

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Review: ‘Hold Still,’ Sally Mann’s Memoir, Reveals a Photographer’s Rich Life

By Dwight Garner

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There aren’t many important memoirs by American photographers. I wish especially that, along with Robert Frank and Diane Arbus, Walker Evans had left one behind. How good was Evans’s prose? He once described James Agee’s sartorial style as “knowingly comical inverted dandyism.” He added: “wind, rain, work and mockery were his tailors.”

I held Evans’s writing in mind while reading “Hold Still,” the photographer Sally Mann’s weird, intense and uncommonly beautiful new memoir. Ms. Mann has got Evans’s gift for fine and offbeat declaration. She’s also led a big Southern-bohemian life, rich with incident. Or maybe it only seems rich with incident because of an old maxim that still holds: Stories happen only to people who can tell them.

Ms. Mann is best known to many for the controversy that surrounded “Immediate Family” (1992), her third book of photographs. That book included many pictures of her three young children, sometimes unclothed, roaming the family’s sprawling and near-Edenic property in the Virginia hills.

These indelible images made her children resemble, at once, young gods and feral animals. They prompted a debate about government funding of the arts and set off a moral panic. Some accused her of printing borderline child pornography.

Ms. Mann addresses “Immediate Family” and its aftermath in many smart, sensitive ways in “Hold Still.” The old attacks still sting. She recalls those who backed her work (Janet Malcolm, Luc Sante, Katherine Dieckmann) and perhaps more vividly those who did not (Mary Gordon, Raymond Sokolov, Anne Bernays).

Her writing about “Immediate Family” is only one of many reasons to read this memoir. “Hold Still” is a cerebral and discursive book about the South and about family and about making art that has some of the probity of Flannery O’Connor’s nonfiction collection “Mystery and Manners”

yet is spiked with the wildness and plain talk of Mary Karr's best work. Like the young Ms. Karr, Ms. Mann was a scrappy, troublemaking tomboy, one who grew into a scrappy, troublemaking, impossible-to-ignore young woman and artist.



The photographer Sally Mann, left, in 1967, from her memoir, "Hold Still."
Courtesy of Sally Mann

The details in "Hold Still" nail Ms. Mann's sentences to the wall. She describes being dropped off after a date, for example, emerging from some boy's El Camino and walking into the house to confront her parents. "My hair, trailing bobby pins, would be matted and tendriled against my hickey-spotted neck, and the skirt of my dress would be wrinkled, the taupe toes of pantyhose peeking out from my purse," she writes. "My swollen lips were now a natural, chapped red, and my cheeks blushed with beard burn." Taupe toes of pantyhose. It's been a while since I've read a phrase that good, even in poetry.

Her parents, hoping to keep the local boys at bay, sent Ms. Mann north from Virginia to the elite Putney School in Vermont. There she began to make pictures. She did other things, too. "I smoked, I drank, I skipped classes, I snuck out, I took drugs, I stole quarts of ice cream for my dorm by breaking into the kitchen storerooms, I made out with my boyfriends in the library basement, I hitchhiked into town and down I-91, and when caught, I weaseled out of all of it."

She includes items like report cards and letters to her parents to back up these kind of things. This seems like the place to remark that this book is heavily illustrated, and strikingly so, filled with memorabilia and a great many excellent and intimate photographs.

At times Ms. Mann can present herself, at the Putney School at any rate, as a frisky yokel gone north to shock the hidebound Yankees. “Not one would have known, as I did,” she comments, “what a whomping a four-on-the-floor GTO could give a Barracuda in the quarter-mile on the bypass.”

Unsophisticated she was not. Her parents were serious and lettered people. Her father, born into a wealthy Texas family, was a doctor (he’d gone to Choate) and an atheist with artistic leanings and a strong intellectual bent. Her Boston-born mother, who ran a bookstore and battled for progressive causes, was a Mayflower descendant.

Her father and mother were also witty and handsome if reserved people who radiated deep charm; in photographs, cameras feast on them. Ms. Mann has inherited their looks, and the pictures people have made of her, reprinted here, are filled with brewing drama and are often as striking as those she has taken of others.



Ms. Mann had horses while growing up in Virginia.
Elizabeth Evans Munger

Ms. Mann tells the stories of each of her parents in “Hold Still.” She rewinds further, and attends to deep family history, going back generations. This book begins, in fact, with her in the attic, poking around in boxes of old family photographs and documents. Your heart begins to sink: Oh no, not the boxes in the attic. Little is worse than someone else’s boxes in the attic.

“I will confess that in the interest of narrative,” she writes, “I secretly hoped I’d find a payload of Southern gothic: deceit and scandal, alcoholism, domestic abuse, car crashes, bogeymen, clandestine affairs, dearly loved and disputed family land, abandonments, blow jobs, suicides, hidden addictions, the tragically early death of a beautiful bride, racial complications, vast sums of money made and lost, the return of a prodigal son, and maybe even bloody murder.”

She finds each of these things. And she whips these stories to life, with a novelist’s relish and skill, shaking every bit of dust from them.

There are many other things in “Hold Still.” Friendships with Southern artists and writers like Cy Twombly and William Eggleston and Reynolds Price are warmly recounted.

Ms. Mann rarely introduces a topic, or a person, unless she has something unexpected to say. Her anecdotes have snap. About his advanced old age, in a line that is hard to forget, Mr. Twombly tells the author that he is “closing down the bodega for real.”

There is also cleareyed writing about race, especially in Ms. Mann’s complicated recollections of her youth. She was essentially raised by a black woman, Virginia Cornelia Franklin, who worked for her parents. She called Ms. Franklin Gee-Gee and loved her dearly; only in hindsight does she consider what Ms. Franklin’s life must have been like.

Ms. Mann is frank, too, about her own life alongside her husband, Larry Mann, a blacksmith and a lawyer. One odd lacuna in “Hold Still” is that there is almost no information about her children, now grown.

Early in the book she writes: “I knew that the crucial question for me as a mother was not whether the pictures were going to be respected in 20 years, but this all-important one: ‘I wonder how those poor, art-abused kids turned out.’ ” She doesn’t tell us, perhaps sensing she has exposed them enough for one lifetime.

The best quality of “Hold Still” — a book that strikes me as an instant classic among Southern memoirs of the last 50 years — is its ambient sense of an original, come-as-you-are life that has been well lived and well observed. It’s a book that dials open the aperture on your own senses. Like the photographs she most admires, it is rooted in particulars yet has “some rudiment of the eternal in it.”