

Tell Me Something: Documentary Filmmakers Edited by Jessica Edwards
Published by First Film Co. New York
Designed by Philipp Hubert, Visiotypen, New York

By Cynthia Close, published in Documentary magazine, 2013

Most of the books about documentary film and filmmakers that I've reviewed for this publication have provided their share of varying degrees of useful information, but I have often lamented the surprising lack of concern for the visuals, the actual design of the books themselves, separate from the content. The publishers; First Film Co., New York, with the assistance afforded by a successful Kickstarter campaign, have addressed this aesthetic void by producing *Tell Me Something: Documentary Filmmakers*, a perfect coffee-table book for New Yorkers (given it's diminutive size.) While the volume is slim at one hundred twenty seven pages it packs a design punch with a thick, black, clothbound hardcover embossed with a silver dot pattern that carries through at a different scale on the weighty, glossy pages within. This is the perfect gift book for those whose interests lean in the direction of documentary film, and as a lighthearted read for more seriously engaged media makers.

Edited by Jessica Edwards the book is a compilation of a wide range of filmmakers from veterans like Barbara Kopple, Albert Maysles, Errol Morris, Martin Scorsese and Michael Moore along side the next generation represented by the likes of Alex Gibney, Gary Hustwit, Lucy Walker, Kim Longinotto, Annie Sundberg & Ricki Stern, and many others. I was also pleased see fresh new faces such as Clio Barnard and Yung Chang. Each of these doc makers were asked to provide one, and only one piece of advice which was allocated to one page (a few are longer) that faces a single photograph of that same filmmaker. The esteemed photographers who took the filmmakers portraits are as rich and varied a lot as the filmmakers they depicted. The photos invite further interpretation of each filmmaker's character, personality, and self-presentation beyond what we know of them through their films.

Thom Powers, the documentary programmer for the Toronto International Film Festival and curator for Sundance NOW doc Club, himself a former filmmaker, tells in the foreword that when he moved to New York City two decades ago he compensated for his lack of formal training in film with the chutzpah to call up strangers, those more knowledgeable than he, to ask for advice. This book serves to replicate that journey taken by Thom, though in greater depth and without the risk of rejection. Thom goes on to state that at this point in his career he has met most of the filmmakers featured here and assures us that "If you ask fifty filmmakers how they approach any aspect of their craft, you might get fifty different answers."

Arranged in alphabetical order starting with Matthew Akers and ending with Marina Zenovich, their advice, including everyone in between, seems to reflect the inherent truth of Thom's statement. Fred Wiseman was an example of the very few whose words of advice, "Marry someone rich" were brief, flippant and eminently forgettable, while others

like AJ Schnack gave a very practical example of an actual form letter, filled with good advice, that you could use to send to the subjects of your film just before the film is seen publicly for the first time.

There were many surprises. Sometimes, the most famous names came across as the most humble. Martin Scorsese took the time to give credit to those filmmakers; John Cassavetes, Claude Charbrol, Elia Kazan, Peter Bogdanovich and Steven Spielberg who influenced him. Michael Moore, while in keeping with being Michael Moore, also gave the following helpful advice; “The first rule of making a documentary is, don’t make a documentary. Make a movie. Nobody wants to see a documentary. To the often-posed question ‘Hey honey, what do you wanna do tonight?’ nobody responds with ‘Lets go see a documentary!’ People do though want to see a *movie*. And when they go to the movies, they want to be entertained.” He goes on to say that “People don’t want the invisible wagging finger of the “documentarian” (a word invented for us because we don’t make movies) pointing at them and telling them to take their medicine.” He elaborates; “It’s like this: You can make a “documentary” about nutrition – or you can make *Super Size Me*.”

I also encountered some unfamiliar names like Macky Alston (*Family Name* - 1997, *The Killer Within* – 2006, *Love Free or Die* – 2012). He had some “liberating” advice. After watching the life’s work of Francois Truffaut, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Wim Wenders, Ross McElwee, Robert Altman and Jane Campion, he realized; “My favorite filmmakers all made at least as many god-awful films as they did great ones. Filmmaking (like most other creative pursuits) requires the audacity to fail big and very publicly.” Certain other pithy statements, such as Jennifer Baichwal’s “Have a plan, but be ready to abandon it at any moment.” And Errol Morris’s “When you go to people for advice, expect the worst.” are pulled out of context and set in large typeface on full color pages that are used as a sort of graphic punctuation throughout the book.

This is the kind of book that can be picked up at any moment, flipped through and randomly read, sort of like nibbling on the soda crackers they give you to cleans your palate between wine tastings. It is full of clever surprises that would please Michael Moore, since it educates while it entertains.