

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

January 4, 2007

photo jacket photos

Filed under: [books](#) — alecsothblog @ 2:55 am

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.

I suspect that most authors deplore these pictures. Certainly Dick Teresi didn't express enthusiasm for them in the New York Times. "In short, author photos are awful," he writes, "Is there something going on here beyond bad taste? Are publishers trying to make some sort of point?"

Teresi's [amusing article](#) tries to answer this question by talking to industry insiders:

"There are no rules," said Victoria Wilson (a vice president and associate publisher at Knopf), then immediately reversed herself. "Well, I have one rule: No cats."...

One Knopf writer, Charles C. Mann says that he had his jacket photo rejected by the publisher. It showed him in an open-necked shirt. An editor (not Ms. Wilson) told him that serious nonfiction authors wear coats and ties and that they button their shirts to the top. His seriousness in doubt, Mr. Mann complied. "I would happily wear a coat and tie for my publisher," he said loyally.

Houghton Mifflin's editor in chief, John Sterling, confesses that there are indeed some unwritten yet very firm rules. These rules appear to forbid subtlety at any cost. "The investigative political writer should look tough," says Mr. Sterling. "He dresses in a coat and tie, preferably in front of the Capitol. The commercial fiction writer, on the other hand, has a soft 'Vaseline' type of portrait."

But again, who really cares about photographic quality. Jacket photos are the literary equivalent to baseball cards. They scratch an itch.

This itch isn't limited to purely literary work. As a longtime fan of photography monographs, I often find myself wondering what the author looks like. But most photographers don't want to sully their vision with a second-

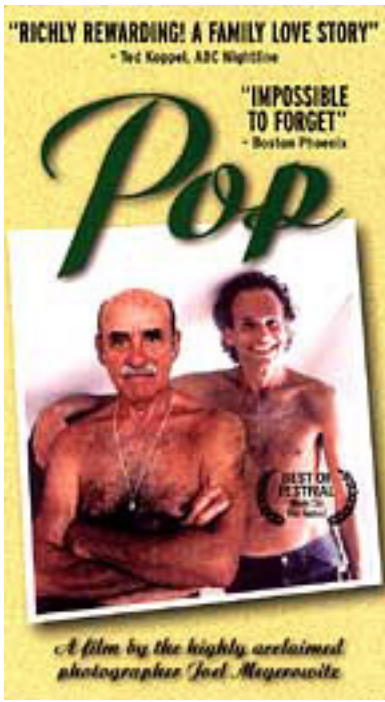
rate snapshot at the back of the book. I understand this desire for purity, but I'm grateful for the exceptions. My all time favorite book jacket photograph is on the back of Joel Meyerowitz's Cape Light:



Cape Light, 1978 photo by Max Kozloff

This picture makes me laugh. Like Cape Light itself, the photograph is unabashedly joyous. I suspect that like Alice Monro's portraits (discussed in a [previous post](#)) this hasn't helped Meyerowitz's perception in the art world. But it suits his vision.

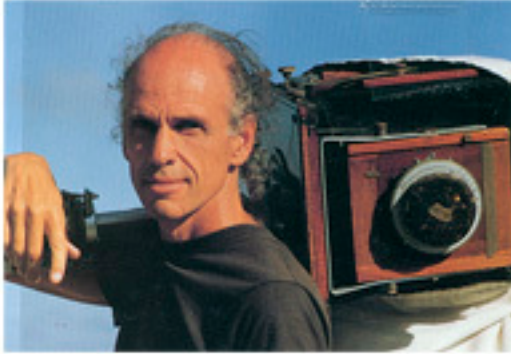
In Meyerowitz's one directorial effort, the remarkably good documentary [Pop](#) (with cinematography by Sasha Meyerowitz) the Cape Light portrait is used for remarkably bad box-cover art:



Almost every Meyerowitz book comes with a new jacket photo. I love that his family makes most of these pictures:



St. Louis & The Arch, 1980 photo by Vivian Bower Meyerowitz



Bay / Sky , 1993 photo by Ariel Meyerowitz

A Summer's Day, 1985
photo by Sasha Meyerowitz

Meyerowitz's openness to the jacket photo isn't surprising. He seems too comfortable with himself to worry about these pictures appearing déclassé. And he's never been reluctant to put himself out in the public eye

I almost think of Robert Adams as the opposite of Meyerowitz. Meyerowitz = Northeast, color, outgoing, [HP](#), joy. Adams = Northwest, black and white, reclusive, [Nazraeli](#), sorrow. Nevertheless, Adams has repeatedly published jacket portraits with his books:

The fact that Adams is especially private makes these pictures all the more special. I'm fairly certain I haven't seen any other photographs of him. And it was only while working on this post that I realized these three portraits are different. His expression is amazingly consistent. In a way this matches the consistency of his work. And I'd be lying if I said these pictures didn't somehow affect the way I look at his work. When I look at an Adams picture – the trademark merger of deep sorrow and simple pleasure – somewhere behind my eye I'm seeing that face.

5 Comments

1. i alway found it interesting and noteworthy that you (alec) seem to use an 'author photo' often. also of note is that you are covered and (apparently) in the process of working at the time. hmm...

Comment by john k. — January 4, 2007 @ [4:22 am](#)

2. Author photos can sell books if the author is especially good-looking. (For example, half the reviews of Special Topics in Calamity Physics mention the author's looks. Would it get as much press if she were ugly?) And Truman Capote's provocative author photo for Other Voices, Other Rooms had a big role in making him famous.

Mediocre or cliché photos — the chin-in-hand poet, the arm-crossed novelist in front of book cases, the business how-to guru leaning over his desk — probably don't have much influence either way, though.

Comment by [Lisa Hunter](#) — January 4, 2007 @ [10:46 am](#)

3. how about this thought (on his own author photos): "Being photographed does not make a man a good writer. It doesn't make a man anything." – Charles Bukowski

Comment by [lodewijk](#) — January 13, 2007 @ [4:30 pm](#)

4. it seems to me that the most sophisticated photography books do not have author photographs at all....generally speaking, if i see an author photo on a photographic book, i know immediately it is probably a book not to be taken seriously....cindy sherman aside!!!

literary works , for some reason, are different....hemmingway was a master at having his photograph made properly.....write a book, call karsh!!

Comment by [david alan harvey](#) — January 18, 2007 @ [3:55 am](#)

5. [...] A couple of years ago I saw Joel Meyerowitz's wonderful documentary film, POP, about his father with Alzheimer's disease. The cinematographer for the film was Meyerowitz's son Sasha. (I previously mentioned the film here) [...]

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