A Corpus in First-Person: Weegee and the Performance of the Self

by

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Introduction

Born Usher Fellig in 1899, Americanized to Arthur in 1909, the Austrian immigrant who worked under the pseudonym “Weegee” rose to fame in the 1930s, a time when the New York City streets were seemingly riddled with robberies, murders, fires, and other tragedies. Young Fellig, in fact, grew up on these streets, having left home at age fifteen. During these formative years, Fellig worked a series of meagerly paid odd jobs, including selling candy to factory workers and bussing tables at an automat, hoping to scrape by with enough money to afford a flophouse bed. When the funds weren’t found, Fellig wandered the city, finding shelter in the Pennsylvania Railroad Station and a bed on the benches of Bryant Park. Joining the ranks of the impoverished bums of the Bowery, Fellig found comradery in the urban squalor that would later become the subject of the majority of his photographs.

Coming up on the tails of the Great Depression and teetering on the brink of World War II, Weegee began to make his name as a press photographer in the 1930s. Though his initial foray into photography was a stint making tintype portraits of children in the streets, Weegee’s career was sparked when he took a part-time job as a darkroom assistant at The New York Times from 1921 until 1926. While his stay at the Times was short-lived, its impact on Weegee was important, and likely his first real contact with the business of news photography. As Miles Barth explains, “The inside workings of a daily newspaper – how editors selected stories to compel their readers, how photographs were cropped and retouched if necessary – was to captivate him for the rest of his life.”¹ Additionally, this time offers a possible origin for his moniker - the story being that his job was to squeegee prints to prepare for drying, and as such, other darkroom staff would call out “squeegee,” which later evolved into Weegee.

After leaving the *Times*, Weegee went to work for Acme Newspictures where he was primarily relegated to the darkroom, but did make the occasional emergency foray into the streets as a press photographer at night when the regular staff photographers were asleep in their homes. It is during his approximately twelve years at Acme that Weegee learned the tricks of the press photographer’s trade and came to be known for his nighttime images of disaster. Growing increasingly dissatisfied with the lack of credit for his work, despite having marked his prints with a stamp reading “Photo Credit Weegee the Famous,” Weegee left Acme in 1935 and took to the streets as a freelance photographer, selling his images to the increasingly popular New York tabloids, such as the *Daily News, PM*, and other press syndicates.

Weegee’s success came quickly, due in large part to his personable nature that afforded insider access to the police, fire departments, ambulance dispatchers, nightclub owners - anyone of importance who might drop Weegee a tip the instant a crime or disaster broke out. In fact, in 1938, Weegee was the first photographer who was granted a permit to own and operate a shortwave police radio. He became famous for his signature style, created by using a Speed Graphic camera with a synchronized flash, the exposure always preset to 1/200 of a second, stopped down to f16, focused to a distance of ten feet.² Known for spending all hours of the night with his ear tuned to the police radio’s frequencies in his room across the Manhattan police headquarters or in his Chevrolet, Weegee gained the reputation of arriving at the scene of the crime seemingly intuitively, often times before even the police did. This is yet another possible source of the name Weegee, a play on the popular Ouija board game and its supposed supernatural premonitions.

The two possible origin stories of Fellig’s pseudonym are worth noting as they exemplify the larger issue of establishing Weegee’s biography. Much of what is known comes from his autobiography, *Weegee by Weegee*, and interviews he did with reporters during his lifetime. As has been acknowledged by scholars, Weegee was not completely truthful about the facts of his life, often embellishing, possibly even fabricating, details that would aid in creating his self-fashioned image and ultimate goal of becoming famous. Many of the first substantial writings on Weegee come from fellow photographers, such as Louis Stettner and John Coplans, who intimately knew him. Such accounts, however, are largely personal anecdotes from the time of their friendship and do not corroborate Weegee’s details about his early life, which are only glossed over in his own reports.

The public persona that Weegee created for himself, rather than the work he produced, has been the focus of much literature on the photographer. Weegee’s self-fashioned identity was rooted in American culture of the 1930s and 1940s, which valorized the photojournalist in popular literature and film as “an icon of rough-edged masculinity.” While Weegee’s presentation as a virile, hard-boiled, man of the people was not unprecedented, his insistence on performing this public self across multiple media to varied audiences has engrained his signature image of a cigar-chomping, anti-intellectual figure as the authentic news photographer in the minds of people since the 1930s. Exhibition catalogues, reprints of his books, scholarly essays,

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3 Arthur Fellig, *Weegee: The Autobiography* (Memphis: The Devault-Graves Agency, 2013); this newer Devault-Graves edition has been published under a revised title, but the contents remain the same as the original *Weegee by Weegee*, published in 1961.


7 V. Penelope Pelizzo and Nancy M. West, “‘Crime Is My Oyster’: Weegee’s Narrative Mobility,” in *Tabloid, Inc.: Crimes, Newspapers, Narratives*, 145-177 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 146.

8 Pelizzon and West note that, “Movies such as *Case of the Missing Man* (1935); *Bank Alarm* (1936); *Time Out for Murder, Exposed, While New York Sleeps* (1938); *Double Exposure* (1944); and *Crime of the Century* (1946) all valorize rough-and-tumble activities of the newsman on assignment,” Ibid., 149.
and monographs have largely focused on the celebrity that he self-fashioned and look at only a handful of iconic images, while often overlooking the context in which the photographs were made and circulated. The International Center of Photography, which holds the Weegee archive, has been the forerunner in Weegee scholarship since the 1990s and has provided revised interpretation. The landmark publications *Weegee’s World, Unknown Weegee, and Murder is My Business* present in-depth studies of Weegee’s best-known photographs and the influences that the Photo League and *PM* had on his career. Despite this important work, a dedicated examination of Weegee’s intentions and self-fashioning across these outlets and into his future endeavors with the photo-book is notably absent. This thesis seeks to explore the varied platforms that Weegee employed to perform his public self from the beginning of his career as a news photographer in the mid-1930s through the publication of his second photo-book, *Weegee’s People*, in 1946. A central argument to this discussion will be that Weegee’s first photo-book, *Naked City*, published in 1945, is not only the climax of Weegee’s career, but also the culmination of the lessons that the photographer learned from the picture press. As such, this thesis will position *Naked City* within the context of Weegee’s work as a tabloid photographer, and follow this trajectory to examine the quite different approach taken in his second book *Weegee’s People*.

Chapter one will look at the ways Weegee positioned himself in the public eye through press profile pieces and his own photographs and articles in the tabloid press. A consideration of Weegee’s involvement with the New York Photo League and *PM* will further evidence this photographer’s self-reflexive approach, as well as his first attempts at transitioning his work.

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from the temporal low-culture status of the tabloids to a tabloid-as-art aesthetic. Questioning the commonly held view of Weegee as a concerned documentary photographer, I argue that Weegee’s affected empathy and compassion were tactics he employed to enforce his authorship over the subjects he photographed and bolster his status as a master photographer. Through a discussion of Clive Scott’s views of documentary versus photojournalism, Weegee’s position within these fields will be explored. The aim of this overview of Weegee’s early career is to better understand his transition to the medium of the photo-book and the reception of him as an artist with the publication of *Naked City*.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its populist appeal, *Naked City* has not received the same rigorous scholarly attention that other photo-books of the time have. Interest in the history of the photo-book as a medium is, indeed, a fairly recent development, generating a flurry of new publications in the past few years.10 Most prominent among them is the three-volume publication *The Photobook: A History* by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger. Within this publication a full page is devoted to *Naked City*, with the cover and five page spreads reproduced above four paragraphs of text. Parr and Badger’s brief discussion of *Naked City* positions it as a documentary photo-book with a “degree of social commentary.” Their view of Weegee is one of a socially concerned “man of the people for the people” and “the authentic voice of the proletariat.”11 Although Andrew Roth’s 2001 publication, *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Andrew Roth (New York: PPP Editions, 2001). *The Open Book: A History of the Photographic Book from 1878 to the Present*, ed. Andrew Roth (Göteborg, Sweden: Hasselblad Center, 2004). *Japanese Photobooks of the 1960s and 70s*, ed. Ivan Vartanian (New York: Aperture, 2009). Patrizia Di Bello, Colette E. Wilson, and Shamoon Zamir, *The Photobook: From Talbot to Ruscha and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012).


Twentieth Century,\textsuperscript{12} does include Naked City in the canon, the one-paragraph discussion, which accompanies seven reproductions of pages from Weegee’s book, fails to actually address the content of the publication. Instead, the text lingers on the persona of Weegee, drawing a comparison to Buster Keaton, and claiming that Weegee was “a poet with a camera.”\textsuperscript{13}

While research over the past decade has shed light on the origin of some of the photographs included in Naked City, discussions of these works have typically existed only within the context of a larger evaluation of Weegee’s career, without a particular focus on the photo-book. In their 2008 publication Weegee and Naked City,\textsuperscript{14} Anthony W. Lee and Richard Meyer have contributed a great deal to understanding the context in which Weegee worked. Their essays focus primarily on Weegee’s career as a tabloid photographer and explore how Naked City grew out of this specific photographic practice, thus discussing some of the issues presented here. As insightful as their project is, however, it is largely concerned with Weegee’s career before the publication of Naked City and provides little discussion of the importance and intent of the photo-book itself and its function as an object.

Chapter two seeks to situate Naked City within the context of the 1930s and 1940s, when photo-books became increasingly popular and represented a new platform for socially concerned documentary photographers such as Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans. Calling upon the writings of W.J.T. Mitchell and William Stott, Naked City’s function as a documentary photo-book will be evaluated. Through a study of Weegee’s image sequencing, text, and overall organization of the book, I argue that Naked City allowed Weegee to assert his authority as

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\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{14} Anthony W. Lee and Richard Meyer, Weegee and Naked City (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
\end{flushleft}
photographer, perform his self-fashioning, and capitalize on his tabloid aesthetic to solidify the name “Weegee the Famous” as an artist.

Notably, all scholarly discussions of Weegee’s career terminate with the release of *Naked City*, despite his further publication of two other photo-books (*Weegee’s People* and *Naked Hollywood*). The reason for this lack of interest in the later part of Weegee’s life is, admittedly, that his work took a remarkable turn for the worse after *Naked City*. The success of his first photo-book led Weegee to believe that he should be creating more artistic work; however, the result was a mix of bland and kitsch photography, including a series of kaleidoscopic, trick lens portraits of celebrities. During the late-1940s-1960s, Weegee’s career became more commercial as he consulted for television and film projects in Los Angeles, worked briefly for *Vogue* magazine, and authored how-to-manuals for amateur photographers.

As an effort to better understand Weegee’s self-fashioning and performed authorship, chapter three will introduce a discussion of the photographer’s second photo-book, *Weegee’s People*, which was published one year after *Naked City*. The publication will be looked at largely in comparison to *Naked City* in order to trace how Weegee severed all ties to the tabloid aesthetic that made him so famous. Through my reading of this work, I argue that Weegee’s approach to his second photo-book reveals his continued play with authorship and pushing the boundaries of his voyeurism. The success of *Weegee’s People*, as will be discussed, lies in the resulting effect of Weegee’s distancing and concealment of himself. Through his minimal use of written language and sequencing of images, Weegee used this publication to project his authorship not only over his subjects, but also over the book’s reader in a way that manipulates their emotions and implicates them in his voyeuristic narratives.
In tracing the formation of Weegee’s performance of the self from the early tabloid press through his first two photo-books, this thesis brings to evidence this photographer’s navigation of various media and cultural audiences. My discussion of Weegee’s understanding of the adaptability of his images to the written language of newspapers and photo-books offers insight into a new understanding of his corpus, arguing that Weegee’s mastery of manipulation, self-representation, and self-reflexivity contributed to the exploitation of his subjects and viewers.
CHAPTER 1

From Low to High: The Project of Weegee’s Self-Fashioning

In the opening paragraph of his introduction to the 1977 monograph that accompanied Weegee’s first museum retrospective at the International Center of Photography, Louis Stettner reflected upon his old friend, “Weegee the Famous,” describing him as “a bawdy sensualist, a shy, silent observer of murder, and a passionate humanist.” Stettner’s rather contradictory descriptions, while raising the question of how one can be both bawdy and shy, both a passive observer of death and a humanist, reflect similar incongruences in much of the art historical scholarship and criticism of Weegee from his contemporaries through the present day. Conflicting opinions revolving around the view of Weegee’s role as an artist and socially concerned documentary photographer, or, alternatively, as a self-serving, fame-seeking tabloid photojournalist, are found in nearly all major Weegee scholarship.

