



## The Americans

*Robert Frank, Jack Kerouac (Introduction)*

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**The Americans** Robert Frank , Jack Kerouac (Introduction)

Previously published in 1959, Frank's most famous and influential photography book contained a series of deceptively simple photos that he took on a trip through America in 1955 and 1956. These pictures of everyday people still speak to us today, 40 years and several generations later.

## The Americans Details

Date : Published February 1st 1998 by Scalo Publishers (first published 1958)

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## From Reader Review The Americans for online ebook

### Carolina de Goes says

Frank was Swiss and got a Guggenheim grant to go on a huge roadtrip and carry this out. The American people were all looking forward to the release of the book, they thought it'd be pretty-pretty and it'd suck up to them, but no! Out it came and people were offended by it. They were offended because the eye of the outsider saw things which the Americans (not the book, the people) did not want shown. Yes, 1950's hypocrisy in its most classic form.

Well, the world has become quite different and it seems the Americans (the people) now quite appreciate the book. Not surprising, for the pictures are brilliant, both in terms of technicality, look and concept. Superb.

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### Cori says

**What intrigued me:** I read an article in Time (I think? I was at a doctor's office and my Google-fu fails me) about elderly artists who are still active in the art community. Robert Frank was on the list. They referenced The Americans in the article and I wanted to take a look.

**What I liked:** There were some truly striking pictures, but this is by far my favorite:

**What I didn't like:** I didn't connect with all of the photographs, but that is of little consequence.

**Favorite quote:** "What a poem this is..."

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### Robert says

Excellent photographs by Frank; shitty, pompous, self-indulgent introduction by Kerouac.

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### Thomas Thorstensson says

Robert Frank's first mission is to tell the story of the Americans, and he does so by taking his photography into just about every environment and social group he can find. He is everywhere, and like Bresson, his focus is not always on the technically perfect shot, but on the story, the feeling, the emotion. The Americans come together, come apart, as we turn these pages. The introduction by Jack Kerouac echoes this photographic style, as he 'em dashes' out his many thoughts and impressions of America—and ends with saying

"That little ole lonely elevator girl looking up sighing in an elevator full of blurred demons, what's her name & address?"

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### **J. says**

If Helen's face launched a thousand ships, and if the Velvet Underground record launched a million garage bands, certainly Robert Frank's dense monograph is the photographic equivalent.

Beautifully elegant images in a harsh, electrifying thematic vein.  
Read through it, see into it, read it through, and try *not to weep*.

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### **Kimmo Sinivuori says**

"...,coast of blue Pacific starry night - nobone half-banana moons sloping in the tangled night sky, the torments of great formations in mist, the huddled invisible insect in the car racing onward, illuminate..." writes Jack Kerouac in the introduction to this classic book of photographs by Robert Frank. This would be a five star book for that Kerouac introduction only but combined with Frank's pictures it is priceless.

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### **Khaoula says**

It left me with a weird image of America and Americans!

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### **Michael says**

First published in 1959, *The Americans* captures the nation at its plainest moments. Following Walker Evans, the FSA photographer who documented the Great Depression's effects upon small town life, Robert Frank took interest in the painfully ordinary: his collection consists of several black-and-white photographs of mundane scenes, bleak landscapes, and harsh portraits. Frank's strenuous emphasis upon the simple makes each of his photos appear a bit lackluster when viewed individually, while it also lends his work as a whole an electrifying sense of severity and directness. Viewed in sequence, Frank's barren photos express a great deal more than they at first seem capable of doing.

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### **Joe Totterdell says**

“One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon’s youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: ‘I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.’ Sometimes I would mention this amazement, but since no one seemed to share it, nor even to understand it (life consists of these little touches of solitude), I forgot about it.”—Roland Barthes, from *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*

“Anybody doesn’t like these pitchers don’t like potry, see? Anybody don’t like potry go home see Television shots of big hatted cowboys being tolerated by kind horses.

Robert Frank, Swiss, unobtrusive, nice, with that little camera that he raises and snaps with one hand he sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film, taking rank among the tragic poets of the world.

To Robert Frank I now give this message: You got eyes.

