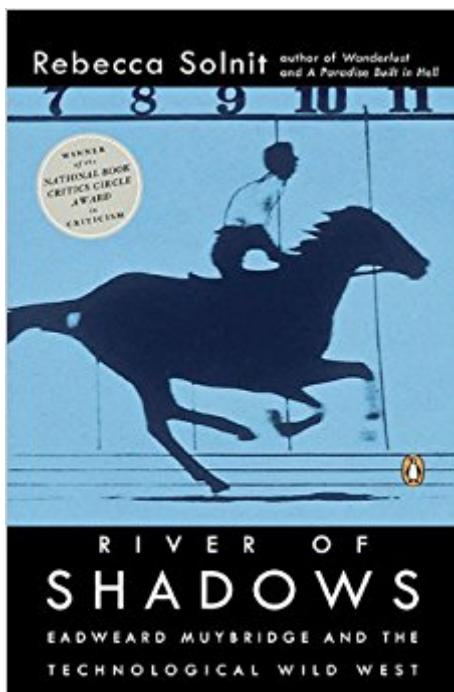


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# River Of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge And The Technological Wild West



## 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

In the 1870s, at a racetrack built by railroad baron Leland Stanford, Eadweard Muybridge invented high-speed photography. With his camera, he cut time into fractions of a second and laid it out in slices. Never before had human eyes seen a trotting horse distinctly, and the photographs astounded horsemen and artists, especially when Muybridge set the film in motion and the horse reeled fluidly across the screen. Today it is difficult to understand the pictures' impact, but 2001 NBCC finalist Solnit (As Eve Said to the Serpent) vividly recreates the wonder that greeted those primitive movies. Although she points her lens at Muybridge, her true subject is the perceptual revolution of the 19th century when the railroad, the telegraph and the camera transformed the

experience of space and time. English-born Muybridge launched his career in 1867 with scenes of Yosemite and San Francisco. He soon began the experiments with "instantaneous" photography that led to the famous motion studies. Except for its most dramatic moments—the murder of his wife's lover, a suit against Stanford—the photographer's life remains obscure. Insistent on writing a biography nonetheless, Solnit pads the book with an account of workers' strikes, an aside on Victorian geology and other irrelevant details. Left to speculate about Muybridge's inspirations, she attributes much to a head injury resulting from a stagecoach accident. Her claims about Stanford and Muybridge as the progenitors of Silicon Valley and Hollywood are equally unsubstantiated. If the book fails as biography, however, it succeeds as a critical essay on Muybridge's art and a reflection on the meaning of space and time. B&w photos. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

\*Starred Review\* Cultural historian Solnit, an original and penetrating thinker with a gift for inventive metaphors and syntactical grace whose previous books include *Wanderlust* (2000), brings her fascination with the American West, photography, and technology's impact on the environment and culture to the story of the man who made motion pictures possible, photographer Eadweard Muybridge. An Englishman turned California bookseller, superb landscape photographer, inventor, murderer (he killed his wife's lover), and pioneer in stop-action photography and the study of animals, including humans, in motion, Muybridge is fascinating and significant, as is his turbulent milieu. Solnit recounts Muybridge's strange life and immensely influential work within the context of the tragic war against Native Americans, and ties his achievements to the world-changing repercussions of photography and the railroads in particular, and industrialization in general. Her exhilarating argument leads her to declare that California, home of Hollywood and Silicon Valley, is the true capital of modernism, and to claim that we haven't even begun to come to terms with its legacy: our estrangement from nature and utter immersion in the mesmerizing "river of shadows," the endless stream of images generated via film, video, and computer. Masterly and creative, Solnit's far-roaming synthesis is as unsettling as it is compelling. Donna SeamanCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I wish all biographies were more like this, although this book is not strictly a biography. What I mean is that the focus is on the achievements and significance of the remarkable central character, Eadweard Muybridge. It was Muybridge's photographic work that led to the development of modern

cinema, which Slonit recognizes as "splitting the second" and therefore as significant as splitting the atom. In the hands of a less skill author, a central character as eccentric as Muybridge could easily have overtaken the narrative. I mean he did kill a guy in a jealous rage. But the murder, the insanity defense and the legally impossible jury verdict are all contained in a single chapter. The larger story, the technological development of the 19th century, continues. We also get a close look at Leland Stanford, the beginning of the transcontinental railroad and the early history of San Francisco, although I did feel Slonit sometimes strained to connect the camera, the railroad and California into a coherent story. This is the first book I have read by this author, but it won't be the last. I was really blown away by this.

I read Ms. Solnit's book after learning that it had inspired actor/director Gary Oldman to write a screenplay called *Flying Horse*, with an eye toward directing the film about photo pioneer Eaweward Muybridge. *RIVER OF SHADOWS* is a meandering but thoughtfully entertaining journey through the energetic, sometimes tragic life of Eaweward Muybridge whose motion-study images were midwife to modern cinema. Solnit grandly sets the stage of Muybridge's era and how the lure of the early photographic process gave the Englishman a new career and a fresh start. His whole-hearted embrace of the burgeoning technology continues to impact us and our perception of time via motion pictures and all forms of emerging visual media. The book title's reference to the "technological wild west" is so appropriate by guiding us through the historical cloud of dust kicked up by an America of the late 1800s with its growing railroads, vanishing cowboys and struggling native tribes, to reveal how science was a significant part of the rough and tumble mix.

An unusual penetrating study of the beginning of photography, of Muybridge's life and his 'movement studies.' Mr. Stanford, of Stanford university, figures in this history, too. Solnit makes insightful connections between traveling by rail and the moving pictures (river of shadows) and captures interesting verbal snap shots of an era.

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.

This book really gave an interesting account of photography and the origins of motion pictures. I'll never look at a racing horse the same.

Solnit is a fascinating and able guide in ways that give a good name to intellectual associative writing: she knows how to do it without sounding anything but genuine in her interests, and she lets those interests guide her (and your) path through multiple topics, without ever losing her place or forgetting her subject in the 'so doing' thereof. Highly entertaining and very smart. . .

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'.

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.

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