In his introductory text, Stettner goes on to claim:

[Weegee] was a profound humanist and a compassionate observer of human beings, portraying them as innately tough, with the strength not only to survive but to flourish. The social significance of his photographs comes from the human misery they uncover, sprawled and huddled on the streets and alleyways like the victims of a holocaust. As if exhausted by the alienating exploitation of the city’s daily routine, they are left to lie where they fall.

Stettner’s view of Weegee as a “profound humanist” is, again, inconsistent, claiming that Weegee’s people are able to both survive and flourish, while characterizing them as abandoned, helpless victims. Lacking an optimistic view of thriving human welfare, Weegee’s photographic gaze, while perhaps socially conscious, is ultimately not socially concerned. Stettner observes that, “many of Weegee’s most important photographs were taken in this same ghetto [the Lower

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16 Ibid., 11.
East Side], and, to his credit, he never sentimentalized or romanticized life there.” While this claim is true on the surface, it does not take into account why Weegee operated as such. This chapter will explore the varied readings of Weegee’s tabloid photographs and the photographer’s intentions in order to argue that his affected empathy and compassion were tactics employed to bolster his name, status and position of authorship, and that these tactics would ultimately become fully evidenced in Naked City. As I will argue in the following pages, Weegee capitalized on two key aspects of 1930s and 1940s photojournalism: the human-interest story and the personal image of hard-boiled masculinity.

Weegee began using publications as an outlet for his self-fashioning as early as 1937. A profile piece in the April 12, 1937 issue of Life magazine (figure 1), titled “Speaking of Pictures…A New York Free Lance Photographs the News,” is about neither photography nor the news. Rather, the two-and-a-half page spread discusses the photographer in the style of a celebrity gossip column, proclaiming Fellig’s tactics and success by noting details such as the fire alarm bell in Fellig’s studio, which was wired directly to the fire department, and how “He once made $84 in one day.” As Richard Meyer remarks, “The ‘Speaking of Pictures’ layout devoted to Fellig reinforced his dual status as both agent and object of ‘picture interest.’” Of the thirteen photographs in the spread, Fellig appears in six. Even when he is not physically present in the other images, the Life magazine captions make him the main actor – in any case, the voyeur-observer - of the scenes represented. For example, the caption for a photograph of a man in a hat explains, “The man at the top is not tipping his hat. He is about to cover his face from Fellig’s camera.” The captions for images of an auto accident and a collapsed fish market

17 Ibid., 3.
18 “Speaking of Pictures...A Free Lance Photographs the News,” Life vol. 2, no. 15 (April 12, 1937): 8-9, 11. Weegee is referred to Fellig here as this article was published prior to his fame under the name “Weegee.”
are described as both “good selling pictures” and a “night which was lucky for Fellig,” respectively. The effect of such captions turns the focus of the image back on the photographer by emphasizing his presence at the scene. As it will be discussed in chapter two, Weegee would go on to use this powerful tactic of reflexive captioning that he learned early on from the picture press not only throughout his career as a tabloid photographer, but also for his text in *Naked City*, succeeding in presenting the photographer himself as the underlying subject of the publication.

Eight months after the essay ran in *Life* magazine, *Popular Photography* published a similarly celebratory feature on this photographer, titled “Free-Lance Cameraman.” The article, notable as the first mention in print of the name “Weegee,” again notes his monetary success, remarking that, “he makes on an average of a hundred dollars a week. On exceptionally good weeks, he has been known to earn twice that sum.” Weegee is presented here as the authority on news photography, according to a spread with lengthy quotes by Weegee himself that discuss how to break into the press photography business, what makes a successful news photograph, and explaining his own working methods and close encounters with crime and disaster scenes. The valorization of Weegee’s spectacular persona in profile pieces such as the two mentioned here would continue through the 1940s. Earl Wilson in *The Saturday Evening Post*, for example, opened his two-page exposé with the claim that Weegee is “New York’s greatest and least inhibited free-lance news photographer;” however, a discussion of what makes Weegee’s photographs so great is markedly absent. Instead, what proceeds is a fluff piece that perpetuates the mythical stature of Weegee as a hard-edged prodigy. Similarly, in what was meant to be a review of *Naked City*, Aaron Sussman wrote three columns that made note of everything from Weegee’s distinct accent to the censorship of his images of show girls in the *Police Gazette*,

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even revealing that Weegee’s “greatest frustration is women,” but offered no comment on the book or Weegee’s photographs other than refer to them in passing as a “magnificent album of snap shots.”

While Ralph Steiner, writing in PM Weekly, did acknowledge that what set Weegee apart from other news photographers was his unique inclusion of the “the human element,” his article privileges a glamorization of Weegee’s character with the claim that his pictures are “good because Weegee adds a little of himself, and a little of Weegee is a really good thing,” followed by the typical reporting on his peculiar lifestyle.

Given the prominence of Weegee’s photographs in the press during this time, it is curious that so many critics did not address the images. This fact is likely due in part to the journalistic presumption that news pictures spoke for themselves. However, it is curious that the photographer’s personal life garnered so much attention from the media. It is as if Weegee’s remarkably supernatural ability was not merely his power to intuit the scene of a crime, but also a love spell that he cast on the public that caused them to become enchanted with his personage. Cultural historians V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy W. West, who have written extensively on the construction of the hard-boiled personas that permeated pulp fiction, films, and journalism of the late 1920s and early 1930s, observe that profile pieces such as those discussed here occurred during “a roughly twenty-five-year period during which public focus on press photography shifted from images to something else that assumed surprising importance: the photographer’s words.”

While Weegee would go on to employ words as a means to propel his fame in numerous feature articles and newspaper columns, photo-books, and in his own autobiography, the profile pieces from the late-1930s and 1940s evidence the public’s growing interest in the

practice of news photography, and more specifically, the supposed rough and tumble life of the photographer. Pelizzon and West offer further explanation:

For the first time, elaborate narratives were generated about the act of acquiring news pictures, and American audiences were encouraged to be as interested in the sensational story behind the photo as in the image itself. Instead of paying attention to the documentary powers or aesthetic merits of particular pictures, these narratives were far more concerned with proving that the shot might have cost the photographer his life.\(^{25}\)

Despite the passing of time, however, Weegee as the figure behind the camera has continued to garner as much, if not more, attention in scholarship as the prolific body of work he produced. Central to this scholarship has been a fascination with the myth of Weegee as an uneducated, anti-artist who was able to intuit the time, place, and angle of a good photograph. Early scholarship valorized Weegee’s alleged callowness. Stettner, for example, described Weegee as a “naïve primitive” whose inability “to be critical of his own photographs”\(^{26}\) was what made him an artist. Coplans, likewise, prescribed to the view of Weegee as an “innocent,” noting that, “The only other photographer of note that Weegee apparently had some awareness of was Lewis Hine.” Coplans went on to claim that Weegee’s images were, “snapped rather than compositionally planned.”\(^{27}\) In the introduction to *Weegee by Weegee*, Bruce Downes proclaimed that, “when Weegee began his nocturnal photographic wanderings, he had never heard of Stieglitz or the Museum of Modern Art… Of any knowledge of art, he was completely innocent.”\(^{28}\) More recently, Miles Orvell described Weegee as “a kind of urban primitive, an innocent, a night prowler.”\(^{29}\) Such impressions, which are rooted in the photographer’s own

\(^{25}\) Ibid.


descriptions of himself as a natural talent and self-made photographer snapping the picture, not only fail to recognize the intentionality of his public self-fashioning, but downplay two important aspects of Weegee’s early career: the New York Photo League and *PM*.

Formed in 1936, the Photo League attracted a number of activist photographers, both amateurs and professionals, many from a similar background as Weegee—children of poor working class immigrants, raised in New York City tenements. Functioning as a school, laboratory, and social club, the left-leaning Photo League attempted to use photography as a means through which to address sociopolitical issues. As Anne Tucker remarked, “The desire for social change and a belief in photography as an expressive medium that could mirror social problems and promote social change became the League’s guiding principles.”

The League’s lectures and classes placed emphases on the power of photography’s message over that of technique. This fact, paired with the affordable tuition, set the League apart from all other photography classes in New York City, as most focused on technical aspects and commercial careers rather than using the camera as an expressive tool. Through a series of collaborative urban documentary projects, such as *Portrait of a Tenement* (1937), *Lost Generation: The Plight of Youth Today* (1940), and *Harlem Document* (1938-40), the Photo League was committed to reclaiming the identity of the people they represented. The League’s photographers accomplished this through their confronting subjects as if they were newspaper reporters—they conducted interviews, developed shooting scripts, and took an editorial approach to the presentation of their images. Despite the socially concerned activism of the Photo League’s projects, however, its underlying aim was to elevate the value of the photograph over objective truth claims. Elizabeth Jane VanArragon observed that the Photo League’s aesthetic introduced

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30 Anne Tucker, *This Was the Photo League: Compassion and the Camera from the Depression to the Cold War* (Chicago: Stephen Daiter Gallery), 9.
“an element of connection between photographer and subjects that would challenge the assumption of the objective truth of the photograph…The impetus for many Photo League images was the photographer’s subjective perspective of [their] subjects, a perspective that formulated an expressive photographic agenda.”

It is, perhaps, this emphasis on the photographer’s subjectivity that attracted Weegee and the Photo League to each other.

Although Weegee greatly whitewashed his involvement with the Photo League, only briefly hinting at it as “a camera club” he had joined, the photographer’s association with the League was no small matter. Though not a dues paying member, Weegee is known to have given lectures, judged contests, and attended regular functions. Through his interactions with the League, Weegee surely came into contact with many of his contemporaries – such notable photographers as Berenice Abbott, Morris Engel, Lisette Model, and Walter Rosenblum – a fact which, combined with his years of experience working in darkrooms, dismantles the myth of Weegee as a naïve, isolated genius.

In 1941 the Photo League gave Weegee his first one-man exhibition, titled *Murder Is My Business*. This presentation of poorly mounted prints that peeled away from their backing, cut paper lettering, and an allover sense of hurried installation, may have evoked a sense of the speed with which Weegee was used to working, as required in the newspaper business. More importantly, however, the graphic presentation of photographs along with newspaper tear sheets, paper cutouts, and stenciled letters, drew upon the Photo League’s aesthetic. For example, in a 1940 review of *Chelsea Document*, Elizabeth McCausland described the didactic text that “knit

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31 Elizabeth Jane VanArragon, “The Photo League: Views of Urban Experience in the 1930s and 1940s” (PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 2006), 385.
together the photographic material,” and expressed her reservations about the haphazard, hand-made design of the exhibition:

The exhibition suffers from handicaps which are understandable. The actual rendering of the panels could be more workmanlike. For example, if the wallboard had been painted a dead white before any visual material had been applied, the impact of the photographs, the lettering and the colored symbols would be more immediate and powerful. It is also always a little disturbing to see the photographs curling away from their supports…The problem of presenting photographs graphically is a complex one. Generally in this case the written and painted material comes off better than the photographic. 33

Despite its visual similarities to previous Photo League shows, however, Weegee did employ a number of reinterpretations of League strategies that allowed him to introduce his character to a wider, professional audience than he was able to access within the confines of his career as a tabloid photographer. Instead of arrows, Weegee used cartoon pistols to draw attention to details on the display panels; where other Photo League shows often included statistical graphs to enforce their activist message, Weegee included a paystub he received from a newspaper for his photographs of murder victims; instead of captions that call for response to injustices, Weegee’s texts provide snarky commentary on society figures and draw attention to Weegee’s self-fashioned persona. In fact, the very title of the exhibition draws attention away from the subject matter and emphasizes the importance of the photographer. As Brian Wallis notes,

Aside from the novelty of a news photographer having an art exhibition, consider the audacity of Weegee’s title: a declaration that murder – not photography – was his line of work. Along with the obvious shock value and the Duchampian humor, this title succinctly and precisely captured Weegee’s attitude toward his job. Rather than clarifying that he was just documenting the crime scenes, the title makes it sound as if Weegee himself were involved in the crimes. 34

The photographs were thematically grouped under headings that announced the scenes and locations that Weegee had captured, such as “Murder,” “More Murders,” “Society,” “Wrecks,” and “Coney Island,” with a single blank display board provocingly labeled “This Place Reserved for the Latest Murder” (figure 2). This latter sign offered the implication that Weegee was always on the scene and was a promise to the public that he would capture the news as it happened for their consumption. Anthony Lee has argued that,

Such manipulations helped underscore the differences between the document and the news photograph, between activist sensibility of the Photo League and the concerns of the photojournalist, and between the collaborative ventures of left-leaning photographers and the increasingly sens’tiff Weegee…Murder Is My Business had the effect of bringing out Weegee’s connections to the documentary, only to have them show how they could facilitate his self-promotion.35

Following the success of Murder Is My Business, the Photo League immediately mounted a second version of the exhibition. This was an expansion of the first installation. The title on Weegee’s new signboard read, “Due to an increase in Murders, The Photo League presents 2nd Edition Murder is My Business by Weegee.” Back by popular demand, Weegee again drew attention to his success by exploiting the lowbrow culture from whence he came. A newly added display board (figure 3), the first one encountered in the exhibition, contained cutout letters announcing “Introducing Weegee” beside a caricature of the photographer. Below the “headline” was Ralph Steiner’s 1941 article from PM Weekly and the 1937 Life and Popular Photography profile pieces. With these blatantly self-referential additions Weegee capitalized on tabloid visual culture to enter the ranks of a more serious circle of photographers, all the while reinforcing that he had done so out of his own unique individuality and merit.

