



Flash: The Making of Weegee the Famous

Christopher Bonanos

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The first comprehensive biography of Weegee—photographer, “psychic,” ultimate New Yorker—from Christopher Bonanos, author of *Instant: The Story of Polaroid*.

Arthur Fellig's ability to arrive at a crime scene just as the cops did was so uncanny that he renamed himself “Weegee,” claiming that he functioned as a human Ouija board. Weegee documented better than any other photographer the crime, grit, and complex humanity of midcentury New York City. In *Flash*, we get a portrait not only of the man (both flawed and deeply talented, with generous appetites for publicity, women, and hot pastrami) but also of the fascinating time and place that he occupied.

From self-taught immigrant kid to newshound to art-world darling to latter-day caricature—moving from the dangerous streets of New York City to the celebrity culture of Los Angeles and then to Europe for a quixotic late phase of experimental photography and filmmaking—Weegee lived a life just as worthy of documentation as the scenes he captured. With *Flash*, we have an unprecedented and ultimately moving view of the man now regarded as an innovator and a pioneer, an artist as well as a newsman, whose photographs are among most powerful images of urban existence ever made.

Flash: The Making of Weegee the Famous Details

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Elisabeth says

It was surprising to see so few photographs in a biography of a photographer, but the descriptions of the ones that weren't pictured were very vivid. Being familiar with Weegee's work, I could imagine them easily. You should absolutely look at the archives here while you're reading this:

<https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/co...>

SundayAtDusk says

It took me forever to finish this book. That was definitely not due to readability problems, or lack of interest in photography, but due to only being able to take Mr. Weegee The Famous in small doses. During the 1930s and 1940s, Weegee (aka Arthur Fellig) was at the top of the heap of street photographers in New York City. One reason being he had no life other than taking pictures, particularly at night. He would be tipped off by the police about crimes; later getting a police radio; and go rushing off into the night to scenes of murder and mayhem. Sometimes he just happened to be somewhere right before a great photo opportunity happened. Those who studied odds, however, would probably say no one had a greater chance for that to happen to than a street photographer like Weegee. As it turned out, some of his best shots were staged, too, or at least partly staged, something he never wanted to acknowledge.

One should note, though, Weegee was a working stiff, not a guy with family money who had no worries about paying bills. He also enjoyed the limelight himself, and did not want his reputation as an exceptional photographer to ever diminish or vanish. What other life did he have? None. He used women and had little regard for them, except as objects for ogling, photographing and sex. He was a creepy guy, a voyeur, a guy who had a thing about mannequins. Why not? Mannequins had no feelings to be concerned about, no requests, no demands. They were just objects to be used and posed in photographs. There was one woman named Wilma Wilcox who stuck by him, however, a Quaker social worker, no less. Weegee ended up moving in with her when he got old and sick. Of course. She saved his photos after his death, she saved his legacy. Author Christopher Bonanos gives Ms. Wilcox her due in this book, and gives Weegee The Famous his due, too. Nevertheless, four hundred pages was too much due for Weegee, in my opinion. Two hundred would have sufficed.

(Note: I received a free e-ARC of this book from NetGalley and the publisher or author.)

Lee Woodruff says

Christopher Bonanos is an excellent reporter and writer and this book is a fascinating look at how we got where are we with the paparazzi and the creation of this celebrity culture from the most famous one ever!

Ted says

What a picture of NYC through the eyes of its most dedicated night crawler! On call all the time for gangland murders, 2AM fires, 5AM roof jumpings with a practiced hand at 6 and 10 feet for rapid fire focus. Tooling around in his office on wheels, his Chevy with a police radio and trunk repurposed as an office. The book has a good index

Bruce Most says

A fascinating portrait of the 1930s and 40s New York City freelance photographer whose stark nighttime photos of murder victims, fires, and auto accidents—and their spectators—brought spot news photographer into the light. It's also the classic story of a lonely immigrant reinventing himself in an often vain attempt to shed his past and achieve the American dream.

Mike says

Terrifically researched, well-written, vivid portrayal of Weegee, warts and all.
Many laughs.

