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Backwoods Genius (Kindle Single)



Synopsis

Like countless other small town portrait photographers across America, Mike Disfarmer lived and died anonymously, in a tiny, remote village in the shadow of the Ozarks. After his death, the contents of his studio, including thousands of glass negatives, were sold off for five dollars. For years the fragile negatives sat forgotten and deteriorating in cardboard boxes in an open carport. How did it happen, then, that the most implausible of events took place? That Disfarmer's haunting portraits were retrieved from oblivion, that today they sell for upwards of \$12,000 each at posh New York art galleries; his photographs proclaimed works of art by prestigious critics and journals and exhibited around the world? The story of Disfarmer's rise to fame is a colorful, improbable, and ultimately fascinating one that involves an unlikely assortment of individuals. Would any of this have happened if a young New York photographer hadn't been so in love with a pretty model that he was willing to give up his career for her; if a preacher's son from Arkansas hadn't spent 30 years in the Army Corps of Engineers mapping the U.S. from an airplane; if a magazine editor hadn't felt a strange and powerful connection to the work? The cast of characters includes these, plus a restless and wealthy young Chicago aristocrat and even a grandson of FDR. It's a compelling story which reveals how these diverse people were part of a chain of events whose far-reaching consequences none of them could have foreseen, least of all the strange and reclusive genius of Heber Springs. Until now, the whole story has not been told.

Book Information

File Size: 193 KB

Print Length: 28 pages

Publication Date: September 8, 2012

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00986ZD7W

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Not Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #64,920 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #2 in Kindle

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Customer Reviews

Well, this was my first Kindle Single. Guess I should've researched the purpose of Singles first but I jumped the gun because this one sounded so interesting. In the end, it left me a little frustrated because I discovered... ta-da! A Kindle Single is SHORT! This was basically a medium to long-ish sized magazine article. It outlines how cool the discovery of Disfarmer's work was, what a gem it was, how unusual and mysterious he seemed and then how hard it was to research him and find a publisher or supporting information. Just when it started to really roll (they began to interview some of the subjects), up popped "THE END." What?! Is a Single just an ad for a larger book? This Single definitely left me with more questions than answers. What else did they find out for the larger, coffee table book?? How did they decide to describe the times that formed such hardship for the subjects? How about a few more pictures or at least one photo of Disfarmer himself? Update 12/14/12: I located the full length Disfarmer book at the library. I got all of my answers there! If you want to know the story of how this book got published, despite the obstacles in its way, then this single is for you. If you want to see the photos and read more about Disfarmer, and you don't particularly care about the publishing aspect of it, then definitely check out the source material. Here's the link: A Disfarmer: The Heber Springs portraits, 1939-1946

Author Julia Scully has written a fascinating account of how an obscure small-town portrait photographer's work came to light after many years of sitting in boxes in an exposed carport. The town was Heber Springs, Arkansas, and the photographer was Mike Disfarmer (although he had changed his birth name of Meyer). For 50¢, a family got three postcard-sized prints from Disfarmer, a recluse who lived in quarters behind his studio and seldom mixed socially. Fifty cents was a lot of money to dirt farmers who were so poor that "when the Depression came, they hardly noticed." Through pure chance, his portraits eventually came to light years after his death in 1959. The author traces the path from the discovery of Disfarmer's negatives through their publication and exhibition. Today, exhibition-quality prints fetch prices upwards of \$25,000. It makes you wonder how many more boxes of glass and film negatives are collecting dust in attics and basements around the country, and even worse, how many have been destroyed, with the loss of so many memories. At least the remarkable work of Mike Disfarmer has been preserved and his story

documented. The Kindle Single includes four of Disfarmer's photos as a sampling of his work. I found other photos online. The story was reminiscent of another top-notch Kindle Single, "The Story of a Photograph: Walker Evans, Ellie Mae Burroughs, and the Great Depression."

A photographic record of poor families lives in small Ozark communities in 1930's and 40's, by an eccentric bachelor photographer who captured on old glass plates the significant events in their lives. Fortuitously, over a decade or two, these photos survived without any knowledge of their value until accidentally discovered by a new couple in town who saw the unique quality of this photographer's work.

When a photographer succeeds in revealing, with penetrating insight, subjects with an incredibly moving, raw story in such a way that it resonates deeply with a wide audience, is it the photographer we should honor or the subjects? The author is from the photography-is-art school of thought, but he has an epiphany as he was unable to uncover nearly anything about the photographer who took these moving photos. Perhaps it's really the stories of the subjects that matter most? A great read, whether you are interested in photography or not.

Interesting, I'm glad they got their book published. I found the guy with the pursed lips on Google. Nice history.. in that it's nice to see photos of olden times...

Being a longtime hobbyist photographer, this book is very well written of an obscure photographer. I had heard of Disfarmer but did not know much about him. This just made it real.

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