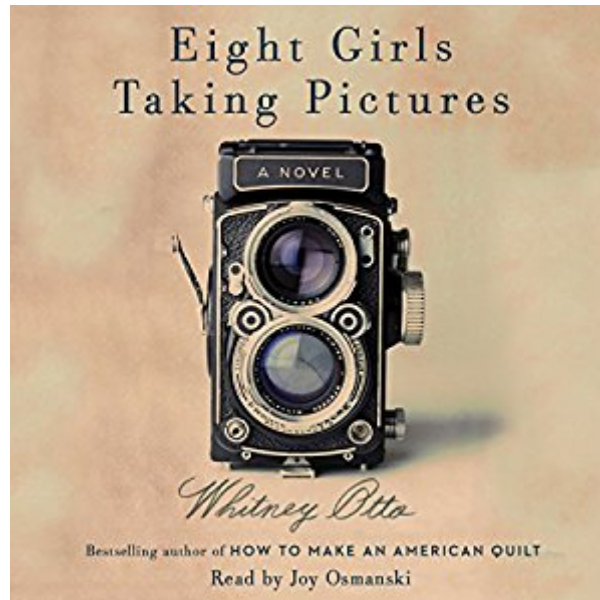




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# Eight Girls Taking Pictures: A Novel



## Synopsis

From the best-selling author of *How to Make an American Quilt* comes a powerful and sweeping novel inspired by the lives of famous female photographers. A deeply affecting meditation on the lives of women artists, Whitney Otto's vivid novel explores the ambitions, passions, conflicts and desires of eight female photographers throughout the 20th century. This spectacular cast of spirited, larger-than-life women offers wide-ranging insight about the times in which they lived. From San Francisco to New York, London, Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Rome, Otto spins a magical, romantic tale that creates a compelling portrait of the history of feminism and of photography. While their circumstances may differ, the tensions these women experience - from wanting a private life or a public life; passion or security; art or domesticity; children or creative freedom - are universal. Otto seamlessly weaves together eight breathtaking vignettes to form a moving and emotionally satisfying novel.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Above all this book is about the world of women in the arts. Otto introduces the reader to the world of photography and its inherent ambiguities. As a printed reflection of a moment in time, it would seem superficially to be more representative than other art forms. Yet we learn that photography, as all art, is never just one thing. So it is with women divided between the traditional roles of helpmate, parent, and homemaker competing with the often selfish role of artist. The girls in the book are born into worlds from the early 1900's to the present. The cameras they use vary. The settings range from the farm to pre war Berlin. They are the proverbial free woman or wife and mother. But each

must master the contradictions in their worlds. Reactions to photography can be extreme, given that the nudes are demonstrably real people. Otto does a good job of leaving some judgements for us to desolate for ourselves. Otto describes the worlds of these women in such a way that one can taste the internal conflict inherent in each. The first story presents a young mother, left to care for two children and a farm, while her narcissistic husband travels for his work. Her own photography is often caught in the bind despite her own superior credentials. I sighed, thinking here is the classic woman's story. But Otto takes it quickly into her interior world and brought me in. Cymbeline, trained in Berlin, is the first cameo, and her views reappear through this book. I think that the vignettes set in pre WWII Berlin were most bewitching to me. The frisson between the exquisite glowing world of the growth of the arts and the looming of the Nazi end of it all, plays out in the world of the girls taking pictures. Otto notes that this is not biographical, but she did draw heavily on her researched stories of some prominent women photographers. The aesthetics she expresses read true and brought me to a new view of this art form. An interesting book to experience.

Readers who don't know much about famous early photographers may find this a better read than I did. Though she used 8 women photographers as a starting place, the author made a decision to change their names, and some of their stories, as well as some, but not all, of the names of supporting characters. That was a mistake, in my opinion, one that detracted from enhancing the story and causing my to try to discern who it was that she was actually talking about and whether events actually happened. All in all, I had to work to finish it and was disappointed in the end that it wasn't a richer depiction of either history or character.

Shortly after reading a couple chapters I wanted to look for a biography and figure out where Whitney Otto was taking the story. The first two chapters, for me seemed to end abruptly leading to another unrelated story; or so I thought. Whitney however has done her homework and did thread these separate women in their 'chapter' as the book moved pass the half-way point. There was one chapter that had me feel uncomfortable and I am not quite able to pinpoint why. Having been a stay at home mom and using my artistic endeavors, one being b/w photography, there was a connection I could relate to. Ms Otto did put into words, close to the end, much of how I felt during those years of what it was like to finding a balance of wife, mother and an individual with needs of my own. I jumped at a chance to read this book for Whitney Otto's "How to Make an American Quilt" has been one of my favorite reads about women of different ages and the support they give and receive from one another. It is about their stories of which are rich, dark or secret, but ultimately unique and have

helped to create the woman they are at the time of the story. In stating this, 'Eight Girls Taking Pictures' has been woven in the same manner. I did recommend the book to a girlfriend and she was not crazy about it.

This reviewer is an advanced hobby photographer. The book is a novel of eight different serious women photographers, each a separate chapter, relating how their profession affects the other parts of their lives and relationships. It covers the years mostly 1910--1960. The book does not delve deeply into the techniques of photography but sketches quite a bit of history of the craft. The women roam the world. Because of the frank, even coarse, explicit language, and some of the art photos that illustrate this book, it is for adults only. There is one chapter, number seven, I think, that could stand alone for younger serious art students. There is a brief bibliography of serious women photographers. Buyers should get the hard cover edition because it has a three-dimensional dust jacket illustration that will make copies of the book increasingly valuable if the jacket survives. I complement the publisher for this.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Not only is it well written, but each main character, despite all being photographers, is uniquely interesting. You will learn much about photography that will be helpful in everyday picture taking because there are many tips and helpful advice woven into each story. The characters are as different as apples and oranges and the settings of each story vary from New York to Berlin to Paris. Well known photographers carry over from one era to the next in some sections so there is some continuity. You will read about their loves and break-ups, grand photography events and people over the top in this profession. Particularly interesting to me was the section in Berlin where, prior to WWII, anything and everything was happening, particularly between women even though homosexuality was deeply hated and men are forced to hide their sexual persuasions. Whitney Otto's writing takes one into the lives of each of these girls and makes you want to know more of them. I believe this would be an excellent book for book clubs.

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