Many scholars have discussed Weegee’s exhibition at the Photo League as the first moment in which the press photographer began to transition his work from tabloid low-culture to

a more engaged, aesthetic photographic practice. This view, however, not only overlooks the importance of *PM* in Weegee’s transition from anonymous crime scene photographer to celebrated artist, but also perpetuates the mythical idea of Weegee as a self-made success. *PM* first appeared on newsstands in June 1940 and, beginning with its second issue, Weegee’s photographs were regularly featured throughout the publication’s eight-year run. Although *PM* was known for its liberal, antifascist, socially concerned views, this is not what attracted Weegee to working freelance for the tabloid. Rather, it was the importance that the publication placed on photographs - many of its readers were immigrants whose English was broken, thus images were the strongest form of mass communication\(^{36}\) – and the guarantee that his name would appear in print. Weegee had grown frustrated with the lack of recognition other newspapers and magazines afforded him. In his autobiography he explained that, at this time, he had become fed up with being “Mr. Anonymous.”\(^{37}\) There he cited an experience with the *World Telegram* as a rare instance in which “Photo by Weegee” appeared below his image, only to be changed back to “Acme” in the next edition. *PM*, however, held a policy of crediting each photographer by name. As such, Weegee made a deal with the publishers that he would offer them first choice of his pictures in exchange for the guarantee that the credit “PM Photo by Weegee” would accompany each image in print. In addition, the tabloid permitted him to work freelance, which allowed Weegee to exercise control over when and what he photographed, as well as encouraged him to write his own accompanying captions and articles. *PM*’s radical innovation to journalism was its mobilization and privileging of pictures—after all, the publication’s name was said by its creators to be an abbreviation of “Picture Magazine” or “Photographic Material.” Two months before the paper’s first issue would appear

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 83.  
on newsstands, Ralph McAllister Ingersoll, former executive editor of Time Inc. and PM’s founder, explained, “Over half PM’s space will be filled with pictures—because PM will use pictures not simply to illustrate stories, but to tell them.” Ingersoll went on to declare, “PM is in the business to tell as much of the truth as it can find out—because it believes journalism’s function in a democracy is to seek truth in contemporary life and print it without fear or favor.”

As such, the publication of “truth” would be anchored by the authority of news pictures and, through PM’s commitment to granting visibility to the photographer, by the “indelible trace of their maker.”

The photography that PM presented was not merely news photography, but, as Jason Hill argues, Art. A 1941 memo cited by Hill reveals Ingersoll’s announcement of a “New Deal for Photographers.” Ingersoll lamented the historical lack of respect and pay for news photographers and advocated that at PM photographers were a “vital and integral” part of the publication. He offered a remedy to the past by stating the publication would uphold “artistic criticism” and that photographer’s directions for cropping were to be followed. “The memo,” Hill explains, “describes a visual culture within the newsroom of artistic authorship, of critique, and of editorial accountability to pictorial agents ceded creative control.”

The idea that the publication’s imagery was to be understood as art was integral to its successful functioning as a democratic tabloid. For PM, the use of the term “art” was linked not to an aesthetic or cultural understanding, but rather, to the editor’s belief that images could be deployed to counter fascism and promote creative and critical political engagement amongst their readers. As Hill explains,

38 Ibid., 16.
40 Hill, Ibid., 29.
41 Ibid., 29-30.
Daily newspapers in the 1930s typically presented photographic news-pictures couched in language asserting precisely the artlessness of their invention; that is, as unmediated facts of the external world, objective visual evidence equally distinct both from any sense of human, intelligent manufacture and from the experience of the news consumer to which they were addressed. And by 1938…these authorless photographic news-facts occupied nearly 40% of each issue of the average daily newspaper. Nearly half, then, of the content of the daily press was occupied by material that was proffered as the disembodied, mechanical representations of a disinterested, unthinking machine.42

The art of *PM’s* photojournalism, then, was intended to combat the tradition of unattributable images that presented assumed facts to a passive audience. *PM* recognized, however, that to accomplish this, the relationship between the photograph and the reader must be transactional and experiential. To spark a critical reaction and partisan argument with the reader, the photographs in *PM* would depend “upon the articulation of an authorial, which is to say on an aesthetic and therefore accountable voice.”43 Hence the publication’s commitment to crediting photographers by name, as well as the its embracing the subjective, artistry of images rather than presenting them as objective evidence. As Ingersoll declared, “*PM* does not believe that unbiased journalism exists…What makes *PM* tick is a serious belief in honest journalism as an end in itself—the bringing of the truth to the people so that they can decide for themselves what to do about it.”44 Hill brilliantly observes the importance of expressive journalism to *PM*:

> Flying in the face of the truism that journalism and art are radically incompatible, even mutually exclusive premises, *PM* conducted its journalism, from its first appearance in the early summer of 1940, as a declaration of the following argument and a performance of its validity: that a progressive pictorial journalism is best conducted by artists and photographers alive to the formal and communicative complexities of their practices and media; that news pictures—elsewhere constructed as necessarily artless—must be presented as motivated, even aesthetic constructions informed by the sensibilities of their embodied makers; and that the newspaper, as a democratic communicative apparatus, is

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43 Ibid., 104.
fundamentally a staging ground for the purposive and transactional communion of this highly contingent art with its equally contingent public.\textsuperscript{45}

Weegee did not become aligned with \textit{PM} due to its politics, however. He actively resisted being viewed as a politically minded photographer, instead, continuously enforcing the image of himself as a hard-boiled, street-wise naïve on the prowl each night for the next great scoop. Yet, just as it is impossible to deny the appeal of \textit{PM} for Weegee, with its emphasis on the importance of photographs and the “sensibilities of their embodied makers,” it is equally impossible to deny the influence that the tabloid had on Weegee. It was under the guise of \textit{PM}’s reputed dedication to promoting an understanding of what news photographs could do in terms of fostering social awareness and change that Weegee elevated his celebrity and the status of his images. As Lee has noted, “In \textit{PM} Weegee found a paper that was as self-conscious as he was about visual meaning, its promotion, and its uses.”\textsuperscript{46}

Weegee, in fact, used \textit{PM} as an outlet for his public self-fashioning. “Weegee positioned himself,” Richard Meyer observed, “as an increasingly central character in the photographs and stories he contributed to \textit{PM}. His articles focused on the act of picture taking nearly as much as on the people and events pictured.”\textsuperscript{47} Through headlines such as “Weegee Covers Christmas in New York,” “Weegee Covers Society,” and “Weegee Meets Interesting People at 6 a.m. Sunday Fire,” the photographer crafted stories that cast himself in the starring role. Similarly, many of his images openly acknowledge the presence of the photographer at the scene. For example, Weegee’s famous photograph of the crowded beach at Coney Island titled “Yesterday at Coney Island…Temperature 89…They Came Early, Stayed Late” (figure 4), most obviously exemplifies this in the throngs of people who excitedly turn to have their likeness captured by the

\textsuperscript{45} Hill, “Artist as Reporter,” 34-35.  
\textsuperscript{46} Lee, “Human Interest Stories,” 69.  
\textsuperscript{47} Meyer, “Learning from Low Culture,” 27.
photographer. The caption below the picture, written by Weegee, is entirely self-referential, reading as an account of the photographer’s day, rather than a reporting on the happenings at the beach:

Saturday was very hot. So I figured Sunday ought to be a good day to make crowd shots at Coney Island. I arrived at the beach at Coney Island at 4 a.m., Sunday. The beach was crowded mostly with young couples lying on the beach covered with blankets. I took pictures of them. When I asked them for their names they all said, ‘It’s just me and the wife,’ as they pointed to the girl on the sand. I went back to the city.48

Other images are not quite as playful in their acknowledgement of the photographer, such as “Murder on the Roof” (figure 5), which appeared in the August 14, 1941 issue of PM Daily. The photograph captures a murder victim, a candy store clerk, lying on his roof in he Bronx. Two detectives examine the body, while eleven onlookers catch a glimpse of the crime scene from a neighboring roof. Many of the spectators look bored and distracted, as if what they are witnessing is normal part of city life. One man, however, meets Weegee’s gaze directly, in an act that betrays a shared voyeurism. Furthermore, images in which the subjects hide their face from the photographer’s camera declare Weegee’s presence, as well as his power to expose the subject. This is the case, for example, of “Ermine-Wrapped Patron Caught in Gambling Den,” from the December 23, 1940 issue of PM Daily (figure 6).

Weegee’s images of crime scenes, fires, folks sleeping on park benches, tenement fire escapes, and boisterous, leering crowds have often been viewed as socially concerned photography, particularly given the photographer’s association with the left-leaning Photo League and liberal PM. The International Center of Photography’s 2006 publication, Unknown Weegee, specifically used the context of Weegee’s employment by PM and interactions with the

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48 PM, Monday, July 22, 1940, 16-17.
Photo League to “cast new light on Weegee’s work as a social documentary photographer.”

Within this monograph, Luc Sante argued that Weegee’s position as a populist artist caused him to “appeal to a working-class audience and reflected its outlook and concerns,” and that his connection with subjects and viewers – “who were the same people” – ultimately made him a humanist. Likewise, Cynthia Young remarked on Weegee’s “uniquely humanist style,” claiming that, “Weegee’s passion for humanity in all its foibles permeates his work, and it provides the basis for appreciating him for what he was – a social documentarian.”

Returning to Stettner, in 1977 he claimed that Weegee “confronted great brutality and affirmed our ability to withstand it. He confirmed, over and over again in his photographs, his own belief in humanity and a basic optimism that he felt would carry us through.” Many scholars have canonized Weegee as an “archetypal hard-bitten” hero who was made all the greater because of his compassionate eye. Twenty years after Stettner, in the International Center of Photography’s landmark volume Weegee’s World, Ellen Handy expressed a similar view, stating:

Whether cynic, seeker of innocence, or romantic, ultimately Weegee was solidly a humanist, and his New York is a seething mass of individuals with emotions, dreams, problems and stories. It differs in every way from the gleaming, depopulated, cubistic site portrayed by Precisionist photographers like Charles Sheeler. For those artists, as for Walker Evans, Berenice Abbott, and Ralph Steiner, the city was a place composed primarily of architecture. For Weegee, it was an event, composed of people, and buildings were not large-scale sculptures ornamenting the skyline but rather containers for myriad human experiences.

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49 Willis Hartshorn, Director’s foreword to Unknown Weegee, essays by Luc Sante, Paul Strand, Cynthia Young, and Ralph Steiner (New York: ICP/Steidl, 2006), 7.
50 Luc Sante, “City of Eyes,” in Ibid., 9.
51 Ibid., 10.
52 Cynthia Young, “Unknown Weegee,” in Ibid., 13.
53 Stettner, Weegee, 19.
54 Weegee is described as such in the sleeve description of the ICP’s 1997 publication; see Weegee, Miles Barth, Alain Bergala, and Ellen Handy, Weegee’s World. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997)
55 Ellen Handy, “Picturing New York, the Naked City: Weegee and Urban Photography,” in Barth, Weegee’s World, 154.
Calling upon one of Weegee’s most famous photographs, an image of two women weeping in the street as they watch their family members caught in a building engulfed in flames, published in *Naked City* with the title, “I Cried When I Took This Picture,” (figure 7), Handy argues that “Weegee’s own intimate connection with his subjects could derive from empathy as well as familiarity.” Handy goes on to contrast Weegee’s image to Paul Strand’s “Blind Woman” (1916; figure 8), saying that, while Strand’s woman is certainly an uncomfortable sight to behold, her inability to look back at the viewer makes her strictly an object of voyeurism. Weegee’s photograph, on the other hand, is immensely more powerful and intimate due to his “identification with the sorrow of the two women he photographed.”

