




Art Market

# 5 Celebrated Photographers Share Their Favorite Photo Books

Jacqui Palumbo Dec 31, 2019 8:00am   



Alec Soth in his photo book library. Photo by Ethan Jones.

All photographers remember the magic of the first camera they owned, but another transformative experience is often the first photography book that kindled a flame within them. Photographers' books are rarely hidden away or untouched, but rather combed through frequently, and loved.

“My photo book collection is arranged in stacks in my living room, in a way that encourages visitors to my home to look and enjoy them,” said documentary photographer Laylah Amatullah Barrayn.

Stains, yellowed pages, and worn bindings might make the rare book collector balk. But fine-art photographer Alec Soth often becomes deeply attached to his copies precisely because of their imperfections. “I love the worn parts of them—this clipped corner on [Stephen Shore’s] *Uncommon Places*,” he said, or a stain on his copy of Robert Adams’s *Summer Nights* (1985). “It's just the memory and the tactile quality of the book. I remember pulling it from my bookshelf, when I first fell in love with it.”

Here, five renowned photographers take us inside their photo book collections.

# Alec Soth



Alec Soth in his photo book library. Photo by Ethan Jones.

One of Soth's earliest photo books was the stained copy of Adams's *Summer Nights*. He bought it before he considered his handful of books a collection. Today, he said, "the Robert Adams shelf is a heavy one."

Soth has collected around 5,000 books, but he still doesn't consider what he does "collecting" in a formal sense. "I'm not obsessive about first editions, or untouched books. Not everything needs to be signed," he said.

When Soth began earning international recognition for his work, he was able to travel to book fairs; form relationships with publishers; and start an experimental imprint, Little Brown Mushroom. His own publisher, Mack Books, released his latest book, *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating*, earlier this year, as well as a reprint in 2017 of his formative 2004 monograph *Sleeping by the Mississippi*.

Soth has been heavily influenced by classic U.S. photo books like Walker Evans's *Message from the Interior* (1966), and Shore's *Uncommon Places* (1982), but he also seeks out niche books that have unusual relationships between image and text. He became fascinated by the subgenre of photographic children's books—Dare Wright's *The Lonely Doll* (1957) being among the most famous—as well as photo-based comic books. "I have lots of obscure artists' books and zines that use image and text in funny ways," he said.

His most treasured photo book was an unlikely find. Over two decades ago he was sifting through a Barnes and Noble sales bin when he came across the U.S. edition of Masahisa Fukase's *The Solitude of Ravens* (1991), an obsessive, poetic study of ravens that reflected the desolate mood of postwar Japan. It's a rare book cherished by many photographers, but was unknown to him at the time. "I opened it up

and I was transformed by the images,” he said. “This particular American edition doesn't have great design. I think it's valuable [now] because it's kind of obscure, but just the act of discovering this work at this time in my life has such value.” He added: “I keep that one in glassine and I treasure it. I think about it a lot.”

