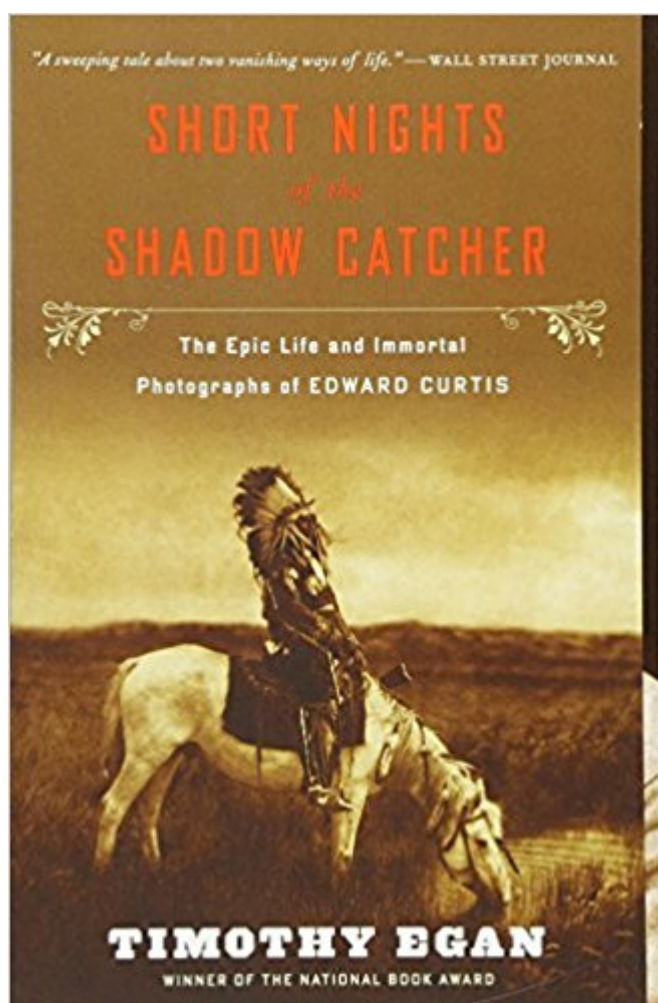


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Short Nights Of The Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life And Immortal Photographs Of Edward Curtis



Synopsis

“A vivid exploration of one man’s lifelong obsession with an idea . . . Egan’s spirited biography might just bring [Curtis] the recognition that eluded him in life.”

Washington Post Edward Curtis was charismatic, handsome, a passionate mountaineer, and a famous portrait photographer, the Annie Leibovitz of his time. He moved in rarefied circles, a friend to presidents, vaudeville stars, leading thinkers. But when he was thirty-two years old, in 1900, he gave it all up to pursue his Great Idea: to capture on film the continent’s original inhabitants before the old ways disappeared. Curtis spent the next three decades documenting the stories and rituals of more than eighty North American tribes. It took tremendous perseverance – ten years alone to persuade the Hopi to allow him to observe their Snake Dance ceremony. And the undertaking changed him profoundly, from detached observer to outraged advocate. Curtis would amass more than 40,000 photographs and 10,000 audio recordings, and he is credited with making the first narrative documentary film. In the process, the charming rogue with the grade school education created the most definitive archive of the American Indian.

“A darn good yarn. Egan is a muscular storyteller and his book is a rollicking page-turner with a colorfully drawn hero.”

San Francisco Chronicle “A riveting biography of an American original.”

Boston Globe

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Customer Reviews

In the summer of 1900, Edward Curtis gave up a successful photography career to pursue a quixotic plan: to photograph all the Indian communities in North America. He quickly learned that his

subjects were dying off fast, so he [needed](#) to hurry if he was [to](#) capture the essence of their lives before that essence disappeared. [A](#) mountaineer, explorer, intrepid photojournalist, and amateur anthropologist, Curtis was Ansel Adams crossed with Annie Leibovitz, a willful and passionate chronicler of a people he came to love. [I](#) want to make them live forever, [Curtis](#) said in the early days of his decades-long mission. As Egan's thrilling story attests, he succeeded, even though he died penniless and alone. --Neal Thompson