Strand, in fact, foregrounded this position in his 1945 review of *Naked City*. Explaining that, “A journalist must also become an artist, bringing his understanding of life, his sensitivity, and, above all, his own participation in what he is experiencing to a high point of focus, sharpening its essential reality,” he felt that Weegee’s greatness lie in his ability to transcend the transitory informational level of news photography, and be “one who was not simply an occasional observer.” It is worth noting however, that, as Miles Orvell has posited, the tendency to turn Weegee into a social documentary photographer was rooted in the 1940s familiarity with Depression-era photography, such as that of the Farm Security Administration. “Anyone looking at the destitute through the eye of a camera had, it was assumed, a heart,” Orvell explains.

In truth, however, Weegee’s heart was that of a photojournalist, not a documentarian. Clive Scott’s discussion of the documentary photographer in his book *The Spoken Image*:

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56 Ibid., 153-154.
58 Ibid., 20.
Photography and Language is helpful to understanding this point, first in his distinctions between the two:

The photojournalist is interested in acts and events, the documentarist in predicaments and conditions. The photojournalist deals in captions, in the interventions of the commentator and newsprint; the documentarist deals in the bare essentials of titles and looks for images that will speak for themselves. The photojournalist’s photograph needs to tell us what something is; the documentary photograph wants to show us how it is. The photojournalist’s camera scoops...The documentary photographer’s camera insists.  

Scott goes on to note that, “the silencing of the photographer is, it seems, a condition of the production of the documentary photograph.” Weegee’s active resistance against this silencing through his bold photo credit and self-referential captioning, or “interventions of the commentator,” his scooping camera, and his focus on events rather than conditions align him with the nature of the photojournalist that Scott describes. Furthermore, Scott observes some aspects of the documentary photograph’s relation to its subject, which stand in opposition to Weegee’s: “We should remember that ‘documentary’ is an ideologically loaded word: we tend to document those we imagine to be less fortunate than ourselves – documentary photography is in some sense ‘victim photography’ – and for this reason, it can provoke only a charitable response…To take a photograph at all is to proclaim a superiority.” Scott continues, “Even in extreme situations, documentary photography manages to be a mutually agreed but unspoken contract between photographer and photographed; hence its distinguishing features of ‘compassion’ and ‘dignity.’”

One can argue that, if Weegee’s best-known photographs are of actual victims of murders, fires, and auto accidents, they are not “victim photography” as defined by Scott.

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61 Ibid., 79.
62 Ibid., 78.
63 Ibid., 85.
Weegee’s subjects are, to quote Martha Rosler, “victims of the camera—that is, of the photographer.” His approach to scenes of disaster is neither charitable nor sentimental; rather, it is nonchalant, as if to emphasize the idea that such occurrences go hand-in-hand with city life, as well as his unflappable disposition as a hard-boiled photographer in the face of horror. Weegee does not claim superiority - nor compassion - over his subjects, rather he projects himself on to them through captions such as “I Cried When I Took This Picture,” as a form of continuous and even narcissistic reminder that he, too, grew up sleeping on park benches and living in tenements, and that he is just half-a-step away from being one of the subjects of his photographs. Lacking the “compassion” and “dignity” of documentary photography that Scott describes, Weegee’s photographs are voyeuristic and invasive. Quite often his subjects cannot offer mutual agreement – they are dead, shocked, horror stricken, or handcuffed. It is in these moments that Weegee’s Speed Graphic inserts itself, calling attention to the presence of the photographer through his use of harsh flash. Even in times of pleasure and leisure, such as Weegee’s images of high society functions, or people at the movies or on the beach, the photographer robs his subjects of their consent and dignity by stealthily sneaking pictures through his employment of infrared film, thus claiming his authority over the scene. Weegee’s subjects, then, are “passive victims,” as Allan Sekula has termed those who “are granted a bogus Subjecthood when such status can be secured only from within, on their own terms.”

As such, the view of Weegee as a socially concerned documentary photographer leaves out the extent to which Weegee exploited the human element and capitalized on assumed empathy. Weegee was well versed in the importance of the human element through his years

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working as a news photographer. *PM* was a progressive forerunner in its use of the human-interest story, a subject that quickly became a staple in all tabloids. As Lee explains, this kind of story “took as photogenic and newsworthy seemingly trivial subjects.”\(^66\) While *PM*’s incorporation of these stories was rooted in its leftist activism, Weegee’s interest in them was centered on the fact that publishers paid money for pictures containing human drama, rather than another generic burning building. Weegee, in fact, openly discussed the importance of appealing to human sentiment, even if it meant employing artifice. In the 1937 *Popular Photography* article, for example, he advised, “Don’t just take a shot of the smashed automobile. Have somebody in it or near it – for human interest. If you can’t get anybody and conditions permit, shoot by remote control. Get everything ready, then pose yourself, pointing to the smashed windshield for instance. That puts salable value in your pictures so far as the newspapers are concerned.”\(^67\) In the same article he later reiterated his point, saying, “People often ask me how to tell saleable pictures from those that won’t sell. There are two points to remember: (1) a picture should tell a story and (2) it should have human interest.”\(^68\)

John Coplans was perhaps one of the earliest critics to contest the widely held view of Weegee as a socially committed documentarian when he observed that:

> There is a demonic edge to Weegee’s quirky endeavor that bears discussion. Many of Weegee’s photographs are morally dubious, not just because of their evident prurience, or his anti-social attitudes or even his outrageous hucksterism – it’s that he sold for money images that exposed and exploited the involuntary, naked emotions of people he photographed without their permission, often by deliberately spying. One does sense animus in Weegee. Sleep, self-absorption, and unawareness were continuing obsession, and people shocked, in terror, convulsed with pain or blown out of their minds were his special targets. In the moment he comes across them, after seeking them out instinctively, it’s as if he knows that in capturing their images, he has a supreme power over them. They cannot prevent his act. His distressed subjects were literally the most completely

\(^{66}\) Lee, “Human Interest Stories,” 77.
\(^{67}\) Weegee, quoted in Reilly, “Free-Lance Cameraman,” 23.
\(^{68}\) Ibid., 76.
vulnerable people imaginable at that moment – in extremis, torn by grief, or totally helpless. This is what makes Weegee’s work pitiless.69

Similarly, Allene Talmey reminds us that the driving force behind Weegee’s photography was not the desire to evoke social change, but was the search for money and fame: “He used his camera not to celebrate the people he photographed, but to make a living, a narrow, spare living.”70 While several of Weegee’s images certainly do elicit sympathy in the viewer, and Weegee cannot be said to be completely devoid of emotion, Weegee was notably apolitical and his primary interest was always self-promotion.

Weegee’s “I Cried When I Took This Picture,” is perhaps one of the strongest pieces of evidence against the personification of Weegee as a socially committed photographer. The image appeared in at least four different publications between 1940 and 1945; twice without a caption, once with the caption This Story Needs No Telling, and finally with the generic caption Fire.71 When Weegee included the print in his 1941 Photo League exhibition, the word “Roast” was written on it – a quotation of a common pun that Weegee supposedly heard while photographing at the scene: “And I noticed also at this particular fire, the aide to the chief came out and he says, ‘Boss, this is a roast.’ Meaning somebody, one or more persons had burned to death. That’s what the fireman called ‘a roast.’”72 Cynthia Young has noted that Weegee might have been prompted to change the title of the photograph to I Cried When I Took This Picture when it was published in Naked City because of the general criticism on the part of the Photo League members “that Weegee’s images did not reflect the social consciousness that the League was attempting to

69 Coplans, Weegee’s New York, 11-12.
71 For a discussion of each article the image appeared in see Lee, “Human Interest Stories,” 66.
foster.”" Furthermore, the self-reflective titling of this photograph not only implicates Weegee in the scene – Young describes this as “a new kind of self-portrait, making the photographer part of the subject of the picture”" – but reveals how problematic Weegee’s supposed empathy truly was. Accordingly, Walter Rosenblum, a Photo League member, admonished the hostility of Weegee’s vision and his refusal to intervene, as he commented on a series of before and after images by Weegee of a man who was hit by a taxi cab (figure 9). Rosenblum demanded to know, “Where was the photographer?”" Similarly, Colin Westerbeck’s response to I Cried When I Took This Picture is, “No, Weegee, you didn’t. You took that picture instead of crying.”” Weegee’s self-conscious decision to cast himself as both the author and subject in photographs such as these robs them of any aspects of sentimentality or idealization.

In 1943 and 1944 the Museum of Modern art included several of Weegee’s photographs in their exhibitions entitled Action Photography and Art in Progress, respectively. Following the critical acclaim of Weegee’s photographs in these exhibitions, Weegee was prompted by several friends and colleagues at PM to bring his photographs into a book. As Luc Sante observes, the publication of Naked City in 1945 “took the anonymous corpse-on-the-sidewalk photograph out of the pages of the tabloids and put it between clothbound covers, stamped with an author’s name.”” Through Naked City Weegee was able to further author his self-conscious persona, creating a book that is arguably so much about the role and presence of the photographer – what has motivated Pelizzon and West to read the book as an autobiography." Naked City was such a

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73 Young, “Unknown Weegee,” 15.
74 Ibid.
77 Sante, “City of Eyes,” 9.
78 See V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West, “‘Good Stories’ from the Mean Streets: Weegee and Hard-Boiled Autobiography,” The Yale Journal of Criticism vol. 17, no. 1 (Spring 2004), and “‘Crime Is My Oyster’: Weegee’s
success that after its publication Weegee became a kind of tour guide of New York City, offering members of high-society the privilege of riding alongside him in his Chevrolet, cruising the night’s underbelly for crime and disorder. This development further confirms what I have tried to point out in my discussion, noting that the book was not in hopes to evoke social change, but rather, to place the character of Weegee in higher demand. Through his continuous public self-fashioning and lessons he learned as a news photographer amid the culture of socially concerned documentary photography, Weegee’s navigation of his photographs from the realm of tabloid low-culture to their reception as an expressive medium was not motivated so much by the desire to achieve the status of “Artist,” rather, it was to achieve the status of “Famous.”

Narrative Mobility,” in Tabloid, Inc.: Crimes, Newspapers, Narratives, 145-177 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010).
Chapter 2
The “I” and *Naked City*

It was Louis Stettner who first suggested to Weegee, in 1941, that he turn his photographs into a book. Writing in the comment book for the first edition of *Murder Is My Business* at the New York Photo League, Stettner scrawled, “I suggest that he should write a book illustrated with his photographs.”79 Weegee’s own account in his autobiography, however, claims that it was not until 1944 when, in enthusiastic response to seeing his works in the exhibition *Art in Progress* at the Museum of Modern Art, his friends and colleagues at *PM* began to suggest the concept of a photo-book to him:

> In the spring of 1944, the Museum of Modern Art invited me to give a lecture. I accepted. After the lecture, a lot of people came over to tell me that I should have a book. I thought that this was a good idea. It had never occurred to me, but it was a good idea. I assembled my pictures, picking out the best of what had taken me almost ten years to accumulate, and began to make the round of the book publishers.80

However, finding a publisher didn’t come easy. As Weegee recounted, publisher after publisher turned him down, asking for the same clichés: “‘Where’s the picture of the sailor in the rowboat in Central Park?’ ‘Where’s the picture of the Fulton Fish Market?’”81 It took nearly two years for Weegee’s photo-book to become a reality. Thanks to William McCleery, the editor at *PM* who made a call to a friend at Essential Books, *Naked City* was born. McCleery would go on to write the book’s foreword.

The book was such an immediate success that it appeared in two different versions. Essential Books published a cloth bound edition with gravure reproductions, priced at $4.00, and

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81 Ibid.
Zebra Picture Books produced an abridged pulp paperback that sold for 25 cents a copy. While the affordable paperback edition allowed the populist audience that knew of Weegee from tabloid low-culture to obtain copies of the book, the cloth bound version, with its glossy pages, served to propel Weegee’s news photographs into the nascent realm of art photography. In fact, it was only the Essential Books’ edition that boasted an endorsement from Nancy Newhall, then acting curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. She wrote thus, “Through his sense of timing, Weegee turns the commonplaces of a great city into extraordinary psychological documents.”

McCleery’s foreword, which likewise was included only in the cloth bound version, ardently made the claim for Weegee as a fine artist while perpetuating the mythology of Weegee’s character. For example, McCleery ponders the photographer’s ability to “have been present at so many climactic moments in the city’s life,” coming to the conclusion that, “the simplest explanation of the phenomenon is that true love endows a man with superhuman qualities, and Weegee is truly in love with New York.” McCleery asserts that it is because Weegee is an “Artist” — with a capital “a” — that “it is possible for us to see his city and believe it, and love it — and yet want to make it better.”

