

*Relentless: The Stories Behind the Photographs*. By Neil Leifer with Diane K. Smith. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016.) Reviewed by Amy Helene Forss in *American Journalism: A Journal of Media History*, Volume 33, Number 4, Fall 2016, p. 484-486.

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Visualize an abundance of twentieth century iconic images. The kind that were *the* sports and celebrity photographs. Picture Muhammad Ali standing over an unconscious Sonny Liston. These were the ones baby boomers identified with, admired and in numerous circumstances, still adore years later. This collection of images begs a question: What were the back stories to these famous portraits? Well, wonder no more. In his seventeenth book, Neil Leifer the creator of these images, reveals photo shoot tales in his aptly named memoir, *Relentless: The Stories Behind the Photographs*.

Leifer's photograph-filled text consists of scintillating vignettes only he could tell. Only he knew what took place before pressing the shutter-release button. For those of us who think we know the contextual narrative, Leifer confirms it, embellishes it or enlightens us with a version no one thought existed. To be honest, he had me at Secretariat. I finally learned the truth behind Leifer's unbelievable shot of jockey Ron Turcotte looking directly at the photographer just as the mighty Secretariat swept the Triple Crown in 1973. Explanations such as his make this photojournalism text worth reading and re-reading.

He was a master at utilizing innovative techniques and carefully considering camera angles to produce unique representations. Similar to a Las Vegas billiard's player, Leifer assiduously studied the personalities of his subjects while scouting possible locations long before the designated event. For example, he met with Alabama football coach Bear Bryant before their actual appointment. He tells readers he often did this to make celebrities feel comfortable around him. Instead of shooting the legendary sports figure within a typical player/sidelines frame, Leifer walked us through how he orchestrated a double-exposure masterpiece of Bryant diagramming a play behind a see-through chalkboard. (293) Leifer, as was his custom, left little to chance and much to innovation. Which was why his work dominated the covers of *Sports Illustrated*, issues of *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *People*, *the Saturday Evening Post* and his calculated snapshots of Paul Newman, Burt Reynolds, Clint Eastwood and the White House's Swedish ivy plant with Ronald Reagan as a prop, remain works of art and creativity.

*Relentless* does double-duty as a valuable contribution to photography and journalism. His technical photography text demonstrates how he was well on his way to becoming the first photographer inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame, but Leifer's description of his *Time* year-long analysis of inmate life educates readers on how to produce a magazine expose and also fine art. He engages his audience with imagery of prisoners incarcerated in well-known penitentiaries by literally showing how he taped a camera to the ceiling of an Attica prison cell. Leifer's minute details behind his Charles Manson interview laid out a do-it-yourself guide for aspiring photojournalists. The photographer

considers his “Charles Manson, California Medical Facility, Vacaville, CA, 1982,” to be one of his best portraits. (261)

Leifer did indeed deliver photographs with stories surrounded by breezy anecdotal text but the book could have used secondary sources and a theme to enrich and tie its numerous chapters together. Perhaps the reason for this omission was at the bottom of the front cover. It noted the book was written with Diane K. Shah although nothing in the text identified or elaborated on the latter author’s role. Was the volume written by Leifer or was it meant to be more of a conversational story? This conjecture may also explain why half of the tales told were photograph unaccompanied. In the chapter entitled, “Munich, 1972 and Peggy Fleming, 1968,” a page and a half of Fleming’s too much information admission about her almost wardrobe mishap was without a picture. Maybe a gentlemanly gesture was the reason for the absence of the Olympic ice skater’s photograph. Leifer did supply a Munich photograph entitled “Police Officers in the Olympic Village, 1972” (163) but his scant sentences did little justice to the terrorist kidnapping and omitted the subsequent methodical murder of the Israeli team. Utilizing secondary sources, footnotes and a bibliography could have enriched the narrative.

*Relentless* delivers on providing the back stories to well-known beloved images. It fills that “how did he do it” story void by sharing the methods and means necessary to make these fortuitous photographs happen. As Leifer noted, the field of photography was “an intensely competitive, sharp-elbows business, marked by constant fighting—even with colleagues and close friends—for position, credentials, and display space.” (xiii) But, he tells readers, greatness can be captured when you create, design and take full advantage of an opportunity. Leifer’s glossy-paged digest’s value resides in its half a century documentation of visual history, which far outweighs its worth as a coffee table keepsake.

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