

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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The Best Books for Photography Lovers

William Meyers recommends new books from 2015.

Updated Nov. 20, 2015 1:47 p.m. ET

Darryl Pinckney's knowledgeable introduction to “**‘O, Write My Name’: American Portraits, Harlem Heroes**” (**Eakins Press Foundation, 136 pages, \$50**) is informative about its subjects as well as the photographer, Carl Van Vechten. Van Vechten (1880-1964), a white man from Iowa, was friendly with virtually all the artists, writers and musicians of the Harlem Renaissance and with their successors from the mid-'30s on. When he got a Leica in 1932, he began taking their pictures. The 50 portraits in “‘O, Write My Name’” include Dizzy Gillespie, James Baldwin, Ruby Dee, Bessie Smith, Joe Louis, Zora Neale Hurston, Romare Bearden, Marian Anderson—an incredible host of talent. Mr. Pinckney writes, “But the first thing Van Vechten’s photographs speak of is his talent for friendship.” The pictures are not about the public personas these famous people presented to the world; they are intimate and revealing, informed by Van Vechten’s insight, curiosity and deep affection.

Most travelers across America go east to west; Lewis and Clark did, and Robert Frank did. “**Dirt Meridian**” (**Damiani, 140 pages, \$50**) is photographer Andrew Moore’s record of his travels north and south along the 100th meridian, a line from Texas to North Dakota that just about divides the country in half, and separates the verdant east from the desolate Great Plains west. Most of the pictures were taken at low altitudes with a high-resolution digital camera mounted under the wing of a Cessna and controlled by Mr. Moore from a laptop in the cockpit. There are stunning pictures of variously textured landscapes that stretch away to far distant horizons. Mr. Moore says his challenge was “to depict that emptiness, but not make vacant images.” There may be the ruins of an abandoned prairie home, or some cattle, or an old fashioned windmill, or meager signs of commercial activity, but mostly there are vast, treeless expanses that are still somehow beautiful.

When he was scouting locations in Kraków for “Schindler’s List,” director Steven Spielberg used Roman Vishniac’s prewar photographs to get a sense of what the Jewish ghetto looked like. Beginning in 1935, Vishniac worked for the Joint Distribution Committee, a Jewish relief agency, taking pictures used in campaigns to raise funds for the impoverished Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. After the Holocaust, Vishniac’s 1947 photo book “Polish Jews” became the best-known visual record of its victims. An expanded version was published in 1983 as “A Vanished World.” Maya Benton, curator of the Vishniac archives at the International Center of Photography, edited “**Roman Vishniac Rediscovered**” (**Prestel, 384 pages, \$75**) to put the “Vanished World” photographs in a broader context; her book includes images of pre-war Berlin, and post-war Jewish communities in America and Europe, as well as

samples of Vishniac's street photography, portraits, and brilliant photo microscopy. It establishes him as a considerably more versatile photographer than previously assumed.

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“Alexey Titarenko: The City is a Novel” (Damiani, 208 pages, \$60) is a wonderful title for this book. Mr. Titarenko's pictures of St. Petersburg, Venice, Havana, and New York are not about the buildings, streets and parks of those cities per se, but about them as sites of narrative. In most of these images one feels the setting is a place where something has happened, or is happening, or is going to happen; there is a theatricality about them. The technical device Mr. Titarenko uses to achieve this effect is the long exposure, keeping the lens open so that moving figures are blurred, sometimes appearing almost as wraiths. He is also a brilliant printer, able to control the tonal values in his prints to emphasize and deemphasize particular elements. In an affecting autobiographical essay he tells how reading Dostoevsky and listening to Shostakovich freed him from the Soviet mindset to become truly creative.

The Aperture Foundation published the first book of its “Masters of Photography” series in 1976. There are now 20 of the small (8 by 8 inches), inexpensive and concise volumes, and Aperture has begun revising and reissuing them. **“Berenice Abbott” (Aperture, 96 pages, \$18.95)** was updated this spring; the introduction by Julia Van Haften was retained and she added commentary for each of the pictures. There are new images in this edition, so that each phase of Abbott's unusually varied career is covered, and a chronology as well. “Jean Cocteau, Paris” (1925) and “James Joyce, Paris” (1928) are among the portraits from her time in France. Her classic project “Changing New York,” an indispensable record of the city in the 1930s, is represented by many of its choicest images. There are pictures from her travels elsewhere in the U.S., and examples of the ingenious photos she took to illustrate scientific principles for a textbook published by MIT.

Mark Cohen could take William Blake's “To see a World in a Grain of Sand” as the epigraph for **“Frame: A Retrospective” (University of Texas Press, 304 pages, \$85)**. Mr. Cohen's pictures are remarkable for how little he needs to include to make a compelling image. “Three Pieces of Bread by Puddle” (1975) contains no more than that, but is an elegant and somehow elegiac black and white abstraction. In “Hole in Shirt” (1974), Mr. Cohen shows us just bits of a boy's clothing, and from the style and condition of the garments we can impute not only his sociological status, but get a sense of his character as well. It is a compliment to the viewer that Mr. Cohen credits us with that ability. Pictures like “Bare Legs and Bent Post, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania” (June 1974) show just parts of someone's body. There is a selection of color photos including the smart-aleck “Boy in Yellow Shirt Smoking” (1977) surrounded by a gaggle of clowning friends.

—Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. His own images are collected in “Outer Boroughs: New York Beyond Manhattan.”

