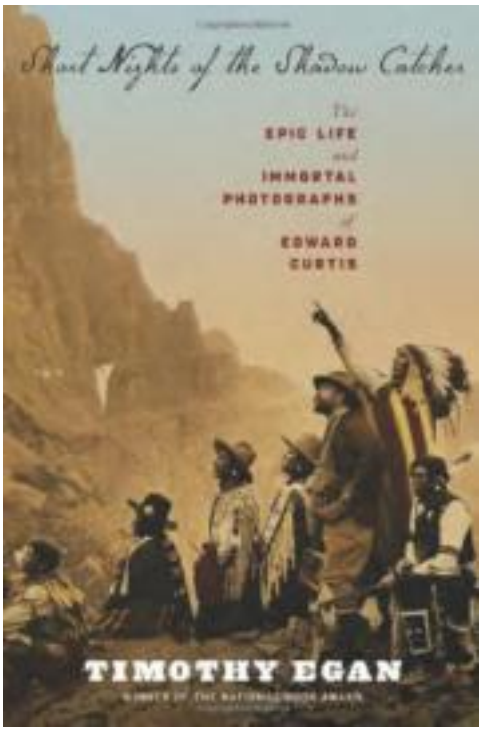
2016 Book Selection for Lake Oswego Reads



Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher

by Timothy Egan

NOTE: Can't wait to read the book? ACE Hardware in Lake Oswego has *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher* on sale for $15.95. ACE is located at 55 S State St.

BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Egan chooses to use the word "epic" in his subtitle. What does epic mean—and in what way does it apply to the life of Edward Curtis?

2. What do you think of Curtis? What kind of man was he—as a husband, father, artist, advocate, and public figure? Do you think of him as delusional...driven...or visionary?

3. Why did Curtis consider George Custer of the Little Big Horn battle a coward?

4. How does Egan present the West of Curtis's time and before? Is the author's portrait of the past realistic...or idealistic? In what way has the historical West vanished?

5. Do Curtis's photographs, sometimes doctored, reflect an authentic Native American culture? What about the alarm clock he removed from one of his photos, for instance? Or was Curtis striving for something mythic rather than authentic?

6. What made Curtis a controversial figure in his day?

7. How would you describe the Anglo/European Americans attitude toward the Native Americans during Curtis's era? How have those attitudes changed...and what changed them?

8. Egan writes of Curtis:

And just what made a dropout from a one-room schoolhouse think he could get the nation's top ethnologists to back his project? Balls. Those who didn't try for the highest peak were doomed to the foothills.

Some critics contend that Egan is too close to his subject and that his book "reads less like a thoughtful biography than a sentimental adventure story for boys." Do you agree or disagree with that statement by New York Times reviewer, Deborah Soloman (see above)?

9. What have you learned about Edward Curtis and/or Native American history after reading *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher*? What did you find most surprising—or struck you as particularly interesting—in this book?

Please be aware that the discussion guide below may contain spoilers!

10. Edward Curtis used a painstaking process to create his photographs, bringing heavy glass negatives to even the roughest terrain and hand coloring many of his prints. What do his techniques say about his approach to humanity and to art? What would he think of our digital cameras and desire to instantly share snapshots with the world?

11. How did *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher* change your understanding of Native American history? Did you have a particularly compelling moment, as J. P. Morgan did upon seeing Mosa— Mohave, in which you saw America's past in a different way?

12. Curtis made a fortune from his studio, but his commitment to the North American Indian project made him destitute. What intangible rewards was he gaining from the project? Is there a cause that you would be willing to support full-time without a salary?

13. Photographs were only one aspect of Curtis's anthropology; it was just as important to him to make a written record of tribal rituals and language with impeccable accuracy. Other than his technical skills, what traits made Curtis the ideal person to create such a visionary record of America's first peoples? What advantages did he have over his more educated colleagues?