Photos from the Author (.com Exclusive) [Bear's Belly](#) (Edward S. Curtis, courtesy of Cardozo Fine Art) [Click here for a larger image](#) [Before the Storm](#) (Edward S. Curtis, courtesy of Cardozo Fine Art) [Click here for a larger image](#) [Canyon De Chelley](#) (Edward S. Curtis, courtesy of Cardozo Fine Art) [Click here for a larger image](#) [Oasis in the Bad Lands](#) (Edward S. Curtis, courtesy of Cardozo Fine Art) [Click here for a larger image](#) [Piegan Encampment](#) (Edward S. Curtis, courtesy of Cardozo Fine Art) [Click here for a larger image](#) [Watching Dancers](#) (Edward S. Curtis, courtesy of Cardozo Fine Art) [Click here for a larger image](#) --This text refers to the MP3 CD edition.

Starred Review Before half its 20 volumes were published, *The North American Indian* was called the most important book since the King James Bible. When the last emerged, its director and primary researcher and author, self-made master photographer Edward Curtis (1868–1952), was old, broke, and dependent on his daughters. Though his great work consumed \$2.5 million of J. P. Morgan's money over the course of three decades, Curtis never took a cent in salary. He lost his business, his property, his marriage, and any control of his great project. But he completed it, preserving a great deal of what we know about Indian cultures, including more than 75 languages, thousands of songs and stories, traditional practices in everything from clothing to religious ritual, and the Indian accounts of such historic milestones as the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Simultaneously, he fixed the image of the North American Indian in a body of work as iconic as any created by any other visual artist in any medium. To accomplish this, he braved the remote, nearly inaccessible places where small tribes clung to their identities, painstakingly won the confidence of wary elders in many larger tribes, and wooed the titans of American wealth to keep going. Ace popular historian Egan makes Curtis's story frequently suspenseful, always gripping, and monumentally heroic. --Ray Olson --This text refers to the MP3 CD edition.

I had heard of Edward Curtis but knew only that he was a photographer, and that he took many pictures of American Indians in the early 1900's. That should make me ashamed, since I lived in

Seattle, Curtis's home town, for many years. Timothy Egan's book gives a detailed, balanced look at Curtis's life and his life's work: Publication of a 20-volume look at American Indian communities in the early 20th century. Just thinking about such a venture makes me tired, but Curtis was tireless (hence the "short nights" in the title -- he rarely slept). The series would include not just photographs but a lexicon preserving languages, and in the making of this Curtis would make film and audio records of songs and ceremonies that would have been lost forever. His ambition seems quite unrealistic, almost delusional, to someone from present day. Traveling thousands of miles with bulky photographic equipment, in unmapped territory without the benefit of conveniences we take for granted -- GPS, airplanes, cell phones, overnight delivery, fax machines. He and his team made a photographic and textual record that has never been equalled, and probably never will be. And during this time he made a movie and developed a stage presentation that wowed even the most sophisticated audiences. Even if you're not particularly interested in photography or American Indians, Egan's book is fascinating as a look at the early 1900's, movers and shakers, people like J. P. Morgan and Theodore Roosevelt. Egan's writing is brisk, his descriptions evocative. It never bogged down, even when things weren't going well for Curtis. The book is full of flavor and color, success and hardship, but more important, Egan, through showing us Curtis's life and his work, has brought home the devastation and loss of American's First People. Destruction and loss of their cultures has hurt every American, not just Indians. That's what I took from this book. The epilogue was heartening, and it's also heartening that Curtis knew the value of his work, even if it wasn't fully realized until after he was dead.

Early nineteenth Century Photographer Edward S. Curtis quickly acquired several nicknames from the various American Indian tribes that he visited to document their way of life. "Shadow Catcher" was the one that most referred to his ability to capture images on his camera. "The Man Who Sleeps on His Breath" referred to his use of an inflatable mattress that he blew up by blowing air into it every night before going to sleep. Near the end of his life, Curtis would apply another nickname to himself. "Following the Indian form of naming men, I would be termed, 'The Man Who never Took Time to Play.'" He'd come up with this nickname after discussing his work habits. "It's safe to say that in the last fifty years I have averaged sixteen hours a day, seven days a week" working to complete my documentation of "The North American Indian." Curtis was an "Indiana Jones" with a camera. Over his long and productive life he managed to take 40,000 photos using a large camera format and glass plate (14 X17 inch) negatives of Native Americans as they were disappearing from the American scene. He also recorded 10,000 Indian songs on wax cylinders, "wrote down

