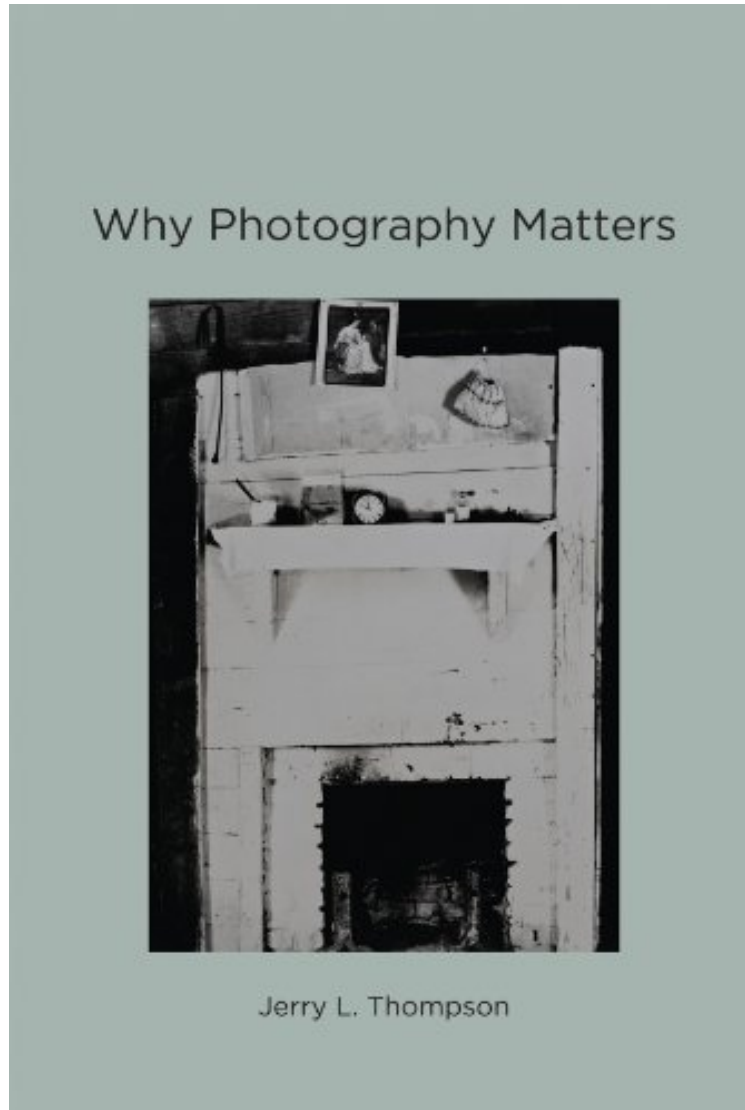


[FREE] Why Photography Matters (MIT Press)

Why Photography Matters (MIT Press)

Jerry L. Thompson

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Jerry L. Thompson : Why Photography Matters (MIT Press) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Why Photography Matters (MIT Press):

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Very confusing...By fred stevensI wanted to like this book, as I thoroughly enjoyed Susan Sontag's photography book, and I thought it would be interesting to read something critical of her book, a different take, but... I have no idea what this book was about, and after reading it, I couldn't tell you one main point. I almost hate to criticize this book, because perhaps it is really deep and thoughtful and just way over my head, and I had a really hard time following any of it or staying interested, so maybe I wasn't the most careful reader. I do think, however, that when an author resorts to putting so many words in italics, as if that gives these words extra

weight, more meaning, then maybe, just maybe, that author's thoughts aren't fully developed and they are not being presented clearly. 9 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Nothing more than a half-baked, maybe even hypocritical, defense of Evans