And I say: That little ole lonely elevator girl looking up sighing in an elevator full of blurred demons, what's her name & address?"—Jack Kerouac, from his introduction to Robert Frank's *The Americans*

When the term “period piece” is mentioned, certain works come to mind: John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and even Kerouac's own masterwork *On the Road*. Robert Frank's *The Americans*, while very unlike the aforementioned works, is a period piece in its own right. During the time of Eisenhower, an industrial time when the nascent highway system was expanding and the car was becoming affordable for the common person, people in America were gradually gaining a greater amount of mobility, and Frank travelled around the mainland United States in an old used car on a Guggenheim Fellowship snapping photographs of the country. Frank's photographs tell the tale of a time in the United States now long gone, and this tale includes people from all walks of life; behind every scene is a story, behind every face is a mystery, and behind every photograph is a unique glimpse of history.

I found all of the photographs in this book to be very captivating in their own idiosyncratic ways, but to attempt to describe Frank's photographs would do them (and Frank) a disservice; instead, I'd prefer to point the readers of this review to the photographs in particular that caught my eye, in the order of their appearance in *The Americans*, with my favorite photographs being in bold text.

My absolute favorite photograph in the entire book, you ask? I'll have to get back to you on that one.

“Political rally – Chicago”

**“Funeral – St. Helena, South Carolina” [#1]**

“Rodeo – Detroit”

**“Navy Recruiting Station, Post Office – Butte, Montana”**

“Movie premiere – Hollywood”

“Motorama – Los Angeles”

“New York City”

**“Charleston, South Carolina”**

“Ranch market — Hollywood”

“Butte, Montana”

“Yom Kippur — East River, New York City”

**“Trolley — New Orleans”**

**“Rooming house — Bunker Hill, Los Angeles”**

“Cafe — Beaufort, South Carolina”

**“U.S. 30 between Ogallala and North Platte, Nebraska”**

“U.S. 91, leaving Blackfoot, Idaho”

“Covered car — Long Beach, California”

**“Car accident — U.S. 66, between Winslow and Flagstaff, Arizona”**

**“U.S. 285, New Mexico”**

“Barber shop through screen door — McClellanville, South Carolina”

“Backyard — Venice West, California”

“Newburgh, New York”

“Luncheonette — Butte, Montana”

“Bar — New York City”

“Elevator — Miami Beach” (this is the photograph to which Kerouac was referring in the excerpt of his introduction to *The Americans* included above)

“Restaurant — U.S. 1 leaving Columbia, South Carolina”

“Mississippi River, Baton Rouge, Louisiana”

“St. Francis, gas station, and City Hall — Los Angeles”

**“Crosses at scene of highway accident — U.S. 91, Idaho”**

“Assembly line — Detroit”

**“Salt Lake City, Utah”**

“Beaufort, South Carolina”

“Chinese cemetery — San Francisco”

“Political rally — Chicago” [#2]

**“Television studio — Burbank, California”**

“Los Angeles”

“Bank — Houston, Texas”

“Department store — Lincoln, Nebraska”

“Cafeteria — San Francisco”

**“San Francisco”**

“Public park — Cleveland, Ohio”

“Belle Isle — Detroit” [#2]

“Chicago”

“Public park — Ann Arbor, Michigan”

“City Hall — Reno, Nevada”

“Indianapolis”

**“U.S. 90, en route to Del Rio, Texas”**

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### **Ahmed Mohamed says**

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### **Al says**

A stunning book that changed my views about what Photography can be. Leave it to a European to come to America in the 1950s and in 83 pictures perfectly expose our hypocrisy while respecting and celebrating us as individuals.

Also, for a book without words, it has a killer introduction by Jack Kerouac.

Robert Frank also filmed the documentary *C\*cksucker Blues*, traveling with the Rolling Stones on their 1972 tour for "Exile on Main St." -- for which he also did the cover. Equal parts debauchery and loneliness, Mick Jagger reportedly said "It's a f\*cking good film, Robert, but if it shows in America we'll never be allowed in the country again." A subsequent legal battle ensued over its release, and it can now be shown in very limited release: 5 times per year, and only with Frank present. Get thee to eBay...

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## **Robin Friedman says**

### **Looking In**

In 1955 - 1956, Robert Frank (b. 1924), an American photographer born in Switzerland, restlessly crossed the United States several times by car to photograph people and places as he found them. He gradually culled through thousands of photographs to select 83 images for his book, "The Americans" published initially in Paris in 1958 and in the United States in 1959 by Grove Press. In its initial publication, "The Americans" sold only 600 copies and received negative reviews. Its stature has grown with time. The book is now an American icon.

