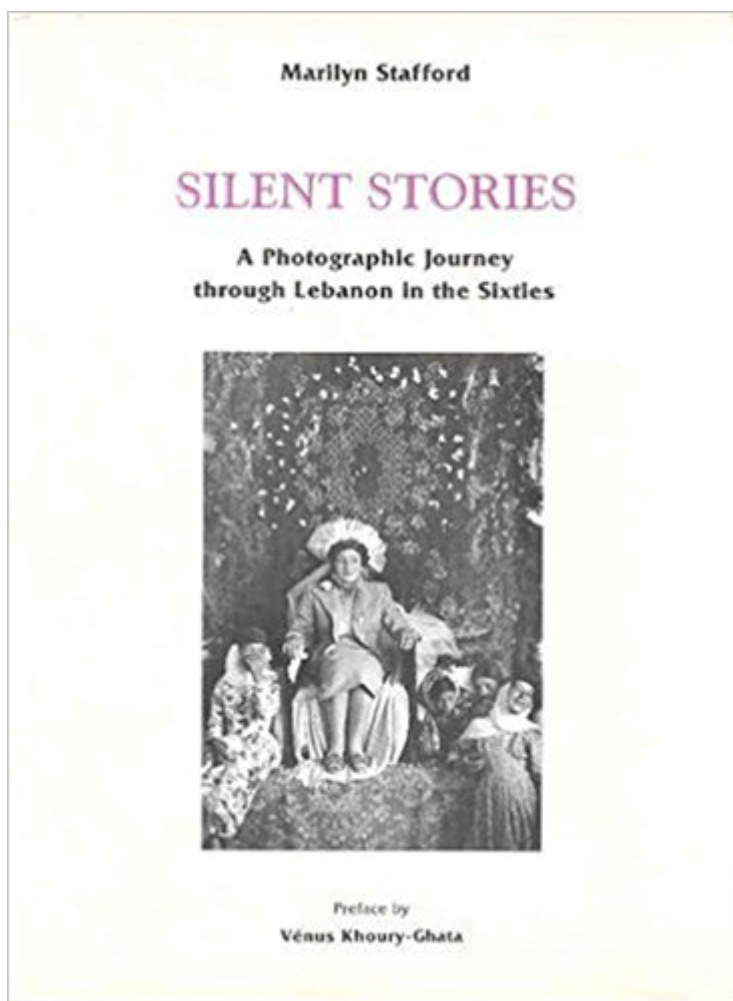


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Silent Stories: A Photographic Journey Through Lebanon



Synopsis

In the early sixties, Marilyn Stafford spent over a year in Lebanon and became fascinated with the country and its people. She travelled extensively, journeying to the most remote villages and recording scenes of everyday life. This album is a selection of 120 of these outstanding photographs. Although there are some architectural scenes and views of towns and villages, the main focus is on the Lebanese people and their way of life: shopkeepers and soups, weddings and religious festivities, cafés and night life, fortune-tellers and street urchins . . . In her personal account of a vibrant society, Stafford reveals a land of contrasts - an intricate blend of east and west, tradition and modernity, which gave Lebanon its unique identity. Stafford's work is far more than a nostalgic remembrance of a Lebanon that was. It is a beautiful and evocative photographic record of a society that is often misrepresented and misunderstood. Even without the war, this book would have been an important contribution to the illustrated modern history of Lebanon. Now, it is an invaluable document in its own right.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

'The photographs are beautiful and evocative . . . a photographic historical record of the Lebanon during post-World War II.' --Digest of Middle East Studies 'An astonishing collection of the eternal simplicities, intricacies and intimacies of everyday life . . . This work is a true hallmark of art.' --The Daily Star

Marilyn Stafford is an internationally renowned photographer whose work has appeared in prestigious papers and magazines throughout Europe and the United States. Her portraits include Indira Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Alberto Moravia, Sir Herbert Read, Luciano Berio and Italo Calvino.

Beautiful and rare black and white photos of Lebanon back in the 60's of everyday life.

This volume of about 115 black and white photographs is a distillation of a year's work by photographer Marilyn Stafford. Apparently, Stafford spent time in Lebanon in the early 1960's, and travelled extensively there. In fact, Lebanon is a quite small country, and the places covered in this book are on the whole well-visited ones--they will be familiar to anyone who knows Lebanon. Thus, turning the book open, and skipping the uninformative preface, we immediately come face to face with a great picture of the Kadisha valley, Bcharre village to be exact; a popular tourist destination in northern Lebanon. The photographer also visited Tripoli, Sidon and Baalbek in the Bekaa valley. The photographs, which focus on people in context, are fascinating individually, and do tell some kind of story in total--this is an account of an innocent and confident Lebanon before the nightmare of civil war began. There are lots of cameo shots of market traders in action, and lounge lizards at the beach, in cafes, or at home. Stafford encompasses the poor and the bourgeoisie in her range of subjects, gate crashing private drawing rooms, parties, the national parliament, and rural dwellers' back yards alike. At times the people in the photographs are unaware of Stafford's presence, giving the images a voyeuristic quality, but more often they are willingly interacting with the photographer, sometimes just smiling, or striking some kind of pose. No one appears self-conscious, or uncomfortable, and warm, sympathetic portraits are the happy result. In this set of photographs, the tremendous variety of Lebanese society is in evidence, and also its history. But even photographs of the impressive Roman ruins at Baalbek are enlivened by people--Stafford follows a principle of painting that says putting a figure in a composition will always bring it to life. Stafford is not really interested in gimmicks then, and is very much following the narrative tradition, hence "Silent stories". There is always a lot of contextual detail in her photographs for one to re-construct the story, even if it is only a dash of foliage, or a garden, or Walid Joumblatt's Bicycle at Moukhtara, the latter from a very poignant image that seems to symbolise Lebanon's pre-war innocence, which was on the brink of being taken away. Yet I cannot agree that these images are from a Lebanon gone forever, a "lost world", a golden age, etc. Rather I see remarkable continuity between these images of fifty years ago and modern Lebanon: Baalbek looks the same, Bedouin women still dance, kids still play in ramshackle funfairs, and the crusader castles stand. Even the food stalls at markets look

almost the same, as if time has stood still. The changes in Lebanon over the past five decades are not easy for the outsider to detect, and remain below the surface, raging psychological currents. Stafford, the outsider, did not detect the tensions already extant in pre-war Lebanon; at least she chose not to focus on them. Because of the continuity I allude to, I believe this book is an excellent introduction to modern Lebanon; indeed, it is essential reference material. What is lacking is a proper preface that tells us something about the photographer. Also, the very best photographic books include some explanatory text, but getting the balance between image and text right is an art. I felt the photographs could have been slightly better arranged, perhaps in chronological order and not loosely by theme as they have been placed here, and some explanatory text added. The dull jacket design of this edition does not do justice to the exciting content.

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