14. How did you react to the way Seattle's white residents treated Angeline, by turns vilifying and revering her? How did political leaders like Teddy Roosevelt manage to embrace progressive causes, such as land conservation and breaking up corporate monopolies, while remaining lukewarm about the plight of Native Americans? Where did your ancestors stand on the issue?

15. The book captures the widely varied landscapes Curtis photographed on his expeditions, from the mesas of the Southwest to the tundra of Alaska. How were the Indians he encountered an extension of their homelands? What did they teach him about the spirit of the natural world?

16. Discuss the disputed events at Little Bighorn and the account provided by Curtis's guides. How did Curtis see his role as a historian? What truths was he able to document with his cameras?

17. What inspired men like John Muir and Edmond Meany to venture to mountaintops? What was the importance of their work, especially as cities and railroads began to encroach on the wilderness of the Northwest? How did their motivation compare to their Indian guides'?

18. How did you feel about Clara Curtis throughout the book? Would you have been able to remain supportive of Edward's project? Why do you suppose the couple's children were more sympathetic toward Edward?

19. Discuss the lives of Alexander Upshaw and Belle da Costa Greene, two central figures in Curtis's life who assimilated to white America. What was expected of them in order to be successful in the "white world"? How was their experience different from Curtis's as he tried to gain acceptance among the tribes he photographed?

20. In the closing passage of the chapter "Twilight," Egan writes, "...not a single person in those books was a stranger to him. "What was at the root of Curtis's connection to the Indians? What drove him to feel such empathy?

21. Discuss the financial power brokers of the time period. What are the implications of J. P. Morgan's ability to single-handedly prevent an economic panic and the fact that there wasn't yet an income tax in America? How was Curtis's work affected by his heavy reliance on private investors? Could his work have been different if he undertook it today, when he might qualify for grants from the government or nonprofits? Would it still have made him destitute, or is celebrity a guarantee of wealth today?

22. How does *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher* enrich the history you discovered in Timothy Egan's previous books? What makes his perspective on the human experience unique?

Tim Egan on Edward S. Curtis, 'Seattle's Michelangelo'

by Robin Lindley

Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher is the product of Egan's extensive archival research as well as arduous travel to many of the locations and tribes studied by Curtis. The book has won praise for its compelling narrative, graceful prose, originality, and humanizing of Curtis and the Native people he photographed and admired. Among other awards, the bestselling biography won the Carnegie Medal for the Best Nonfiction Book of 2012, and also was recognized with starred reviews from Booklist, Kirkus and Publisher's Weekly.

Egan worked for 18 years as a writer for The New York Times, first as the Pacific Northwest correspondent and then as a national enterprise reporter. He continues to write a lively opinion column for the Times. His other books include the National Book Award winning history of the people who lived through the Dust Bowl, *The Worst Hard Time*, as well as *The Big Burn*, *The Good Rain*, *Breaking Blue*, and *Lasso the Wind*. Mr. Egan also won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001 as part of a team of reporters who wrote the series How Race Is Lived in America. He lives with his family in Seattle.

For this recent interview, Egan looked back and answered a series of questions by email on the life and times of Edward Curtis.

How did you come to write your sweeping biography?
Did it grow our of your previous books on history of the West?

I'd always heard something of Curtis. I think anyone who grows up in the Northwest has seen one of his pictures. They are, in a way, cultural background — just sort of there. But then I started to look into his life story and realized what a masterpiece his life and his work were.

You've described Curtis as Seattle's forgotten Michelangelo. For readers unfamiliar with him, what are a few things you'd like them to know about Curtis?

For starters, the greatest photographic achievement in American history — more than 40,000 pictures, taken largely from cumbersome glass-plate negatives, of native people. The only thing I can compare it to his Mathew Brady's Civil War pictures, and Brady didn't take a lot of his photographs.

Second, the anthropological achievement: documenting tribal stories, creation myths, dietary habits, etc. [The knowledge is] still used to today. Third, he was the first person to figure out what really happened at the Battle of Little Bighorn, with Custer. Fourth, the technical breakthroughs, from his use of colored lantern slides to his groundbreaking film (*In the Land of Head-Hunters* — colorized in parts, using all native cast, on location).