Sure enough, people fell so much under Weegee’s love spell that Naked City went through six printings within its first six months of publication. Reviews appeared in all New York daily newspapers heralding Weegee as “a poet with a camera” and declaring that, “Weegee today is Art, as his new book, Naked City attests it.”

Paul Strand, who in PM described Weegee as “an artist, a man of serious and strong feeling,”

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82 Nancy Newhall, front-cover blurb to Naked City (New York: Essential Books, 1945).
83 William McCleery, foreword to Naked City, 6-7.
proclaimed that *Naked City* was “the first major contribution of day-to-day journalism to photography as a creative medium.”

One month after the June 1945 publication of *Naked City*, the *Saturday Review of Literature* described the collection of photographs as a “magnificent album of snapshots and love letters” about New York City. Though the *Saturday Review*’s assessment of the photo-book is not entirely wrong, its romanticization of Weegee’s relationship with New York City is certainly oversimplified. Published at the peak of Weegee’s career, *Naked City* was the result of the photographer’s accumulation of thousands of images taken over the preceding decade while working as a freelance photographer for various tabloids and New York daily newspapers, notably *PM*. Throughout this time Weegee’s driving force was fame. From the stamp on the back of his photographs that read “Weegee the Famous,” to the ways in which he constructed the character of Weegee for the public’s consumption in interviews and his own writings, constantly insisting upon the image of himself as a hard-boiled, anti-intellectual, psychic savant, “Weegee was always busy creating Weegee.”

As I have suggested in my earlier discussion on documentary photography in Thirties America, Weegee’s *Naked City* is far apart from the tradition of socially concerned photo-books that were published during this decade, such as Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) or James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Looking at Weegee’s book against the example of these photo-books, two of the most important of the time, yields a rethinking of the intent and importance of *Naked City*. The main point of these publications was, as William Stott explained, “to make the reader feel he

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87 Ibid., 20.
was firsthand witness to a social condition.” Unlike these photo-books, Weegee’s is inherently self-reflexive, placing primacy on the presence of the photographer at events rather than insisting upon change through the photographer’s compassionate eye. By exploiting the lessons he learned from his career as a photographer for the tabloid press about creating dramatic appeal through images and text, Weegee employed the format of the photo-book as an outlet through which he could assert his authority as a photographer and further promote his name.

*Naked City* capitalized on tabloid sensibilities, namely the photo-essay, a form that became popular in magazines such as *Look* and *Life* in the late 1930s. As cultural historians V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West have observed, “Though *Naked City* was much longer than the short spreads presented in these magazines, it partook of the same impulse to employ visual sequencing and text as part of an extended mediation on serious subjects.” The photo-essay, as W.J.T. Mitchell has noted, has tended to be “by and large, the product of progressive liberal consciences, associated with political reform and leftist causes.” Such “liberal consciences,” however, have often employed the photo-essay in a wide range of aesthetics that did not necessarily comply with that of tabloids. *Naked City* is exceptional in this regard.

Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* reduced the interweaving of photos with text. Though the images are reproduced on facing pages, no “key” is provided that describes what is depicted. A reading of James Agee’s text in the back of the book may yield some clues to a narrative connecting the images to what is written, but given the complete separation of the text and images, these connections “must be excavated.” Evans and Agee, in fact, expressly stated

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93 Ibid., 291.
this intention in the preface to their book: “The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the
texts, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative.”

Perhaps more evocative of
the tabloid photo-essay is Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*, the layout of which balances text, “captions that quote people saying things they never said,” below or alongside photographs—typically one, sometimes two per page. While, of the
books mentioned here, *You Have Seen Their Faces* is the most similar to *Naked City* in regards
to layout, Weegee’s photo-book maintains a quite obvious tabloid aesthetic. At times placing as
many as six images on a page, with extended captions that resemble newspaper reportage—in
length only, not content, as will be discussed in the following pages—*Naked City* evidences
Weegee’s bringing the language of popular culture into the realm of the photo-book.

In his book *Picture Theory*, Mitchell uses the term “photographic essay” rather than
photo-book, and argues that what defines the medium is “the conjunction of photography and
language.” He goes on to note that what is unique to the photo essay is “the intimate
fellowship between the informal or personal essay, with its emphasis on a private ‘point of
view,’ as memory, and autobiography, and photography’s mythic status as a kind of materialized
memory trace imbedded in the context of personal associations and private ‘perspectives.’”

Surely, Weegee’s *Naked City*, which is deeply imbued with a self-referential, autobiographical
nature, emulates this trait. Through a case study of Agee and Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous
Men*, Mitchell discusses the “central formal requirements of the photographic essay.” While
Agee and Evans achieve the qualities of independence and co-equality, as stated in their preface,
through the complete separation of words and images, it would seem that in so doing *Let Us Now

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94 James Agee and Walker Evans, preface to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), XV.
95 Stott, “The Documentary Book,” 221.
97 Ibid., 289.
*Praise Famous Men* attempts to disguise the autobiographical nature that Mitchell describes, and which *Naked City* openly embodies.

Mitchell argues that, “the aestheticizing separation of Evans’s images from Agee’s text is not…simply a formal characteristic but an ethical strategy, a way of preventing easy access to the world they represent.” Alternatively, Stott provides an exploration of a more integrated text-image relationship by calling upon Caldwell and Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*. He remarks on the emotional use of text, stating that, “If the pictures in a documentary book stimulated most emotion, though, the emotion was guided by text.” He observes that, in opposition to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in Caldwell and Bourke-White’s book the text “told who was suffering where, and why, and what could be done to help.” These texts were, however, completely fictional—the captions were fabricated quotes intended to invoke pity in the reader by reducing the lives and consciousness of the tenant farmers. Stott observes, “The subjects say either ‘Look at me, how wretched my life is,’ or ‘Look at me, my life is so wretched I don’t even know it.’” While a parallel may be seen between Caldwell and Bourke-White and Weegee in their favoring of storytelling over fact, in their “spirit that regards its craft, its effect, rather than its subject,” as Stott declared, *You Have Seen Their Faces* remained rooted in the documentary tradition of providing a verbal commentary on social conditions. Weegee’s use of text is radically new as it constantly vies for the position of narrative dominance and calls attention to the producer, stating authorship and self-fashioning.

Though small in format, measuring 9 ¼ x 6 ½ inches, *Naked City* is bursting with almost 230 photographs spread across eighteen chapters, replete with short mediating texts and captions.

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98 Ibid., 295.
100 Ibid., 221.
101 Ibid., 223.
written by Weegee. The book’s chapters, which are thematically organized around the subjects he was most recognized for as a tabloid photographer, share many of the same section headings he used in *Murder Is My Business*: “Fires,” “Murders,” “Sudden Death,” “The Opera,” “Pie’ Wagon,” and “Coney Island.” These chapters create an episodic structure that develops around the central narrative on the act of looking and of Weegee’s own self-representation. As the book unfolds, Weegee’s position evolves from a distanced, passive observer, to a man of the people, and finally, in the concluding chapters “Personalities” and “Camera Tips,” to a member of the artistic elite and a master photographer. Weegee creates these personas and positions them at the forefront of the publication through his distinctive voice that loudly asserts itself in the textual passages that introduce each chapter and numerous image captions that range from banal or punning descriptions to blatantly autobiographical commentary. Beginning with the second paragraph of the book’s introduction, Weegee announces himself in the first person as the subjective narrator. He writes, “For the pictures in this book I was on the scene.” As Pelizzon and West observed, “The textual passages insist that we must imagine Weegee himself not simply as a reporter but as an active participant in the depicted scenes. The clusters of photos thus serve as moments in a story about a man’s intimate relationship to the city.”

While very few of the photographs are linked in a temporal sequence, Weegee’s arrangement of the photographs and text insists that each page should be read consecutively as part of the larger whole. This whole, being Weegee’s awareness of his role in authoring a distinct version of New York City, is succinctly captured in the book’s frontispiece—a view of the Manhattan skyline illuminated by a flash of lightning (figure 10). This photograph is markedly different than those that follow in the book, and Weegee’s oeuvre for that matter, in that its

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subject is the city’s architectural elements, which are missing from the rest of Weegee’s work. Not only does this photograph serve to set the location of what is to follow, but, as Ellen Handy has observed, the flash of light is a pun, acting as a stand-in for Weegee and his camera’s invasive flash blub: “In this photograph, nature imitates art, or at least Weegee.”

Thus, the image is just as much a postcard of his beloved city as it is a reflection of Weegee and his authoritative self.

The inside cover of the cloth bound edition of the book is lined with photographs of the photographer in his car (figure 11), reinforcing for the reader the centrality of the photographer as the narrator of the book. On the left, he is portrayed putting on galoshes, which presumably came from the stash of miscellaneous equipment in the trunk, as a sign of Weegee’s ever preparedness to be first at the scene and capture the best shot; on the right, he is sitting at a typewriter in the back of his trunk, perhaps typing notes or captions for his photographs on the spot. Furthermore, Weegee’s preface, entitled “A Book is Born,” gives to Weegee - not to New York City nor to his photographs - the starring role. Despite this momentary recognition of his subjects—“I caught New Yorkers with their masks off…not afraid to Laugh, Cry, or make Love”—ultimately, Weegee’s opening text is self-reflexive, saying, “What I felt I photographed, laughing and crying with them.”

Importantly, the only photograph in this section of the book is a self-portrait of Weegee holding “his love—his Camera” (figure 12). Serving to reinforce the position of the man behind the camera to be as important as, if not more than, the subjects he photographs, this image also illustrates Weegee’s voyeurism. His camera is “at once a barrier

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104 Ellen Handy, “Picturing New York, the Naked City: Weegee and Urban Photography,” in *Weegee’s World*, Barth, essays by Miles Barth, Alain Bergala, and Ellen Handy (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 149.

105 Weegee, *Naked City*, 11.
and a mediating instrument,“106 a tool which brought him fame through the distant and unconcerned act of looking.

This voyeurism is played out in the first two chapters, first as a study of the viewed, followed by the exposure of the viewer. Chapter one, “Sunday Morning in Manhattan,” offers the calmest version of New York to be found in the book, with views of the city and its inhabitants when they are still asleep. The photographs depict the only moments in the entire book when Weegee stands at a distance from his subjects; additionally, this is the only chapter in which not a single image contains a figure whose gaze directly meets Weegee’s camera. Rather, the figures, who sleep on tenement fire escapes, park benches, sidewalks, wherever they can find it, are so undisturbed by the photographer’s presence that it seems they are not aware of his being there at all (figure 13). Weegee liked to push these invasive boundaries, often employing infrared film to secretly photograph in the dark without flash. A later chapter, “Coney Island,” includes six photographs taken on the beach in this surreptitious manner (figure 14). Looking at these images, one can imagine Weegee quietly patrolling the beach, creeping within feet of his entwined subjects, and covertly recording their intimate moments. Weegee’s prying gaze, which exploits the unconscious state of the viewed, welcomes the reader to stare at the subjects without challenge.

Chapter two, however, takes a dramatic shift from distanced, passive observation to deliberate voyeurism by way of the theme of curiosity and spectacle. “The Curious Ones…” opens with a series of images of men, women, and children on the sidewalks of New York “always finding time to stop and look at a fire…murder.”107 While the images depict the involvement of spectators in such a way as to expose the general interest of the public in

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107 Weegee, Naked City, 34.
violence, they serve as an attempt to justify and soften the coldness of Weegee’s nosing eye. A paired set of photographs on facing pages, for example, depicts a time-lapsed scene of a crowd watching a fire (figure 15). Weegee explains that the first photograph was taken in the afternoon and when he came back to the same spot that evening another crowd was still captivated by the tragedy. More importantly, however, Weegee’s image and caption of the afternoon photograph draws attention to the photographer’s presence at the scene—a tactic that Weegee employed throughout *Naked City*. While several of the figure’s gazes meet Weegee’s, one woman on the left, despite the context of the heartbreaking event, flashes a smile at Weegee’s camera. As Weegee’s caption boasts, “they are watching me take their picture.”  

108 Thus, his presence is just as much a spectacle as the burning building that is out of frame. Weegee’s focusing on the spectators rather than the disaster serves to establish the guise that he will continue to insist upon throughout the remainder of *Naked City*. Rather than being about a shared sympathy with his subjects, as Weegee would have us believe, the focus of his images shifts from the thing observed to Weegee’s act of observation, and subsequently his being observed, from a self-serv ing position of power.

A number of the photographs throughout the book contain figures who not only meet Weegee’s gaze, but also smile, revealing his darkly humorous, sardonic observation that, perhaps, his presence signals the subject’s recognition of their fifteen seconds of fame to come in the next morning’s newspaper. Weegee’s captions often reiterate his subject’s acknowledgement of his presence, such as with the image of a man carrying a small child out of a burning building.

