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Doing Documentary Work (New York Public Library Lectures In Humanities)



Synopsis

Sitting in his study, William Carlos Williams once revealed to Robert Coles what he considered to be his greatest problem in writing a documentary about his patients in New Jersey. "When I'm there, sitting with those folks, listening and talking," he said to Coles, "I'm part of that life, and I'm near it in my head, too.... Back here, sitting near this typewriter--its different. I'm a writer. I'm a doctor living in Rutherford who is describing 'a world elsewhere.'" Williams captured the great difficulty in documentary writing--the gulf that separates the reality of the subject from the point of view of the observer. Now, in this thought-provoking volume, the renowned child psychiatrist Robert Coles, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Children in Crisis* series, offers a penetrating look into the nature of documentary work. Utilizing the documentaries of writers, photographers, and others, Coles shows how their prose and pictures are influenced by the observer's frame of reference: their social and educational background, personal morals, and political beliefs. He discusses literary documentaries: James Agee's searching portrait of Depression-era tenant farmers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and George Orwell's passionate description of England's coal-miners, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Like many documentarians, Coles argues, Agee and Orwell did not try to be objective, but instead showered unadulterated praise on the "noble" poor and vituperative contempt on the more privileged classes (including themselves) for "exploiting" these workers. Documentary photographs could be equally revealing about the observer. Coles analyzes how famous photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange edited and cropped their pictures to produce a desired effect. Even the shield of the camera could not hide the presence of the photographer. Coles also illuminates his points through his personal portraits of William Carlos Williams; Robert Moses, one of the leaders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee during the 1960s; Erik H. Erikson, biographer of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther; and others. Documentary work, Coles concludes, is more a narrative constructed by the observer than a true slice of reality. With the growth in popularity of films such as Ken Burns's *The Civil War* and the controversial basketball documentary *Hoop Dreams*, the question of what is "real" in documentary work is more pressing than ever. Through revealing discussions with documentarians and insightful analysis of their work, complemented by dramatic black-and-white photographs from Lange and Evans, *Doing Documentary Work* will provoke the reader into reconsidering how fine the line is between truth and fiction. It is an invaluable resource for students of the documentary and anyone interested in this important genre.

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Customer Reviews

Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist whose series of books on children won him a Pulitzer Prize, has turned his watchful eye to the nature of the documentary and produced a thought-provoking book. In somewhat the manner of James Faris's recent study, *Navajo and Photography*, Coles reveals how documentarians like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans edited and cropped their images to produce a desired effect, and raises the question of authenticity versus manipulation. Lange, the subject of a previous biographical study by Coles, comes under close scrutiny as he contrasts her iconic image of a migrant mother with obscure photographs shot moments earlier. The author also recalls James Agee's self-critical appraisal of his and Evans's "insensitivity" and "arrogance" in pursuing an editorial assignment. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A challenging exploration of documentary writing and photography, focusing on the ways in which researchers can affect, reshape, or misrepresent what they see. Coles, the noted psychiatrist and Harvard ethicist (*The Moral Intelligence of Children*, 1997, etc.), notes in the introduction that he has been preparing to write this book "for over 35 years"--ever since he and his wife, while studying the integration of schools in Louisiana in 1960, first tried to make sense of what it meant to be witnesses, researchers, and onlookers. A fascination with the moral and practical consequences that arise when observers (journalists, academics, or social activists) probe the lives of a class of

people-- whether coal miners (George Orwell), migrant workers (Dorothea Lange), or Mississippi farmers (James Agee and Walker Evans)--led Coles to become one of the founders of Duke University's Center of Documentary Studies. Poet/doctor William Carlos Williams and biographer/therapist Erik Erikson are Coles's heroes, and from them and others he draws his theme: "We notice what we notice in accordance with who we are." Coles offers striking examples of the way in which preconceptions can alter what is seen, including Lange's famous "Migrant Mother" photograph: That seminal Depression-era picture was selected from a series of shots and then cropped for dramatic impact, in accordance with Lange's personal vision, with who she was, with what she wanted to communicate about poverty in the South. Also examined, in sometimes rambling, verbose passages, are the impact the observer makes on those being observed and the tendency by writers like Agee and Orwell, for instance, to put on a pedestal the farmworkers and coal miners who helped make them famous. Journalists, social workers, and therapists, as well as producers of print or film documentaries, will find this ruminative volume of special use, reminding them of the questions they should ask themselves before they invade schools, workplaces, and private lives. (18 b&w photos, not seen) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book was a useful read and provided a fantastic prospective on documentary photography.

interesting alternative perspectives presented with illustrative examples that make sense of theory in practice. It brings abstract thoughts and notions down to a manageable level. A must read for field researchers prior to interaction with research participants.

spectacular!!!

I am not done reading this book yet, but so far it is very on target for speaking about the pitfalls and the concepts of doing documentary photography. I think photography students who are interested in this type of work should absolutely read this.

This is an excellent book for anyone wanting to gain a greater insight in documentary photography work. Coles provokes many questions, and sometimes ones you've not yet thought. I highly recommend Doing Documentary Work!

Valuable insights and great references, However, he misspelled the name of the author of one of the most valuable references, Literature and Photography; the correct spelling is Jane M. Rabb

This book is useful in giving insight on doing documentary work. However, Robert Coles' writing style seems like one run on sentence after another. After reading the book, I came to the personal conclusion that this form of documentary work is not an art and definitely not science, simply a craft that is heavily biased by the researcher's lens of viewing the world.

This is an important book for "so called" documentary writers, photographers, and film makers. I say "so called" because we tend to think of documentary work as an accurate representation--literally the truth. Robert Coles pretty much shoots that idea down, showing how the background, beliefs, biases, hopes, and fears of the documentarian color the narrative. I came away believing that the word objective is not relevant here, and that it may be impossible to ever get at the truth. If I read Coles right, the documentarian may, in fact, be more akin to the literary fiction writer/photographer/film-maker, who does seem to get at the truth. This is not to say that documentary work is futile. On the contrary it can be potent, meaningful, and worthwhile. We may just have to look at it differently and face up to the fact that it reflects the person doing the documentary work as much as it does his/her subject. This is a liberating idea. And we owe a debt to Coles for proffering it. There are consequences, too. For instance, in the light of Coles' discovery, a lot of critics may owe an apology to Richard Avedon, whose photographic fiction, "In The American West," may be fine documentary work after all.

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