By Brian S. Carroll
This book should really be titled "Why Walker Evans Matters" as Thompson spends such a significant portion defending his former employer (even the dust jacket reminds us Thompson worked as Evans's principal assistant for a short spell). Thompson decries the aphoristic, footnote-less, modernist style of all earlier writings on photography, saving his most pointed criticisms for Susan Sontag. Thompson mentions how Sontag's own critical hang-ups with Evans appeared while the late photographer was still living, yet Thompson, in a cruel irony, hasn't reserved this same methodology for Sontag's words. In the latter sections of the work, Thompson trudges forth as Evans' mandated apologist, completely avoiding addressing Sontag's most intriguing complaints of Evans (and others) that she pushes in both *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*, that is, the major issues of the uncaptioned portrait, images that deny subject identity (such as in Evans's *Subway Portraits*). Indeed, one could argue Thompson's book is intended to merely advance the conversation, extend the dialogue even further and that such reactionary commentary would detract from the overall goal. The problem with this defense, however, is that Thompson already attacks Sontag for her brand of sweeping rhetoric, a picking-and-choosing of her acerbic discourse, and in the end has engaged in such sour behaviors himself. Certainly questioning Sontag's long-canonization is needed and fruitful, Thompson just chooses to do so in a very unsatisfactory and embarrassingly incomplete manner. In other parts of the scant work, Thompson offers a few readings of Atget, Winograd, and Marcia Due which are all extremely pedestrian (the foregrounding trees here mean this, this distant subject's clothing may say that) and focus so painfully on simple, formalistic elements. In exerting a half-baked notion on "truth" on these texts, Thompson extends his great disservice. Thompson purports his work of that of a philosopher yet he avoids employing any ample, amplified "rigorous thinking," as Heidegger would say (a thinker that Thompson relegates to a single footnote of a minor Heidegger work, completely avoiding his more significant essays on art, or Being). Again, seemingly in a defense against Evans, Thompson's hypocritically sweeping gesture casts off discussions of the ethics of exploitation in photography (perhaps the only reference to Sontag, and other's, valid critiques), as if such conversations are stale and outmoded. However, if he's seeking a sort of ontological truth, it would have behooved Thompson to engender more thinking here, not just with the thoughts of Heidegger, but those too of Levinas and Irigaray, powerful thinkers that advance important thoughts on ethical relationships to the Other and how engaging in such vigor leads to an authenticity of being. The closest Thompson gets here is in his (too brief) look at a single Winograd image, offering some undercooked ideas regarding dialectics between subject and operator, but Thompson fails here, as in many places throughout the book, to follow these thinking-threads deeper along their paths to disclosure. It would be unfair to call Thompson's book mean-spirited, of course, but the brevity-as-profundity technique is just a masked laziness, and this makes it practically just as offensive.

5 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Just ok

By Donald G. Stanton
The author does not make his point clearly. At points he seems to go off in different directions and does not make it all the way back.

Photography matters, writes Jerry Thompson, because of how it works -- not only as an artistic medium but also as a way of knowing. With this provocative observation, Thompson begins a wide-ranging and lucid meditation on why photography is unique among the picture-making arts. He constructs an argument that moves with natural logic from Thomas Pynchon (and why we read him for his vision and not his command of miscellaneous facts) to Jonathan Swift to Plato to Emily Dickinson (who wrote "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant") to detailed readings of photographs by Eugène Atget, Garry Winogrand, Marcia Due, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank. Forcefully and persuasively, he argues for photography as a medium whose business is not constructing fantasies pleasing to the eye or imagination, but describing the world in the toughest and deepest way.

How photographs work is the challenging subject of Jerry Thompson's radiant new book. Once considered revolutionary in their illumination of the world, photographs have long since been reconceived as prestigious aesthetic objects. Against this turn Thompson argues reflectively and philosophically for a restored sense of need and purpose. The book offers a stunning recovery of the original raison d'être of camera work as revelation and knowledge. (Alan Trachtenberg, Professor Emeritus of English and American Studies, Yale University; and author of *Reading American Photographs* and other books) It would be hard to imagine a more effective and refreshing demonstration of why photography matters than Jerry Thompson's book of that title. It is demonstrative as reasoning and also as a display of the way photographs can awaken and engage all the human powers of intellect and sensibility. To look along with the author is to embark on a dialectical path that describes a long arc through regions rarely embraced in one view. (Joe Sachs, translator of Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Physics*) In photography, content is often confused with aesthetics. In his concise and focused study, Jerry L. Thompson, gifted with an artist's eye and a philosophical mind, requires but a few examples -- from Atget to Evans -- to illustrate what remains when all narrative has been exhausted: the true essence that turns a photographic image into a work of art. (Heinz Liesbrock, Director of the Josef Albers Museum, Bottrop) About the Author Jerry L. Thompson is a working photographer who also writes about

photography. He worked as Walker Evans's principal assistant from 1973 to Evans's death in 1975. He is the author of *The Last Years of Walker Evans* and *Truth and Photography*.