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108 Ibid., 36.
which is captioned thus, “He is surprised to find me there with my camera. He must wonder if my studio is on the fire engine...or if I sleep in the Fire House”109 (figure 16).

The images of those who shield their faces from Weegee’s prying camera lens are most revealing of both his voyeurism and imposition on the subject. Two photographs in the chapter “Pie Wagon,” for example, reveal the power of exposure that the photographer holds over his subjects (figures 17 and 18). “They gave me a lot of trouble as I tried to photograph them…covering up their faces with handkerchiefs,”110 Weegee recounts with annoyance in one caption. As he explains in the chapter’s opening text, he not only felt the implicit right to invade the privacy of others, but relished in his position of control over others: “The ones that ‘cover’ up their faces are the Fences…who start crying and pleading with me not to take their pictures…as their poor mothers will see it in the newspapers and it will break their hearts…they should have thought of that before they went into the crime business…I disregard their pleas and crocodile tears…”111 Speaking at a latter date, he recounted a time when he had to argue with a jewel thief to allow him to take her picture, he wrote:

She says, ‘I know what you want, you want to take my picture. Why should I let you? So my friends, relatives and mother can see it on the front pages of the newspapers?’ I said, ‘Now wait a minute lady, don’t be so hasty. You have your choice. Do you want your picture to appear in the papers, a rogues gallery picture with your number underneath it? Or would you let me make a nice, home portrait study of you using nice, soft lighting like Rembrandt would have done.’ Talking and arguing with her, I convinced her that that was the only logical thing for her to do, to pose for a picture. Now that was a good catch you might say for me, besides the New York cops.112

Two chapters, “Fires” and “Murders,” not only provide the reader with many of Weegee’s most iconic images of subjects that were his bread and butter as a tabloid

109 Ibid., 58.
110 Ibid., 170.
111 Ibid., 160.
photographer, but also evidence his strong narrative impulse and use of text to reiterate his position as author. The introductory text to “Fires” constructs the narrative pattern that Weegee will develop with his photographs to follow, all the while insisting upon the photographer’s presence at the scene. First, Weegee describes the tendency for people to risk their own lives to save their pets from fires, telling the story of a time when he confronted a woman with a box of snakes who informed him that “she was a dancer who used the snakes in her act,” then shifting to emphasize the brutal reality of death that fires bring. Weegee makes his personal stance clear with the affecting statement, “This always makes me cry…but what can I do…taking pictures is my job,” and finally, he asserts the importance of his photographs as evidence to solve disputes between firemen of who should receive credit for rescues.113

Weegee called further attention to the job of “taking pictures” through the inclusion of the record stub of a thirty-five dollar check in payment for photographs from Time, Inc. (figure 19). In the opening text to the chapter entitled “Murders,” Weegee explains, “I got the above statement with check from Life magazine. Twenty-five dollars was for the murder picture on the right…the other picture they bought was only a cheap murder, with not many bullets…so they only paid ten dollars for that.”114 The inclusion of this image illuminates not only the photographer’s role as author of images, but also the commercial origin of his work. As Richard Meyer remarked, “The murders are noted but not shown in Weegee’s photograph; what is shown is the economic transaction between freelance photographer and magazine publisher that typically remains unseen by the public.”115

113 Ibid., 52.
114 Ibid., 78.
This particular emphasis on the commercial, tabloid origin of his photographs is a revealing reminder of Weegee’s “hard-boiledness” and the lessons he learned from the picture press about using images and text in combination to tell scintillating stories, all the while promoting himself. Throughout his career he actively recycled his photographs through their recaptioning and resignification in their varied appearances in multiple publications overtime, as evidenced in the discussion of his famous photograph “I Cried When I Took This Picture” in chapter one. *Naked City* offered the photographer a new place to further explore the adaptability of his images. By presenting photographs in a new context, he was able to cut all ties with their origins and attach dramatically new meanings and stories to each photograph.

For example, “Murders” reappropriates a photograph that originally ran in *PM* on October 9, 1941 capturing school children in the tragic instant of witnessing a murder across from P.S. 143 (figure 20). In *Naked City*, Weegee writes, “A woman relative cried…but neighborhood dead-end kids enjoyed the show when a small-time racketeer was shot and killed.” Here Weegee not only recasts the students as tough neighborhood kids, but he also crafts a fiction in which the crowd’s gaze meets the opposite page where the murder’s victim is revealed. The caption beneath the bloody corpse reads, “Here he is…as he was left in the gutter. He’s got a D.O.A. tied to his arm…that means Dead On Arrival.” The two facts are not temporally connected. As Anthony W. Lee has observed, “the problem…is that the photograph of the dead man belonged to another street, event, and murder, in no way related to the original scene from which *Their First Murder* was taken.”

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116 Weegee, *Naked City*, 86.
117 Pelizzon and West note, “The phrase ‘dead-end kids’ clearly alludes to the celebrated young actors who starred in various crime films such as *Dead End* and *Angels with Dirty Faces.*” Pelizzon and West, “Crime Is My Oyster,” 169.
118 Weegee, *Naked City*, 87.
The chapter “Fires” offers a prime case study of such a trick of de-contextualization that Weegee played on his readers. With the exception of the first image of a burning building (figure 21), the photographs in this chapter focus exclusively on the human drama of the rescue of people, kittens, mannequins, paintings, a Torah, and the tragedy of dead bodies. Although it is more than likely that each of the twenty-five photographs in this chapter were taken at different fires, no specific context is provided for each of the images and many have no captions. This presentation induces the reader to think that the photographs were all taken at the location of a single fire. In fact, Weegee’s sequencing of images from different stories creates an elaborate play in which the images riff off each other—an image of a man without pants is next to one of a man putting on his pants; on one page a fireman holds newborn kittens, on the facing page a different officer holds a recused dog; a rescued girl and her violin mirror a salvaged angel and her lute; a Jewish man who saved the Torah from a synagogue is juxtaposed with a rescued Santa Claus. “Fires” reaches its climax with the photograph “I Cried When I Took This Picture.”

Weegee’s use of text in the caption, however, prioritizes the photographer’s presence and response over that of the subject’s heart wrenching drama (figure 22). This photograph’s presence in *Naked City* is so far removed from its original context that it allows Weegee to “view the picture not as tied to a place and time or to a specific set of historical actors but instead as an occasion for maudlin self-reflection,” as Lee observed.  

Similarly, in the chapter “The Bowery,” Weegee places an image of a man sleeping in a mission beside half a page of text that declares, “Not so long ago I, too, used to walk on the Bowery, broke…The sight of a bed with white sheets in a furniture store window, almost drove me crazy. God…a bed was the most desirable thing in the world. In the summer I would sleep in

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120 Ibid., 68.
Bryant Park…But when it got colder I transferred over to the Municipal Lodging House…I didn’t have a nickel to my name”¹²¹ (figure 23). This passage emphasizes Weegee’s own experiences in such a way that renders the text limiting to the image beside it and the other images of the homeless sleeping on sidewalks and park benches. As Mitchell remarked of the text-photo relation in photo-essays, “We move less easily, less quickly from reading to seeing.”¹²² Weegee’s words place his experiences at the fore, causing the reader to be unable to look back at the image without seeing it as a piece of his own autobiography.

In other instances, the text reveals a loose approach to fact and temporality as a storytelling tactic. For example, a series of three photographs of before and after a man is hit by a taxi are all comprised under the narrative of “the first time an accident is photographed before and after it happened”¹²³ (figure 9). Included in the chapter “Psychic Photography,” Weegee uses this sequence as attempted evidence of his psychic abilities to intuit the scene of a crime or disaster. Truthfully, however, it is likely that after taking a photograph of a bum seated on the street, Weegee walked away and when, about a block later, he heard the commotion, he returned to photograph the aftermath of the crash. Weegee, as author of this version of the story, would have us believe that the man will soon die after having received the last rites. When the images originally appeared in PM, however, it was confirmed that the man was taken to the hospital and “expected to recover.”¹²⁴ This use of text in Naked City serves as a perfect illustration of Clive Scott’s observation that:

> The caption seems to allow the intervention of the operator through a side door, as a bystanding consciousness presiding over the image…The caption never coincides with the image, never exists in the same time: it either precedes the image…or succeeds it, acts as a reaction. Consequently, meaning itself is

¹²¹ Ibid., 58.
¹²² Mitchell, Picture Theory, 287.
¹²³ Ibid., 206.
displaced, removed from the image: the image is either only part of a metaphor or the instigator of a presiding voice, which, in return, endows it with a justification.125

As author, Weegee exemplifies this latter approach in which his voice presides over what is depicted in the photograph. While a more lighthearted narrative is addressed in the chapter “Frankie,” notably one of the only instances in which a figure is identified by name, Weegee again fabricates the emotional arc, this time of a woman in the audience at a Frank Sinatra concert. Here, over a series of four spreads, Weegee creates a call-and-response play between Sinatra’s singing on the left-hand page and a woman’s emotional reactions on the right. Placed just about at the center of the book, this chapter signals a distinct emotional shift in the book—from fires, murders, and accidents, to the subject of entertainment, whether it be at the circus, the opera, a bar in the Bowery, or Coney Island.

Throughout Naked City Weegee presents himself as a hard-boiled, man of the people, often underscoring his working-class background, as in “The Bowery.” The language and tone he employs in the texts serve to emphasize his tough-guy authenticity. The book is replete with popular lowbrow slang phrases such as “bumped-off,” “high-class,” and “cutie,” misspellings, and ellipsis, evoking a freehandedness and tabloid aesthetic. As Pelizzon and West note, “by the time Weegee published Naked City it would have been difficult to swing a stick without hitting some mainstream author writing in this mode.”126 However, as Naked City unfolds, Weegee’s desire to be seen as a serious, expressive photographer begins to reveal itself.

Perhaps as a nod, or even a challenge, to the Photo League’s Harlem Document, Weegee included a chapter on Harlem. Harlem Document was generated by the Feature Group, a special documentary production unit operating under the auspices of the Photo League and initiated by

Aaron Siskind in 1936. Siskind and eight other photographers worked with Michael Carter, an African-American sociologist, with the intent of publishing a book of photographs accompanied with texts. Although the book was never published, the project yielded many photographs taken between the years 1937 and 1940. Siskind’s approach to *Harlem Document* stands in stark contrast to Weegee’s method of working. In fact, Cater met over the course of two years with the group of photographers and provided them with background information and statistics on Harlem, as well as introduced them to the neighborhood’s residents and leaders. As Siskind discussed his approach, “There is first the examination of the idea of the project. Then the visits to the scene, the casual conversations, and more formal interviews – talking, and listening, and looking, looking. You read what’s been written, and dig out facts and figures for your own writing…And finally, the pictures themselves, each one planned, talked, taken, and examined in terms of the whole.”

In comparison with Siskind’s well thought-out book project, Weegee’s photographs are more experiential, less planned and researched. In the opening text for his chapter on Harlem, Weegee offers a rare moment of political commentary and forethought on the subject, addressing discrimination, noting the tensions between whites and black in the neighborhood tenements. The way of working for Siskind and Weegee was also different. Siskind used a large format camera on a tripod, which required that his photographs be planned and posed. Weegee’s equipment, on the other hand, allowed him mobility and spontaneity, often times creating a much less obtrusive relationship with his subjects than did Siskind. Weegee’s “Harlem” is composed of images of riots and broken windows, as well as dancing at a masquerade and Easter Sunday morning. In his captions, Weegee presents himself as someone who, through his smarts and

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knowledge of what makes a unique picture, is able to mediate between both sides of a great divide and capture scenes that other photographers would fail to see. Of a church congregation “dressed in their best” for Easter Sunday, Weegee remarks that they are “the same as any other decent people...they’re no different...these are the people the papers don’t write about or photograph.”

