

# M + B

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## The Best Photography Books of 2015

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While many of the books I liked this year conformed to the documentary photography tradition, the one I liked most questioned it in a mischievous way. Regine Petersen's beautifully designed *Find a Fallen Star* (Kehrer) is a two-volume visual meditation on meteorites and their impact, both physical and psychological. German-born Petersen roved far and wide to uncover the testimony of people who were struck by meteorites or witnessed them hitting the earth's surface. Deftly merging photographs, press cuttings, first-person accounts and her own haunting landscapes into a multilayered narrative, Petersen creates a fascinating interrogation of memory, myth and evidence, whether visual or oral.

Documentary photographer Alec Soth confirmed his status as the foremost chronicler of contemporary American life and its discontents. Punctuated by lyrics from the American popular song canon, *Songbook* (Mack) is an elegy for a small-town way of life that centred on communal rituals, from bowling clubs to faith groups. It's also a melancholic look at a disappearing America that, for all its familiarity, often seems unreal when viewed through the prism of Soth's camera.

Mike Brodie, an instinctively gifted self-taught photographer, followed up his acclaimed first photobook, *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity*, with *Tones of Dirt and Bone* (Twin Palms), in which he shot America's wide open spaces and the often haunted faces of the young itinerants and train hoppers he lived among for a time. His Polaroids are both gritty and unashamedly romantic.

If it's just plain grit you're after, though, Danny Lyon's reissued and revised classic, *Conversations With the Dead* (Phaidon), is insider documentary at its most visceral. Lyon spent a year in the late 1960s photographing inside the Texan prison system with "the intention of destroying it". Forgoing detachment for an unapologetic identification with his subjects, his images are a potent testament to the inhumanity of that system.

It is interesting to contrast Lyon's approach with that of the American photographer Sofia Valiente, whose book *Miracle Village* (Fabrica) is perhaps the bravest debut outing of the year. Shot inside an isolated community in rural Florida that is predominantly composed of convicted sex offenders, it is a thoughtful, revealing book about a taboo subject from a young woman whose observational skill is already well honed. Mariela Sancari's *Moises* (La Fabrica) also negotiated a taboo subject in a powerful and deftly handled manner. The subtext is the suicide of her father, Moises Sancari, and the hole it left in her and her twin sister's life. Mariela sought out men who resembled her father as he might have looked had he lived into his 70s. She photographed them dressed in his clothes, with her own image often appearing like a shadow in the image. Both obsessional and formally accomplished, *Moises* is a study of grieving that lodges in the head like no other photobook made this year.

Young Irish photographer Ciarán Óg Arnold won the Mack first book award with *I Went to the Worst of Bars Hoping to Get Killed. But All I Could Do Was to Get Drunk Again* (Mack), its title taken from a Charles Bukowski poem. It is a compelling, sometimes hallucinatory, glimpse of the machismo and desperation of small-town rural Ireland, where unemployment is high and alcohol an easy escape.

English working-class life in the 1980s is the subject of Chris Shaw's *Retrospecting Sandy Hill* (Mörel), in which he befriended and photographed the residents of an Aldershot housing estate. Shot in black and white, and annotated with Shaw's scrawled asides and remembered glimpses of conversation, the snapshot-style images and dramatic portraits evince a rough, but celebratory, sense of everyday life on the estate in a refreshingly nonjudgmental way.

Another book of 80s fly-on-the-wall documentary, Tom Wood's *Looking for Love*, shot entirely in the Chelsea Reach nightclub on Merseyside, was "remixed" by Gareth McConnell, who scanned a double-page collage of images that did not make it into the original, blew them up and resequenced then into a parallel narrative. The end result, *Looking for Love* (Sorika), is a wee bit "meta" – a photobook about a photobook – but possesses a raw punk energy that subverts and complements the original.

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Another raw and visceral book that has grown on me over the last few months is *Fire in Cairo* by Matthew Connors (SPBH Editions), which eschews straight reportage for a heightened sense of atmosphere and spectacle. Shot during the social and political upheaval in Egypt, it combines often striking street portraits of masked youths with oblique street scenes, images of flares and laser lights, makeshift shelters and destroyed buildings. The photographer's own impressionistic prose adds another layer of mystery to an already atmospheric evocation of a city undergoing sudden, violent transformation.

The city and its ghostly traces is the subject of *Missing Buildings* by Thom and Beth Atkinson (Hwaet Books), a book that testifies to the worth of a single great idea, deftly executed. For six years, the Atkinsons, who are brother and sister, roamed London looking for the still visible traces of buildings destroyed in the blitz: gaping spaces, shadowy outlines of houses, the ghostly absences on terraced streets. The result is a kind of visual psychogeography that is also a low-key but lingeringly powerful act of remembering.

On a more tender note, *Aunties: The Seven Summers of Alevtina and Ludmila*, by Nadia Sablin (Duke University Press), is a book made out of pure love. Sablin, who lives in Brooklyn, visits her two elderly aunties every summer, capturing their simple, self-sufficient life in a wooden house among woodland in rural Russia. Sablin's biggest influence is magical realist fiction and the images move effortlessly between the real and the almost enchanted.

Another labour of familial love is *Looking for Alice* (Trolley Books), in which Sian Davey, a former psychotherapist, trains her camera on her young daughter who was born with Down's syndrome. "I wonder how it might be for Alice to be valued without distinction, without exception and without second glance," elaborates Davey, and her intimate, quietly observational photographs illuminate that thought in a clear-eyed, un sentimental way.

Both *Frame* by Mark Cohen (University of Texas Press) and *Depth of Field* by Walker Evans (Prestel) are scholarly surveys of two giants of American photography, the former less well known than he should be for a take on street photography that is strange and surprising in its skewed angles and altered perspectives. The great Japanese photographer Shoji Ueda, who died in 2000, is celebrated in *Ueda* (Chose Commune, which collects his formally austere, but hauntingly beautiful, landscapes and portraits, mostly taken in and around his home town of Tottorri. Another relatively unsung pioneer, Germaine Krull (Yale University Press) is celebrated in an eponymous catalogue that accompanied her retrospective show at Jeu de Paume in Paris in the summer. Named by Man Ray as his equal, Krull was a founder of radical modernist photography and the book goes some way to establishing her rightful place in the photographic firmament.

For anyone in search of the possible radical pioneers of today, look no further than *Self Publish, Be Happy: A DIY Photobook Manual and Manifesto* (SPBH Editions/Aperture), which gathers together 75 young iconoclasts whose experimentalism may befuddle the traditionalists but shows how photography continues to redefine itself as a self-questioning medium in the age of Instagram overload.