people don't read famous people's blogs if they suck. I subscribe to his feed because he's always writing about some really interesting subject I would not thought to write about. Most recent example: Photography used in book covers. [...]

Pingback by [Art Fag City » The Best of the Web 2006](#) — February 5, 2007 @ [8:31 am](#)

31. Hi! Say please where it is possible to take the base information. It is very necessary!

Comment by [air](#) — February 9, 2007 @ [12:56 pm](#)

32. Hello! First time today has come on your site.

Ideas stated by the author are close to me, I have found for myself Answers to many questions. Thanks that you exist!

Comment by [kelly blue book](#) — February 10, 2007 @ [12:48 pm](#)