Similarly, Weegee’s text recalling an evening in which he was photographing the opening of the opera, boasts, “Press agents, seeing my camera, pointed out notables to me but I refused to waste film or bulbs as I don’t photograph society unless they have a fight and get arrested or they stand on their heads.” Throughout this narrative text, Weegee seems to grapple with two sides of himself—he simultaneously plays up his street-wise, low-brow persona by criticizing the wealth of those in attendance (“War or no war, the Rolls Royces, big and shiny, kept arriving. Some had two chauffeurs with the usual gas ration sticker in the windshield”) and claiming that he could “almost smell the smugness,” while also presenting himself as one who could mingle with this crowd, explaining that papers and syndicates would send “only high class photographers who know society” to cover such an event. Weegee even recalled a moment when he found himself in private box on the grand tier of the theatre with the board of directors of the Metropolitan Opera House: “There was another occupant, a director who kept his high silk hat on. I gave him a couple of dirty looks but he paid no attention to me or the usher.” Weegee’s presentation of himself as someone who is on the same level as the members of high-society is entirely new to the persona he developed in Naked City. Within the content of the photo-book, Weegee was thus able eschew his street-wise, tabloid persona in favor of one which might appeal

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128 Weegee, Naked City, 198.
129 Ibid., 125.
130 Ibid., 124.
131 Ibid., 125.
to a more refined, cultural audience. For example, a photograph of four men in silk top hats was included in *Murder Is My Business* with the caption “High Hatted Hitch Hikers.” This witty, contemptuous caption reveals Weegee’s impression of the gentlemen’s haughtiness and emphasizes a class division that he plays into. However, when Weegee includes the same image in *Naked City*, he changes the caption to, “The four High Hats are waiting for James and the limousine.” The fact that Weegee now claims to know the name of the men’s chauffeur interjects him into the scene on a personal level—he is on a first-name basis with these high-society folks.

As *Naked City* concludes, it becomes more reliant upon text with the second to last chapter containing only two photographs among five pages of text, and the final chapter, “Camera Tips,” being five pages of Weegee’s insight into the world of a professional photographer. “Personalities,” the penultimate chapter, features portraits of two quite different photographers—Alfred Stieglitz, the great modernist and proponent of photography as art, and Pat Rich, staff photographer at the *Police Gazette* and “Virtuoso of the Cheese Cake (leg) photo” (figures 24 and 25). Pondering Stieglitz’s fame, Weegee begins his meditation on the photographer with the question “what did his fame get him?” He recounts a time when he saw Stieglitz walking the street alone and asked him, “You Stieglitz? I’m Weegee. You may have read about me in magazines, or seen my pictures in *PM*.” That Stieglitz did not know whom “Weegee the Famous” was astonished the press photographer. In 1944, at Stieglitz’s last gallery, An American Place, the two photographers talked and Weegee took his photograph. Weegee determinately states: “Was he a success? No, he was a failure. What about the photographers he has known and started and helped? They were successful… why?... because they had wanted

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132 Ibid., 137.  
133 Ibid., 237.  
134 Ibid., 233.
money and were now working for the slick-paper magazines… because they were politicians and showmen who knew how to sell themselves." While he repeatedly reminds the reader of Stieglitz’s poor health and finances, he recognizes the importance of the photographer’s influence and wonders of he could provide answers to questions that Weegee was asked when he lectured at the Museum of Modern Art for a program related to the exhibition *Art in Progress* in the spring of 1944.

While Weegee’s short text on Pat Rich contains none of the disparaging remarks that were reserved for Stieglitz, touching mainly on the police photographer’s sensational, sexy, low-culture images, Weegee seems to want to merge the populist appeal of Rich with the high-art status of Stieglitz. As Miles Orvell observes, Stieglitz’s presence in *Naked City* is both “an act of homage, [and] an act of self-assertion and challenge on Weegee’s part, an effort to reach across the culture gap, from low to high.” As such, Weegee’s final chapter, “Camera Tips,” makes sense as being the photographer’s attempt at cementing his force as a skilled and respected photographer. Making reference to the many lectures he has given and the questions he has received from aspiring news photographers, Weegee reveals his secrets, ending with the directive, “When you find yourself beginning to feel a bond between yourself and the people you photograph, when you laugh and cry with their laughter and tears, you will know you are on the right track.” Thus, by the conclusion of *Naked City*, the subject is no longer the city, but Weegee’s authority as a photographer, and his drive towards surpassing the great master, Stieglitz.

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135 Ibid., 234.
137 Weegee, *Naked City*, 243.
Naked City marks the apex of Weegee’s career. By shifting his photographs from ephemeral tabloid pages to a book Weegee was able to transcend the transient nature of those pictures and solidify his name. Amid the affected guise of social commentary that Weegee attempted to project, Naked City’s genius lie in its distinct tabloid-as-art aesthetic, as a subjective, expressive medium capable of eliciting an active, engaged response from the viewer. Despite the publication’s massive success, however, Naked City also marked the beginning of a decline in Weegee’s career.

One year after his first book’s publication, Weegee produced a follow-up photo-book, Weegee’s People. While this second publication, a collection of portraits, offers a handful of striking images, the overall impression is one of bland repetition. Due perhaps to the significant lack of text and the relatively sparse layout—that is to say, a distinctly more traditional approach to the photo-book that foregoes tabloid sensibilities—Weegee’s People lacks the emotion and “Weegee-esque” charisma of Naked City. As Weegee’s works came into higher demand, entering museum collections and gaining a market, Weegee thought that he ought to be creating more “artistic” and somewhat austere photography. The result was a series of portraits of famous people achieved with trick lenses, which have been received by-and-large as kitsch failures. Weegee seems to have lost sight, as time went on that it was his sensational, raw images of New York City, paired with his manufactured tough-guy persona that had made him “Weegee the Famous.”

138 In the years following the presentation of Murder Is My Business at the Photo League, Edward Steichen acquired several of Weegee’s prints for the Museum of Modern Art and included them in the museum’s exhibitions Action Photography (1943) and Art in Progress (1944).
Chapter 3

The Subjugation of Weegee’s People

Wanting to capitalize upon the success of *Naked City*, Weegee published his second photo-book, *Weegee’s People*, one year later. In the introduction to the 1946 publication, Weegee claimed that this was the book he wanted to make. He was no longer required to work odd hours, chasing disasters and crimes; he could now afford to live a life of leisure and photograph the things he liked rather than what would sell:

> After my first book, *Naked City*, had run into three editions within a few months, I found myself in a confident and happy mood. And the way I felt—well, that’s the way I take pictures, so I parked my car and cut the wires of the police radio set in it. I was through with the newspaper game—through with chasing ambulances to scenes of crime and horror—I was saturated with the tears of women and with children sleeping on fire escapes. Now I could really photograph the subjects I liked—I was free.\(^{139}\)

Despite his newfound freedom and supposed love for the subject matter, however, *Weegee’s People* did not see nearly the same success as *Naked City*. Few reviews from the time of the book’s publication seem to exist. The few that do, gloss over the content of the book, instead, recalling Weegee’s past and noted persona as a news photographer, and consider the very different book as simply a pleasant experience, which may be “read in ten minutes.” Writing in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1947, Howard Swain remarked, “It’s an interesting picture book, however, and one that would be well-placed on a library table where a visitor left to his own devices for a little while could see it without finding some other volume you hope to keep until you have finished it.”\(^{140}\) Weegee’s scholars have since continuously referred to the photographer’s second photo-book only in passing and widely share the common opinion of the work as lackluster and


lazy. Miles Orvell, for example, has viewed *Weegee’s People* as, “an innocuous and largely humorous collection of urban types from the perfectly normal to the strangely bizarre. Each portrait exhibits some emotion, but there is a certain blandness to the collection as a whole.” While this interpretation certainly carries a significant amount of truth—the book is, indeed, lacking in excitement and any real narrative—*Weegee’s People* does bear interest when one considers how Weegee’s voyeurism is played out in this context. *Weegee’s People* yields an understanding of a new approach by the author to his self-fashioning and manipulation of both his subjects and viewers.

Containing over 260 photographs, spread across eleven chapters, *Weegee’s People* is comprised primarily of portraits of New York City’s inhabitants. The subjects range from the homeless to members of high-society mingling over drinks; from children at a movie theatre to a lively jazz bar full of dancing. Unlike *Naked City*’s chapters, which are tightly edited and read as photo essays from a single night’s fire, circus, or opera event, the organization of *Weegee’s People* is much more sprawling, even aimless. Within a single chapter Weegee presents ambling scenes from various events that took place at different locations and times of day. The chapters have generic headings indicating that the following pages may contain images of people sleeping, various activities taking place on Saturday night, or a cast of actors backstage, and there is little to suggest any significant narrative or themes throughout the book.

One thread, however, is Weegee’s new status and his freedom from the demands of work on assignment. In the opening chapter, “The Park Bench,” he presents familiar images of folks on park benches at night, sleeping or kissing. However, the viewer faces quickly a new side of this photographer. Mixed in with the nighttime scenes are many others taken in daylight.

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representing quieter and more innocent actions such as a nanny looking after infant twins in a stroller, two men playing a game of chess, another man reading the funny papers. These photographs begin to reveal Weegee’s new lifestyle, which is almost that of a wanderer, free to spend his days as he likes.

The second chapter, “Society,” bears photographs reminiscent of those included in the chapter “The Opera” in Naked City. Here, however, Weegee’s images are more intimate. He seems to be familiar with his subjects, not only spending time at the opera with them, but also mingling about at receptions and Sammy’s Night Club on the Bowery (figure 26). Weegee’s introduction makes it clear that he felt more entitled than ever to be included in high-society happenings. As he writes, “For the shots in the society chapter, I used infra-red film and invisible light because they forgot to give me a ticket to the Opera opening and I had to sneak in with Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt’s party and had to take pictures in the dark in order not to receive the bum’s rush.”

Despite this mishap, however, Weegee asserts throughout the book that he has full, welcomed access to the city’s happenings. Whether he moved about a movie theatre or sub-cellar musical parties; the backstage at the opera or the front row at a jazz club; the Cities Service Company or the Museum of Modern Art, Weegee could, seemingly, come and go as he chose. New York was his city, and these were his people.

Although Weegee created a handful of new photographs for his second book, many of the works included here were rejects from Naked City. One image does, however, appear in both publications. The view of the Manhattan skyline illuminated by a flash of lightning (figure 10) is reproduced in Weegee’s People on a page that announces that the book is “By the Author of Naked City,” and thus becomes self-referential. Weegee’s use of this image, perhaps his most anomalous, as his calling card in Weegee’s People, reaffirms Ellen Handy’s reading, discussed

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142 Weegee, Weegee’s People, 3-4.
earlier, that this work is an allegory for Weegee and his camera’s relationship with the city.\textsuperscript{143} This is also indicative of a new approach to the photo-book—a removal of his boisterous voice in lieu of a more distanced, surreptitious stance as author.

Unlike \textit{Naked City}, which featured images of Weegee on the book’s inside covers and his self-portrait on the page preceding the introduction, the only likeness of the author in \textit{Weegee’s People} is found seven pages in, and bizarrely, it holds much less creative stature and self-importance. Significantly, Weegee is not shown at work, as he was in \textit{Naked City}, but rather, asleep on a bench in Washington Square Park (figure 27). As he explains in the book’s introduction:

\begin{quote}
I spent all summer in Washington Square Park resting after the publication of my first book, \textit{Naked City}, hence the pictures in the chapter titled “Park Bench.” One afternoon I fell asleep and a girl photographer snapped my picture and mailed the film to me. I like this picture of myself because it’s real, and I think it’s an improvement over the usual pictures of authors—the kind where the author poses with pipe and book in hand and the usual dog by the fireplace—not a care in the world, not even a worry about royalties or sales of movie rights.\textsuperscript{144}
\end{quote}

The difference of Weegee’s own portrayal is remarkable. In \textit{Naked City}, Weegee’s gaze and imposing Speed Graphic camera look at out at the viewer, reinforcing the author’s position of power. For example, the cigar that hangs from Weegee’s mouth serves to create his tough-guy persona. In the photograph in \textit{Weegee’s People}, however, Weegee has become one of his many sleeping subjects, vulnerable and unaware of his onlooker’s voyeurism. This is the first instance of many to follow in which Weegee removes his mediating presence and pretends to be one among his subjects. The result of the inclusion of this portrait that denies the photographer’s knowing, welcoming gaze, not only likens him to his subjects, but it also implicates the viewer.

\textsuperscript{143} See discussion on pages 37.
\textsuperscript{144} Weegee, \textit{Weegee’s People}, 3.
This implication and manipulation of the viewer, played out through the book’s images and use of text, is the secret success of *Weegee’s People*.