Notes:

2014's *Nightcrawler* was inspired by him. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nightcrawler>
69...tear sheets covered his walls
75... more material could be mined from the faces of the onlookers. (watching the watchers)
90...Posed, inadvertently? ... journalistic malpractice ... How often does that happen in documentaries?
95... Custom baggy suits, famous for not touching his body.
100...75 cent investment in a rubber stamp paid off big.
106...fires agonizing, but a lot of the murder pics are more fun. Particularly when the dead men are gangsters.
120...strings of sentences and fragments joined by ellipses ... in direct imitation of W Winchell
128...He scorned "human interest" stuff ... "mental masturbating" ... but, \$5 was \$5
142... Joseph Mitchell like WG, high-life, low-life melding ... Sammy's, the crossroads
163...dressed as a clown for RBBB ... cf George Plimpton playing with the Detroit Lions
182...1938 NYC prohibited cross-dressing. ... The "3 piece rule".
230..."Naked City" naming rights
254...stories in the Jr Hemingway mode, war exploits, libertinism, hunting in jungle
276...Satchmo parallels
293...schlock film pioneer Doris Wishman
298...Dr. Strangelove, Sellers imitated his voice
321...Notes: fultonhistory.com ... ProQuest Historical Newspapers service

Leigh says

In my alternate universe life, I'm a photojournalist--so it's not surprising that I loved this book. Bonanos tells

Weegee's story with an appreciation for the strength of the work and bemusement mixed with occasional dismay (deserved) at the man himself. A great chronicle of the best of the early street photographers.

John says

As someone who loves *film noir*, hard boiled detective and crime fiction, and midcentury jazz, it's no surprise I love Weegee's photography, and have for years. I never new a lot about Weegee (born Usher Felig, Americanized to Arthur Fellig) until now -- and I have to say, what I've learned is pretty disappointing. Weegee was, without question, a classic American type -- a hustler, a dreamer, possessed of serious talent and great instincts. He was also creepy, lecherous, and self-deluded, and it's hard after reading this biography to see him as a great artist instead of simply the right person in the right place at the right moment in history (in spite of Bonanos' argument to the contrary).

So Bonanos has written a biography of someone you'd never want to meet, and one that reveals very little about his artistic process because there's not that much to reveal. Why read it? Because it's a terrific history of the rise of photojournalism and a compelling love letter to midcentury New York, and an interesting if superficial look at the beginning of schlock cinema. Taken as social and cultural history, instead of biography, it improves dramatically.

Kristine says

Flash: The Making of Weegee the Famous by Christopher Bonanos is a free NetGalley ebook that I read in early June.

Usher/Arthur Fellig aka Weegee, a name that represents a kind of male Sasha Fierce persona who is the greatest photographer and can hold a conversation with anyone. That persona in itself created a caricature for those later involved his chosen career and the burgeoning fame of press photographers. His early free-lance photos depict truth in a primitive, no-filter way (showing reactivity, instead of activity; to the minute, emotive photos of crime and tragedy as they happen), then, later in the 1950s, he takes ironic, gaffy human interest story photos for girlie/cheesecake magazines while choosing magazine work over newsprint and publishing his own photobooks and short films.

Leigh says

Extremely well researched, this is an interesting look at a news photographer who helped create news photojournalism. Personally, Weegee was an obnoxious skirt chaser, but professionally, he was a workaholic who used his talents to make remarkable photographs of early and mid 20th century New York.

Bonnye Reed says

GNab Flash: The Making of Weegee the Famous is an excellent biography of the life and times of Arthur Fellig. Arriving in New York City in 1910 from Eastern Europe, Arthur was one of seven children.

And though he was hungry, frightened, unable to speak English and only ten years old, Arthur (born Usher Felig) was working within days to help support his large family.

Arthur was a go-getter. When the information for the 1910 census was taken 8 months after their arrival in NYC, Arthur was proficient in English, German, Polish and Yiddish. He was bright, ambitious and more importantly, he knew how to hustle to achieve what he wanted. And what he wanted was to become the best news photographer in the world. And that he was able to accomplish. With bells on.

