

Yosemite People

Jonas Kulikauskas

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Beautiful photographs are paired with oral histories; what emerges is a nuanced vision of Yosemite, rich and complex.

Yosemite National Park is iconic to American imagery, so it would seem like an impossible task to offer a new and startling photography project of the site. But this is exactly what Jonas Kulikauskas does with his newest book, *Yosemite People*. Pairing his black-and-white photographs with oral histories from those who live and work at Yosemite, Kulikauskas curates a feeling of intimacy and familiarity to share a view of the park beyond flat depictions of postcard-perfect landscapes.

Yosemite People collects more than a hundred photos taken by Kulikauskas over the two years he dedicated to documenting the people of the park. These photos, beautifully printed, move from the overwhelming majesty of nature to the intimate moments of human life.

Whether documenting an older woman catching a nap on a couch in the lodge, a park ranger sharing stories of Yosemite with a tour group, or a small child playing in the concrete parking lot, these photos offer a deceptively bucolic vision at first glance. Audiences will be drawn in by the surface beauty, but soon small details begin to emerge and a more nuanced vision of Yosemite, rich in the complexities of reality, comes into view.

In her introduction to *Yosemite People*, Carol McCusker remarks on the unique perspective that Kulikauskas's background in street photography brings to the project. Referencing his focus on the people of Yosemite and their relationship to the park, McCusker places Kulikauskas within the same school as the WPA photographers who attempted to document the emotional and practical realities of the Great Depression in the 1930s. As with the widely known WPA photographs, there's a narrative quality in Kulikauskas's shots that compels the viewer to imagine the stories behind the people depicted.

The strong sense of story is strengthened by the inclusion of diary entries, personal histories, and interviews from people who have dedicated their lives to Yosemite. These oral histories bring *Yosemite People* out of the abstract realities of the viewer's imagination and into the lived realities of those who call Yosemite their home.

Not unlike other service-oriented industries, the National Park Service relies upon the work of employees who facilitate the relationship between visitors and Yosemite. Kulikauskas's decision to include the words of park employees opens up a path to understanding the park in all of its complexities. Of particular note is Kulikauskas's recognition of Yosemite as the home of the Ahwahneechee people, and of the violent role of American manifest destiny in overtaking it.

In drawing together these strands of art, American history, and environmental studies, Kulikauskas has produced a book for a wide-ranging audience. Just as Yosemite National Park has meaning for everyone who encounters it, so too will *Yosemite People*.

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