One of the most obvious differences between the photographs in *Naked City* and those that make up *Weegee’s People* is the lack of crowds in the latter. In the context of the picture press and *Naked City*, crowds played an important function in the viewer’s relationship to the viewed. As Astrid Böger observed, “The photographer made sure to include spectators in most of his images…so that viewers are invited to ask how they would have reacted had they been on site. Weegee’s arresting, simultaneously intimate and sensationalist views of disaster as part of the human condition thus hold up a mirror without being moralizing in any obvious way.”¹⁴⁵ Just as the viewer might recognize their innate desire to look in the spectator who unabashedly and passively watches tragedies play out before them, so too did Weegee identify with the onlooker’s voyeurism. His presence at and documentation of scenes of crime and disaster, and subsequently the viewer’s gaze, could then be rationalized—“taking pictures’’ was, after all, his job, and looking is something we all do. Luc Sante brilliantly explained the effect and implication of crowds in Weegee’s photographs:

> Not only are his subjects so absorbed in what they are viewing that they give themselves to the camera, uncomposed and naked, but by virtue of the act of looking they become avatars for the photographer himself. Weegee puts himself in their shoes, and imagines them in his. They are a city of eyes, joined together by curiosity, the photographer merely the one who does it for a living. Weegee proclaims his inability to judge the mob of gawkers. However crass they might seem, because he is the nosiest of them all, just as he absolves himself of imputations of voyeurism by demonstrating that everyone is so inclined.¹⁴⁶

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Within *Weegee’s People*, the photographs are often tightly cropped and include either a single subject or a small group of people gathered together. Gone are the crowds of spectators in *Naked City*’s images that vindicate the viewer’s gaze. Similarly absent are the onlookers who uncannily betray Weegee’s presence with a smile. The few photographs of subjects who look into Weegee’s camera lens read as agreeable portraits (figures 28 and 29) rather than unsettling admissions of human nature, as in the example of the smiling woman amid a crowd of people watching a fire, discussed in chapter 2 (figure 15). Many of the photographs in *Weegee’s People* conceal the “controlling presence of the photographer and put the viewer in direct, dire contact with the subject.”¹⁴⁷ Most of them are so closely cropped and invasive that the viewer is inserted into the scenes, seemingly without the company of the photographer. The book’s reader may stand just inches away from a couple’s intimate embrace (figure 30) or feel the musical vibrations in a sub-cellar concert (figure 31). In sum, the viewer is no longer able to justify their voyeurism through Weegee’s mediating presence. The dynamics observed for *Naked City* has completely changed.

It becomes apparent that in this book the photographer felt an “implicit right to invade privacy as long as it was in a public space.”¹⁴⁸ Weegee’s use of infrared film throughout the book makes a particular case for this claim. This “invisible light,” as Weegee called it, allowed him to photograph in near-total darkness, without flash, thus concealing his presence. The result of these images is a transformation of the subject into an almost translucent figure with solid black eyes. Infrared film revealed the figure’s blemishes, veins, facial stubble, and false teeth. Members of society captured in this manner no longer looked elegant, but cold, artificial, and alien (figure 32). The level of voyeurism afforded by infrared film is, as John Coplans remarked, “furtive and

unfair.”

Weegee’s use of this surreptitious technique is particularly unsettling in the chapter “The Children’s Hour.” These photographs of young children entranced by images projected on a movie theatre screen not only take advantage of an already vulnerable group of subjects, but also manipulate and implicate the viewer into being part of this covert viewing, thus provoking a similar effect to the one observed in *Naked City*. Weegee, in fact, discussed in his autobiography how, early in life as a fiddle player for silent films at the Third Avenue movie theatre, he learned how to “play on the emotions of the audience.” He described, “I could move them to either happiness or sorrow...I suppose that my fiddle-playing was a subconscious kind of training for my future photography. In later year, people often told me that my pictures moved them deeply to tears or laughter.”

This manipulation and consequent implication of the reader is further achieved through the use of text. Unlike *Naked City*, though, written language is noticeably sparse in *Weegee’s People* and no longer mimics captions of newspaper reportage. With the exception of the book’s introduction, there are few instances where more than three sentences appear together. Notably, the tone of Weegee’s writing has also changed drastically. While the occasional first-person “I” does appear, as in his caption “I like this…,” which accompanies two photographs of couples kissing, (figure 33), its employment boasts less of Weegee’s presence at the scene. The moments when the author’s voice slips through are few. Throughout the book image captions are short and descriptive. Their purpose is typically to identify a place or event—“Cafeteria on East Broadway” or “Masquerade,” for example. The effect of such limited intervening text forces the reader to project his or her own thoughts on the page. As Daniel Wolff has observed of Weegee’s work, “Weegee draws us in, not as participants but as screenwriters. His pictures demand our

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words.”  Surely, this statement rings true of Weegee’s People, in which the ample empty space around images demands the reader’s own interpretation of the scenes that are presented without commentary. Furthermore, Weegee’s suggestive pairing of text and image subtly directs the viewer and aids in the creation of voyeuristic vignettes within the reader’s mind. For example, a photograph of a man in a top hat whose gaze guides the viewer’s eye to the adjacent photograph a woman’s leg visible through the slit in her dress, paired with the caption “It was a double feature program…” creates a miniature, imagined drama of lust and scandal (figure 34).

Although less obviously autobiographical than Naked City, Weegee’s second publication subtly reveals the author’s continued performance of self-fashioning. The photographer narrates his new life post-Naked City as one in which his status has reached such a level that he can photograph whenever and wherever he pleases. In fact, the removal of the blatant, loud voice of the author and reflexive captions and images can be seen as speaking to Weegee’s reaching peak fame, as if he feels that, of course, the reader will see the works and immediately see Weegee. In this sense, through Weegee’s implication of the reader, the book’s holder is just as much one of Weegee’s people, just as much under his spell, as those reproduced on the pages within.

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Conclusion

The approach of most art-historical scholarship has been to discuss Weegee’s photographs as a series of independent and striking works, a fact largely encouraged by the singular vintage prints often displayed in museum galleries. Louis Stettner argued that, “Most of Weegee’s photographs were taken as single accomplishments and were meant to be viewed independently of other photographs. Moreover, his training as a news photographer taught him to make an individual photograph tell as much as possible, to tell the ‘complete story.’”152 While Stettner’s point about the direct impact value of a news photograph is true, it is so only to an extent. The origin of Weegee’s most iconic photographs reveals that they were reproduced within the chaotic context of the tabloid—alongside other images, headlines, captions, and reportage. Furthermore, photographs quite typically relied on the various relations with their surrounding content in order to be understood and deliver their full effect.

The de-contextualization of Weegee’s photographs, however, began with the artist himself, as was discussed in chapter 2. By repurposing news photographs within the medium of the photo-book, Weegee was able to elevate their status to that of a less ephemeral, more engaged, expressive form of art. Moreover, as Richard Meyer remarked, “As Weegee’s photographs are detached from their original contexts, the specificity of the people and events they portray becomes similarly obscured. Individual murder victims, suspects, and witnesses in once-current New York City crime scenes become characters in an imagined narrative, much as Weegee himself emerges as a hard-boiled detective-narrator.”153 As such, it was through the adaptation of his photographs to a new context of the photo-book and his severing their ties with

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the picture press that Weegee was able to craft new stories that inserted him in the scenes he captured.

Meyer has argued that this isolated understanding of Weegee’s photographs has existed because of the “tension between fine art and tabloid journalism,”¹⁵⁴ that the low-culture origin of Weegee’s work is unsettling, even confusing, to the art-historian. However, the denial of viewing Weegee’s photographs in their original contexts goes beyond the ignorance of their associations with tabloids. In fact, no extensive discussions of how his photographs function within the body of his photo-books exist. This thesis aims to reveal how Weegee’s photographs are transformed by their sequencing and by their juxtapositions with text. Looking at a Weegee photograph by considering both its origin and context proves this photographer’s underlying goal of performing his self-fashioned persona and expanding his control as author across his evolving career.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 45.
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Figure 1: “Speaking of Pictures...A Free Lance Photographs the News,” Life vol. 2, no. 15 (April 12, 1937): 8-9, 11
Figure 2: Installation view of “Weegee: Murder Is My Business” at the Photo League, New York, 1941. International Center of Photography
Figure 3: Installation view of “Weegee: Murder Is My Business” at the Photo League, New York, 1941. International Center of Photography
Figure 4: Weegee, “Yesterday at Coney Island…Temperature 89…They Came Early, Stayed Late,” *PM*, July 22, 1940, 16-17. International Center of Photography
Figure 5: Weegee, “Murder on the Roof,” *PM*, August 13, 1941, 18. International Center of Photography
Figure 6: Weegee, “Ermine-Wrapped Patron Caught in Gambling Den, New York,” PM, December 22, 1940. International Center of Photography
Figure 7: Weegee, *I Cried When I Took This Picture*, December 15, 1939, Gelatin silver photograph. International Center of Photography
Figure 8: Paul Strand, *Blind*, 1916, Platinum print. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1993, 33.43.334
For the first time, an accident is photographed before and after it happened.

A man is seated on the sidewalk taking it easy.

He gets up to cross the street and is hit by a taxicab. The poor man was a peddler of pencils. His cane was broken and his stock of pencils lie beside him.

A passerby has put a handkerchief to his forehead to stop the flow of blood.

A passing priest gives the injured man the last rites of the Church.

Figure 9: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), p. 206
Figure 10: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), frontispiece
Figure 11: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), inside cover
A BOOK IS BORN

One just doesn’t go up to strange men, women, children, elephants, or giraffes and say, “Look this way please. Laugh—cry—show some emotion or go to sleep underneath a funeral canopy.” They would have called me crazy and called a cop who would have called the wagon with the guys in white and I would have wound up in the psychopathic ward at Bellevue Hospital in a strait jacket.

For the pictures in this book I was on the scene; sometimes drawn there by some power I can’t explain, and I caught the New Yorkers with their masks off . . . not afraid to Laugh. Cry, or make Love. What I felt I photographed, laughing and crying with them.

I have been told that my pictures should be in a book, that they were a great social document. As I keep to myself, belong to no group, like to be left alone with no axe to grind, I wouldn’t know. Then something happened. There was a sudden drop in Murders and Fires (my two best sellers, my bread and butter). I couldn’t understand that. With so many millions of people, it just wasn’t normal, but it did give me a chance to look over the pictures I had been accumulating. Put together, they seemed to form a pattern. I pasted the photographs up into a “dummy” book and left it with the publishers with a note “This is my brain child . . . handle with care please.”

The people in these photographs are real. Some from the

Figure 12: Weegee, Naked City (New York: Essential Books, 1945), pp. 10-11
Figure 13: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), pp. 20-21
Figure 14: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), pp. 182-183
Figure 15: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), pp. 36-37
This man was lucky... he hadn’t gone to bed as yet... but the rooms got full of smoke... the lights went out... so he grabbed his kid... without tying the kid’s shoelaces... and ran for his life. He is surprised to find me there with my camera. He must wonder if my studio is on the fire engine... and if I sleep in the Fire House.
These two guys were arrested for bribing basketball players... they gave me a lot of trouble as I tried to photograph them... covering up their faces with handkerchiefs.

Figure 17: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), p. 170
Figure 18: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), p. 172
4 MURDERS...

People get bumped off... on the sidewalks of New York. The only thing unusual about these killings is that they are never solved. The guys are always neatly dressed... fall face up... with their pearl gray hats alongside of them. Some day I'll follow one of these guys with a "pearl gray hat," have my camera all set and get the actual killing... could be... I got the above statement with check from Life magazine. Twenty-five dollars was for the murder picture on the right... the other picture they bought was only a cheap murder, with not many bullets... so they only paid ten dollars for that.

Figure 19: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), p. 78
Figure 20: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), p. 86-87
Figure 21: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), p. 53
Figure 22: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), p. 74

I Cried When I Took This Picture

Mother and daughter cry and look up hopelessly as another daughter and her young baby are burning to death in the top floor of the tenement... firemen couldn’t reach them in time... on account of the stairway collapsing.
Not so long ago I, too, used to walk on the Bowery, broke, "carrying the banner." The sight of a bed with white sheets in a furniture store window, almost drove me crazy. God... a bed was the most desirable thing in the world.

In the summer I would sleep in Bryant Park.... But when it got colder I transferred over to the Municipal Lodging House.... I saw this sign on the wall there. A Sadist must have put it up. I laughed to myself... what Cash and Valuables... I didn't have a nickel to my name. But I was a Free Soul... with no responsibilities....

Figure 23: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), pp. 158-189
Figure 24: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), p. 222
Figure 25: Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Essential Books, 1945), p. 236
Figure 26: Weegee, *Weegee’s People* (New York: Essential Books, Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946), p. 38

After the Opera . . . at Sammy’s Night Club on the Bowery.
Figure 29: Weegee, *Weegee’s People* (New York: Essential Books, Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946), pp. 150-151
Figure 30: Weegee, *Weegee's People* (New York: Essential Books, Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946), pp. 130-131
Figure 31: Weegee, *Weegee’s People* (New York: Essential Books, Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946), p. 100
Figure 32: Weegee, *Weegee’s People* (New York: Essential Books, Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946), pp. 34-35
Figure 33: Weegee, *Weegee’s People* (New York: Essential Books, Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946), p. 50
Figure 34: Weegee, *Weegee’s People* (New York: Essential Books, Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946), pp. 28-29