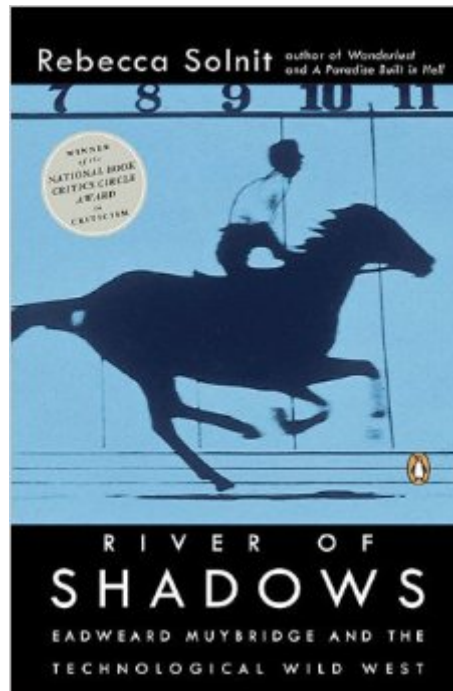


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River Of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge And The Technological Wild West



Synopsis

The world as we know it today began in California in the late 1800s, and Eadweard Muybridge had a lot to do with it. This striking assertion is at the heart of Rebecca Solnit's new book, which weaves together biography, history, and fascinating insights into art and technology to create a boldly original portrait of America on the threshold of modernity. The story of Muybridge—who in 1872 succeeded in capturing high-speed motion photographically—becomes a lens for a larger story about the acceleration and industrialization of everyday life. Solnit shows how the peculiar freedoms and opportunities of post-Civil War California led directly to the two industries—Hollywood and Silicon Valley—that have most powerfully defined contemporary society.

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Customer Reviews

Everyone knows about the inventions of such men as Edison and Marconi, the sorts of inventions that truly brought us to the modern age. It sounds like a stretch to claim that the man who definitively answered the question of whether a trotting horse ever completely leaves the ground also changed the world. However, Rebecca Solnit has written an original biography of the photographer Eadweard Muybridge, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (Viking) which centers on how Muybridge, by splitting motion into split-second bits, changed the nature of our perception of time and space in a way that brought us inevitably to Hollywood and to Silicon Valley. She writes, "Muybridge was a doorway, a pivot

between that old world and ours, and to follow him is to follow the choices that got us here." As biography, the book is inevitably thin. Muybridge kept no journals and there are few letters, and details about his remarkable life are hard to come by; the basics, of course, are here. Solnit says, "Most of what is known about Muybridge makes him seem a hollow conduit for his work, with only a few vain remarks to personalize the prodigious accomplishments." Rather than biography, as a series of essays on the importance of his work, the book is original and fun. Muybridge's life and work are inextricably bound with the brand-new state of California, but he was born in 1830 over a family shop in England, in Kingston-upon-Thames. He lit out for San Francisco, where he worked as a bookseller. He made a name for himself in photography, however, which was a relatively new and demanding art. He was among the first to photograph the wilderness of Yosemite, using huge plates for images that are still dramatic. Muybridge stepped into fame with a commission from Leland Stanford, one of the famous robber barons who had made his fortune on the railways. Stanford had a hobby of raising race horses and he wanted to do it all as scientifically as possible. Some horsemen maintained that trotting horses always had at least one foot on the ground, while Stanford maintained that the horse became airborne in each stride; neither side had any way to demonstrate its position, for although one could stare at trotting horses eternally, the motion was simply too fast to make out. There is a legend that Stanford had a big bet on the issue, but Stanford was not a betting man, only one who wanted to raise and race horses scientifically. Muybridge had already had a commission to photograph Stanford's house and properties, and was asked to consider the problem of the trotting horse. Muybridge was instrumental in technological breakthroughs to make the famous series of photos happen, involving film and shutter speed, as well as the development of a way to trigger a set of cameras at just the right time. Solving the technology was only a minor part of his contribution; he went on to run the photographs together so that they became a loop of action, the forebear of the movies. Muybridge's work was so startling that it was denounced and cartoon parodies were printed showing a horse's legs in "authentic" wildly impossible positions. His subsequent studies of other animals and humans in motion are still in print, still a vital resource for artists. Solnit has used the life of Muybridge to gather information on widely dispersed subjects that she ties into the biography with wonderful facility. Wyatt Earp, Mary Pickford, and Thomas Edison are all here. There are digressions about the invention of the time zones, the resettlement and slaughter of the Indians, Hewlett-Packard, and much more. Solnit's wide-ranging account makes it feasible that Muybridge was the father of the moving image, and that from his work descends the age of images in film, television, and internet.

Rebecca Solnit has created a provocative masterpiece! This is not a simple biography about one of the great innovators of the field of photography. It is a richly, intellectually layered work that explores the big ideas of time and our relationship to it; the fusion of politics, science and industry in the 19th century; and links today's Silicon West to what we call the Wild West of our past. She possesses exceptional writing skills. This is book well worth reading by those seeking inspiration to invent the future, or for those who wish insight into the concept of progress.

Like many people, I had seen Muybridge's motion studies before, but had never considered the man behind the pictures. Solnit presents a compelling portrait of a man who is at the same time probably certifiably nuts, a genius years ahead of his time, a lousy husband and father, and a murderer. As Solnit points out, his groundbreaking work was really the basis for motion pictures and much of other technology we take for granted today. I took this book with me on an overnight flight to Brazil and compulsively read it cover to cover while I should have been sleeping.

I wasn't especially interested in Muybridge, but this book is a good deal more than that. Though not stinting on detail, Solnit's writing and intellectual abilities provide a grasp of the transformations of time and space that occurred in the past century and a half; she addresses, and conquers, the challenges of making another age vivid and profound as has no book I've yet encountered. "She writes like an angel," one critic said, and it's quite true; through her supple and sensitive prose she reflects on Muybridge's life and times, examining them from every angle, and in so doing gives a clinic in how history of any kind may be most richly approached.

Certainly much more than a biography, this book on Muybridge is full of other subjects. Solnit angle on time is quite special, as it comes back again and again. We tend to forget how everything has thoroughly changed since the Victorian era. This book confronts our acquired attitudes and what we take for granted today. It is always a surprise and an experience to read on a subject and find much more on the way. This book is a mind expander.

Not the most scintillating writing I've ever read, but an eye-opening story of an artist (Muybridge) whose work helped shape our world. In fact, before reading this book, I took him entirely for granted and did not even consider him an "artist", just a photographer who took pictures of things in motion. He is a heck of a lot more than that, and his photographs are beautiful! The book also gave me (a foreigner who did not study the history of the formation of the west) a glimpse at the fascinating and

almost incredible history of the formation of San Francisco, and at how truly rapidly this country developed the roots of what it is today (for better and for worse). This should be required reading in history classes.

Rebecca Solnit is an amazing writer. She brings to the surface all the hidden currents of the Muybridge story in a narrative that is at once informative and moving. This book constantly surprised and delighted me with its deep insights and fascinating details. Not only is it well researched, but the results of the research are germane to the story and are all neatly brought together. It was a pleasure to discover that fine writing like this still exists. I can't wait to read her other books now that I have found her.

This book connects E. Muybridge to history from the beginnings of photography to present day cinema. In the process it provides a concise overview of American history and the American experience. I found this to be easy to read as it is well written and full of facts that I either had forgotten or never knew. For anyone interested in the history of photography this is a 'must read'.

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