

Books

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A Day in the Life of America

by Rick Smolan and David Cohen

Collins Publishers, 272 pages, \$39.95

A brief survey of major bookstores in the Riverside area reveals that most stores are sold out. It's at the top of the nonfiction lists, second only to Bill Cosby's "Fatherhood." It's "A Day in the Life of America," a slice-of-time portrait by 200 of the world's best known photojournalists, and it's a hit in a way few other books of photographs have ever been.

Visual books are rarely best sellers, and an edition of over 5,000 copies of a book of photographs is considered large. There have, though, been exceptions — two, in fact, in the last three decades.

The best selling photography book of all time was published in 1955, to accompany the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "The Family of Man." The show was billed as "the greatest photographic exhibition of all time," and included 503 pictures ar-

ranged by curator Edward Steichen into a relentlessly sentimental sequence of dancing children, gnarled grandparents, heroic poor folk and charming aborigines. Still in print, the book version of "Family of Man" is an apt — if embarrassing — encapsulation of America's world view in the 1950s.

The second most popular photography book ever is called, simply, "Diane Arbus." It was published in 1972. Where "Family of Man" sports a colorful cover and a picture of a smiling Peruvian flute player, the Arbus book opens with a darkly printed photograph, well-described by its title: "Russian midget friends in a living room on 100th Street, N.Y.C. 1963." The Arbus book is peopled with transvestites, freaks, cripples and crying babies; it ends with seven full-page pictures of, apparently, retarded adults in Hallo-

ween garb, shot from a low vantage point against blank or brooding skies. In case we didn't get the message of the photographs, Diane Arbus sent one last communication to the world of the 1960s by committing suicide on July 26, 1971.

Most of us have a tendency to treat photographs as if they were some proof of truth; as if, by some magic, the mere act of looking could be the same as knowing. The editors of "A Day in the Life of America" want us to believe that. We are told that their project was conceived as "an honest look at America in the 1980s, not just another book of pretty picture postcards." The book's major essay, by Robert Sam Anson, even tells us what to think: "'Yes,' you find yourself murmuring, 'this is what America is.'"

But just as every glance is from a specific point of view, so

each of these books takes a position. And the acceptance of these three books by broad general publics says a lot about the values and ideas we have shared at certain times in our national history.

In the case of "A Day in the Life of America," point of view is a club wielded against all unbelievers. The first picture in the book is dawn, represented by a starburst-filtered sun, rising over a sea of clouds and the logos of the project's six main corporate sponsors. The front cover is a picture of a cowboy; the back cover features dancing teenagers at a prom.

In a gross inversion of the American doctrine of equality, one double-page spread of group portraits includes, along with the square dance club and the church group and the Bavarian band, the beaming faces of a Ku Klux Klan mob, formally posed in a field at

dusk. Elsewhere, the book's layout and choices emphasize the same homogenized message of cheer and pride.

There are, of course, sumptuously colorful images throughout this book, like Aaron Chang's shot of military cadets lined up like so many pawns on a huge, red and white chessboard. There are also touching moments, such as that captured by Laotian photographer Seny Norasingh as a veteran lifts his son to kiss the name of his grandfather at the Vietnam War Memorial. There are even the occasional tough pictures: one of a chain gang sitting in a driving rainstorm while guards chase an escapee, and a mini-essay by Stormi Greener on dioxin contamination, for example.

Still, our understanding of the meaning of these individual pictures is shaped by the book's context and sequence — elements

controlled, not by the photographers, but by 18 picture editors and a project director who began the whole thing assuming that "for the first time in many years there seems to be a real pride in being American." ("You can see it printed on T-shirts.")

There is no truth here, nor could there be. For, like its best-selling predecessors of 1955 and 1972 — indeed, like all reports of all events — the book is simply an interpretation.

Perhaps that is the reason so many of us are snapping up this book for Christmas gifts or for our own coffee tables. The book shows us little we had not already seen, and it teaches us even less. Providing new insights, after all, was not its intention. "A Day in the Life of America" is, instead, an affirmation of the way we would view our world, and a fitting emblem of the 1980s.



Lead photograph from 'A Day in the Life of America'