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# Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits



WINNER OF THE BANCROFT PRIZE

## DOROTHEA LANGE

A LIFE BEYOND LIMITS

LINDA GORDON



## Synopsis

Winner of the 2010 Bancroft Prize and finalist for the 2009 Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Biography: The definitive biography of a heroic chronicler of America's Depression and one of the 20th century's greatest photographers. We all know Dorothea Lange's iconic photos - the Migrant Mother holding her child, the shoeless children of the Dust Bowl - but now renowned American historian Linda Gordon brings them to three-dimensional life in this groundbreaking exploration of Lange's transformation into a documentarist. Using Lange's life to anchor a moving social history of 20th-century America, Gordon masterfully re-creates bohemian San Francisco, the Depression, and the Japanese-American internment camps. Gordon has written a sparkling, fast-moving story that testifies to her status as one of the most gifted historians of our time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Review of "Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits" by Linda Gordon, W. W. Norton & Company, 2009, 536 pp. By Mark J. Palmer, Associate Director International Marine Mammal Project Earth Island Institute Berkeley, CA Dorothea Lange's photography during the Depression defined the discipline of Documentary Photography - photography devoted to forth-rightly examining the human condition, often in the interest of righting great wrongs. In an excellent new biography by historian Linda Gordon, Lange's experience in photographing the poor and the downtrodden was more than a bit ironic. She herself was raised in an upper class family on the East Coast. She announced her intention to take up photography as a career apparently without ever having even handled a

camera, much less taken any photographs. Her career started by making portraits of wealthy San Franciscans in a studio far from dusty farms and back roads. Lange was a hard-working self-starter, and she first attached herself to several expert photographers from whom she learned her trade. Gordon skillfully pairs Lange's career with the historic times in which she worked: Her portrait work of the elite citizens of San Francisco during the 20's is coupled with the bohemian lifestyle she adopted with many artists, including her first husband, Western painter Maynard Dixon. Her pairing with economist and agricultural reformer Paul Taylor, whom she would soon marry, when the Depression in the 30's swept away her and Dixon's art patrons and left thousands unemployed, especially migrant farm workers who were already exploited and in poverty.

If the subject weren't so compelling, I would not have stayed with it. The childhood parts are heavy on speculation as to how a child of this era with polio or separated parents would have felt. Speculation on why Lange accepted the traditional women's domestic roles is similarly overdone. Staying with this book was well worth it. Linda Gordon shines in her presentation of Lange's work and its place in its era and ours. Gordon describes not just how these iconic photos were made, but the life of Lange as she made them. Lange took on (or wound up with) responsibilities for her own two children as well as offspring from her two husbands' previous marriages. There are allusions to neglect, but the children seem to be around more than one would expect from such a busy life. By contrast, Lange's life on the road driving from place to place, relating to the people and taking the photos is very well defined. Gordon clearly demonstrates why Lange can be considered a photographer for democracy. She writes not just of Lange's work but her commitment towards the social reforms that she hoped her images might inspire. Her work with the FSA dovetailed with her second husband's work in agricultural economics. They were independent professionals as well a team. There is a good description of the mission and vulnerability of the FSA, its role in the New Deal, its political pressures, office politics and how and why Lange was too often the odd man out. Both Lange and the FSA had to accept the racism of the times. Photos of people of color would not be highlighted since the public would not be inclined to accept them. The agency always had to consider the power of the growers to totally eliminate it.

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