I was especially grateful for all the information included in this biography of the life and mores of NYC during the early to mid-twentieth century. Christopher Bonanos paints an interesting, vital picture of these times, and of Arthur Fellig's place in that world. This is a biography I can happily recommend to friends and family.

I received a free electronic copy of this biography from NETGALLEY, Christopher Bonanos, and Henry Holt and Co in exchange for an honest review. Thank you all for sharing your hard work with me.

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Henry Holt and Co.

Cflack says

I read this in conjunction with "Weegee Serial Photographer" the graphic memoir by Max De Radigues and Wauter Mannaert and they were fantastic companion pieces.

This fascinating biography is a extremely detailed telling of the life and work of one of the best known 20th century American photographer. Not only did it document practically year by year Weegee's evolution from a child photographing other children on a horse on the lower east side to darkroom technician to credited national photographer to artist, it also told the fascinating story of his relationship with Wilma Wilcox, his on and off girlfriend he met through the Photo League, a group of photographers who worked together on both social causes and creative education.

We see Weegee as a young immigrant breaking free from his family at a young age to go on his own through his climbing the ladder to become a "brand" he created for himself. We see his relationships with newspapers men, police and mobsters and his relentless pursuit of his notoriety.

Bonanos does an excellent job of not only recounting Weegee's life but also emphasizing his differentiators - what made his work different from a compositional and emotional point of view as well as his willingness to give up much of a personal life and creature comforts for his success.

Jason says

As a biography of Weegee's work, this book was fascinating, revealing the stories behind the photos, as well as interesting connections I didn't know (Kubrick), or had forgotten (Arbus). But the book jacket claims to provide a portrait of the man himself, and I found that portrait lacking. Whether it's the lack of detail about his relationship with his family throughout his life (his sister pops up for a sentence towards the end of the book, the only indication of a family relationship since the early chapters), or a lack of exploration of the, at

times, disturbing relationship he had to females (I'm thinking of the Helen Gee comment that hints at pedophilia, as the most glaringly unexplored), I was left feeling the book didn't successfully reveal the Arthur Fellig that lurked beneath Weegee.

Don Gorman says

(1 1/2). Sometimes it is a fine line between a one and two star book. This is one of those occasions. The writing in this book is fairly methodical, kind of a journal of events with some facts and situations embellished to make it more readable. The subject of the book, however, is very interesting. An early photojournalist sort who takes on a character of his own. "Weegee" is quite the guy and his struggle to survive in the start of his career makes for the most intriguing part (to me) of this book. His later exploits when he becomes more recognized and successful are fun, but the presentation feels very dry. I really would have liked to seen more examples of his work, there are not enough plates here. Not what I was looking for.

Adele S. says

My star rating's pretty uncertain on this one, so I'm thinking about changing it.

Biographies aren't usually my thing. I prefer my nonfiction in the form of essay collections or autobiographies because to me, they better connect with the material because they've experienced it firsthand.

But I couldn't pass up the idea of Weegee, the nighttime press photographer who took inspired photos of my favorite city.

His story was fascinating, wacky, and weird; it's an amazing look into NYC life from the 30s-60s. His photographs truly are special, especially under the circumstances in which they were taken.

I'm pretty sure Weegee would've made me SUPER uncomfortable if I met him in person- his sexism and objectification of women is a lot to unpack. But in other ways, he was ahead of his time in inclusivity. He's one heck of a complex person.

I wasn't a huge fan of Bonanos' writing style. He was far too big a fan of the comma and the parenthetical expression for me, and I almost felt like he was writing about Weegee from afar. I couldn't connect to Weegee the way I was continuously told I was supposed to. He apparently was rough, yet people were drawn to him. However the writing was too detached for me to feel much towards him at all- in fact, I only felt a small bit of sympathy for him towards the end of the book (his encounter with Andy Warhol made me wince. Watching him slow down was a little heart-wrenching as he got sick).

Overall, this was an incredibly interesting story of a very strange and very talented man, but I'm not sure how much I loved the way it was told.

A big thank you to Henry Holt for sending me a copy of this book to read!