Finally, perhaps most important, the artistry: capturing faces, traits, the human element of people who've been stereotyped.

It's incredible that Curtis had little formal education but became one of America's most prominent artists and anthropologists. How did he decide on a life in photography?

Like all obsessives, he got deep into it and could never get out. It started as a bit of a lark, then grew into The Cause, The Lifework. He was up against time, U.S. Government, cultural elites on the East Coast who looked down on him. But the photo world understood, as did the American Indians, that he was doing something special.

What was the role of Chief Seattle's daughter Princess Angeline in inspiring his project to document the Indian tribes of North America?

She was this vanishing, spectral presence: the "Last Indian" so-called. Curtis was interested in the authentic (mountains, rivers, native people) that was being erased to create this big city. Seattle, by the way, is the biggest city in the world named for a Native American, but for a while they made it a crime for Indians to live within the city limits. (One of the names under consideration for a new King County water taxi is the Princess Angeline; the decision is expected later this month.)

Over the years, Curtis documented the lives of Indians around the continent in the wake of genocide and flagrant efforts to bury their cultures. How did this Curtis gain the trust of members of 80 different tribes?

He took his time. He got to know them, and them him. He was patient. He would come back, time and again, year after year, before taking a photograph.

How did Curtis come to know luminaries such as President Theodore Roosevelt who became his friend and supporter, and the rapacious financier J.P. Morgan who became his patron?

He was charming, and people found him dashing, adventurous, sort of rakish. Roosevelt was impressed at the scope of his work and said the picture that Curtis took of him was the best one anyone ever took. He used it in his autobiography, and a print of it hangs in the Rainier Club. Getting in to see Morgan, and get his financial backing, was just sheer balls. Curtis loved a dare.

Curtis took extreme risks to document Native American life. Are there one or two stories of his daring and perseverance that particularly impressed you?

Floating down the wild, undammed Columbia River - that was a suicide trip, and nearly cost him his life. His car nearly fell over a cliff in Northern California. His horse threw him near the Grand Canyon. It's amazing he lived to be an old man in his 80s.

Curtis provided evidence that disproved mistaken notions about Indian life held by academics. What are some notable misconceptions that Curtis exposed? Didn't he interview Indian survivors of Custer's Last Stand who shed new light on Custer's leadership?

He was the first person, I believe, to completely figure out the Custer story. But he pulled his punches, and put his report under lock, because [Roosevelt] warned him about consequences (the ever-watchful Mrs. Custer). But he nailed the story. His version was the correct version.

Curtis paid special attention to the Indians of the Northwest and photographed their lives and rituals. What particularly impressed you about his study of the Native Americans of the Northwest?

He loved the way they interacted with the sea. Curtis said early on that "nature must tell the story," and in the Northwest Indians he saw that, albeit at a time when it was being marginalized.

Despite his accomplishments, Curtis had a troubled personal life that you describe vividly. You mention that Seattle's exclusive Rainier Club provided a home for Curtis. How did the Rainier Club become a part of his life?

His wife kicked him out. The Club took him in. At first, a distinguished guest, then he paid for his rent at the Club with his masterpieces. As a result, Rainier Club is by default one of the great Curtis galleries in the world.

What did people in Seattle think of Curtis? Were people here aware of the significance of his project on the tribes of North America?

He was a celebrity, probably the best known Seattleite for 30 years, but the people in Seattle didn't really get what he was up to, with the exception of his good friend [professor of history] Edmond S. Meany out at the University of Washington.

Robin Lindley (robinlindley@gmail.com) is a Seattle writer and attorney, and features editor for the History News Network. His interviews with scholars, writers and artists have appeared in HNN, Crosscut, Writer's Chronicle, Real Change, The Inlander, Truthout, Daily Kos, Common Dreams, and other publications. He is a former chair of the World Peace through Law Section of the Washington State Bar Association.

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