The United States publication of "The Americans" included an introduction by Frank's friend, Jack Kerouac, which had earlier been rejected by the French publisher. Frank did well in asking Kerouac to write the introduction. Years earlier, Kerouac had made a series of mad journeys across the United States resulting in his famous novel, "On the Road." Kerouac's book shows more of a romantic spirit than the unsentimental photographs taken by his friend. Kerouac's introduction captures the spirit of Frank's photographs and of Frank's portrayal of America and offers comments on several individual photos. It deserves its place as part of Frank's masterwork.

In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the book, the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. presented a major exhibition of Frank's work, titled "Looking In" which included the 83 photographs of "The Americans" presented in the order of Frank's book, together with other photographs that Frank took, including many photographs he took while he crossed America that did not make their way into the book. I was fortunate to visit the exhibition yesterday to see the photographs first hand. The National Gallery of Art has also published an encyclopedic version of Frank's book, "Looking In" which is large and expensive and includes much material in addition to Frank's now iconic collection of 83 photographs. My review here is of Frank's initial collection with Kerouac's introduction. The book is much less expensive than the reissue, is easier to handle, and provides the original version of Frank's masterpiece.

Frank's pictures do indeed draw the viewer into the scenes he depicts. The photographs include men and women, whites and blacks, rich and poor. The photographs show a certain loneliness, isolation, and unhappiness, regardless of social class. Thus, there are photographs of a lovely young woman operating an elevator, and of a hard-faced young woman behind a restaurant counter staring fixedly at the viewer. There is a photograph of a wealthy couple in Miami, of lavishly dressed gamblers at a Nevada casino, and of the elegant guests at a New York City cocktail party, drinks in hand, to benefit a school of art. Frank shows a segregated bus in New Orleans, and a scene of a stoic African American nurse holding a white baby in South Carolina. He photographs places, as well, a bar in Detroit, a collection of rubbish in the back yard of a Los Angeles home, that reminded me of works by Charles Bukowski, and the starkness of a men's bathroom and shoeshine stand - which Kerouac described as a place where the ladies don't go.

The photographs suggest the fascination of Americans with their cars - one of the best works in the collection is the picture of the dividing strip of an open road at moonlight. They also show the fascination of many Americans with the products of Hollywood - with starlets, cowboys, and television - together with the inauthenticity and emptiness of these concerns. Politicians, such as the photograph of the "city fathers" of Hoboken, New Jersey early in the collection, and of wheeling-dealing, cigar-smoking delegates at the Democratic Party's Presidential convention in 1956 (all men) come across as arrogant, crude, and ignorant. Many of the photographs are draped with flags, or other symbols, and many include comments on American religion, from an African American preacher who traveled up and down the Mississippi River for years to

bring people to God, to the crosses, churches, and calls to repentance that dot the American landscape, to orthodox American Jews at the banks of the East River on Yom Kippur casting their sins into the water.

For all the melancholy, loneliness, and shallowness they convey, Frank's photographs show an understanding of the United States and a love of its people and places. His photographs of young people capture the alienation that has become commonplace since the 1950s, but also the search for love and meaning. His photographs capture the breadth of the United States, the difficulties of race relations, and the feelings of desolation, conformity, and tension, as people strive for financial security.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to see Frank's photographs themselves at the National Gallery. This book of Frank's 83 photographs, together with Kerouac's words, offers the reader the opportunity to share, return to, and reflect upon Frank's photographic vision.

Robin Friedman

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### **Gary says**

To quote Kerouac from his intro, "To Robert Frank I now give this message: You got eyes." These are wonderful timeless images. A classic work to be savored.

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### **Tim Scott says**

The images in this book either didn't move me or left me so in love with the composition and infected story within its frame. As a whole, each image bleeds spontaneity and common appreciation of the details of living.

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### **Carmen says**

This is one of my favorite pics from Robert Frank's collection of photos in his classic "The Americans." It's a beautiful chronicle of America in 1955-1956. It's obvious that Frank liked capturing faces, expressions, moods. The introduction was written by Jack Kerouac, where he romanticizes about the American road, as seen through Frank's lens. There are so many great pics, "Drug store-Detroit" being another of my favorites. The one above is titled, "Barber shop through screen door - McClellanville, South Carolina." I love pictures that have a lot of layers, and here you can see the photographer, what is behind him, and what is in front of him. I really like photos with refraction and reflections of images, without the use of mirrors. Here's another one I like, with the little baby, the towering jukebox, the empty room, and light streaming in from the windows...titled "Café in Beaufort, South Carolina":

A really beautiful collection, a book you can peruse for hours...and it makes a wonderful gift, thanks P! :)

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