vocabularies and pronunciation guides for 75 languages, and transcribed an incalculable number of myths, rituals and religious stories from oral history." He also transferred his music recordings to actual sheet music. He was famous during the first part of his monumental Native American documentation. He was a personal friend of President Teddy Roosevelt and sponsored by J.P. Morgan. Curtis enjoyed great public acclaim for his 20 volume history series. He was an international celebrity. However, his 33-year project wasn't finally completed until long after its novelty with the public had vanished. Because Curtis was a terrible businessman J.P. Morgan accepted his offer to personally work for free. Morgan only paid for his expeditions and the eventual printing of the books. Morgan eventually also ended up with all rights to Curtis's life of cutting edge work. J.P. knew a bargain when it was offered to him. In 2009, during that deep economic recession, a single set of the 20 Volume series sold at auction for \$1.8 million dollars. The value of the work was finally being realized by the public. "Curtis was the first person to conduct a thorough historical autopsy of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, from both the Indians side and that of the cavalry." He walked the battleground with men who had actually taken part in the battle. His revelations were deemed too explosive to publish in his Magnus Opus and shelved until future generations could bear to hear the truths he recorded. He produced one of the first documentary films about the Indians titled "In the Land of the Head-Hunters." After a much-heralded debut, the film was tied up in legal problems with the distributor and disappeared for 33 years. Like all of his work with Native Americans Curtis never made a dime and actually lost money on his monumental works and died dirt poor in the smog choked slums of Beverly Hills, CA. No kidding, Beverly Hills had some slums. This highly readable, illustrated biography was one of the most enjoyable books this reviewer has read in years. As an ex-photographer, would-be adventurer, art and book collector this book's subject fascinated me. When I was traveling around the Basin in the 1960s taking photographs for National Geographic, I too loved to take pictures of Indians. However, I would not have gone one step out of my way to photograph cannibals or head hunters unless I was certain of remaining safe throughout the experience. Curtis was a much more adventurous soul than this reviewer. He also had incredible stamina and was able to work 24/7/365 almost without sleep in locations almost unfit for human existence. He was driven by his desire to capture an important part of world history that was dying so fast he knew he'd never be able to document it all for posterity. He was constantly aware that the images and information he sought were disappearing every day and would soon be lost forever. Curtis had discovered photography almost by accident. He later opened his eyes up to the Native Americans living in squalor in his hometown of Seattle. Although the city is named after the great chief, Seattle, Indians were not allowed to live within the city limits. Like so many

photographers, he realized the need to photograph the disappearing Native American Culture because it was happening all around him and most of the population failed to see it much less care about it. At the same time I was reading this wonderful biography that picked up speed as it progressed, I was also reading "Edward S. Curtis: Visions of the First Americans" by Don Gulbrandsen. That large coffee table book includes more than 300 photographs by Edwin S. Curtis. Many of those photographs are reproduced in the same size and format as the original glass plate negatives. If ever there were two books that should be read together as a set, these two books are they. Reading the descriptions of the struggles of taking certain photographs in Egan's excellent biography makes it much easier to better appreciate some of the nuances of the reproductions in Gulbrandsen's collection of actual Curtis images of a now vanished world.

I recently read a book entitled The Short Night of the Shadow Catcher by Timothy Egan, the story of the nationally acclaimed American Indian photographer Edward Curtis. Recognizing the decline of the Indians' cultural heritage in 1900 due to the banning of their traditional ceremonies by the US Government, and frantic to preserve these traditions, he enlisted the help of Theodore Roosevelt and J.P. Morgan to go out in search of these photographic images yet to be taken. With financial support for the fieldwork only, Curtis lived amongst nearly every American Indian settlement in North America, being given the name "Shadow Catcher" by the Indians themselves. The result is a masterpiece of immortality for the American Indian. The title of his comprehensive work containing twenty volumes is The North American Indian. By living with and developing a relationship of trust within the tribes, he was able to catalog and record both audio recordings and visual images of the last vestiges of the American Indian rituals, ceremonies, traditions, languages and stories. Curtis himself received no compensation for his work - he died bereft of money as well as recognition for his life's work. Today, Indian tribes use Curtis' work to teach Indian people their old ways and traditions that have been lost to time. If not for Curtis, they say, they would be unable to communicate their own traditions and lost languages to the younger generation, since they themselves had never seen nor heard it - until they viewed the work of this genius.

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