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REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

THE WAY WE WERE

Forss, George

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BOOK REVIEW

The many faces of New York City are captured vividly in this stimulating collection of pictures and commentary by an acclaimed photographer.

Forss taught himself photography while working as a messenger in New York in the 1970s and then started selling his prints on the streets; commercial assignments, gallery shows, and books followed. The over 70-odd black-and-white pictures collected here cover a wide range of scenes. We see zebras wrestling at the Bronx Zoo; sunlight filtering through the leaves in Central Park; July Fourth fireworks over the harbor; enigmatic double exposures, composed for a Saks Fifth Avenue campaign, of languid mannequins in glittering dresses hovering over prosaic streetscapes. There is an intimate photo of a cooped-up ivy plant gesticulating wildly at the bleak view out a Brooklyn apartment window, grand portraits of Manhattan skyscrapers bathed in stunning sunlight, and, most New York-ish of all, photos that blend intimacy and grandeur, including several shots of the Brooklyn Bridge soaring over narrow neighborhood streets and an exuberant scene of kids and a dog romping in the Washington Square fountain beneath the triumphal arch. Then there are the atmospheric Manhattan cityscapes, Forss' trademark. From on high we see skyscrapers glowing with lights, melting into an indistinct horizon in the dusky, chiaroscuro twilight; from below we see lower Manhattan erupting from the harbor's waterline. The most iconic photos spotlight the lost twin towers: in one we see them marshaling a phalanx of skyscrapers, gleaming in evening sunlight against ominous clouds; in another, they center a mysterious, dreamy skyline, seen in outline through light and fog from across the Hudson. Forss comments on each image in a paragraph or two, with technical details and narrative snippets that have a lyrical matter-of-factness. ("I was watching and waiting for some 'magic'...with my camera ready to take a picture, when this Bowery lady raised her drink in a salute.") The book's one problem is the small size and indifferent quality of the reproductions; still, these images are arresting enough to make one hope that they will be redone in a glossy coffee-table format that can do them justice.

A superb record of a photographer's love affair with New York.

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