

Introduction

“The proper study of Mankind is Man,” wrote Alexander Pope in 1733. Bringing this thought into the context of a modern digital photographer, making portraits of men, women, and children is a passionate undertaking for many of us.

As a well-known proverb says, “the eyes are the window to the soul.” It’s often believed that by looking into someone’s eyes you can see into their core being; and that by observing a face, or a photo of a face, you can understand character. The issues common to all photography—composition, lighting, exposure, and camera technique—come into play when you make a portrait. In portraiture, the variables of character and physiognomy add assumptions about the relationship between reality and portrayal, as well as challenges in rendering character as you see it, and opportunities for creative photography.

To what extent is a photographic portrait “real”? Does the portrait represent the subject fairly and accurately? Put another way, do you know something that is true about the subject after looking at the portrait?

These are excellent questions. If you are not involved in the serious pursuit of making photographs, you’re likely to assume that there is a correlation between the photo and the reality of the subject, and that you’ve learned something about someone by looking at their portrait. But as photographers, we know that many photographic portraits are superficial and plastic—and highly subject to manipulation.

The truth of a portrait depends upon the insight and integrity of the photographer, the honesty of the subject, and the photographic and digital techniques and manipulations used. Not all photographic portraits are intended to be truthful, nor should they be. For example, if you are hunting for a job, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with putting “your best foot forward” by using an overtly flattering professional head shot.

My point is that in portrait photography it is crucial to be aware of your intentions and goals. A glamour session in the studio is a very different affair from a gritty portrait that attempts to reveal the truth about a complex personality, warts and all. Also, unlike most other kinds of photography, great portraiture requires collaboration with your subject. If you are taking a photo of a blade of grass or a railroad station, you don’t really care what the plant or the building thinks of you. But if you are photographing a person, your relationship with the person—their life experiences, how they feel about photography, and what they think of you—plays an important role in the process of photography.

Speaking of intentions and goals, *Creative Portraits* is unlike other portrait photography books you may have seen. My assumption is that you are seriously interested in photography—or you probably wouldn’t have picked up this book. But this isn’t primarily a treatise about studio portrait techniques.

Instead, *Creative Portraits* aims squarely at the heart and soul of portrait photography,

which is what most of us really care about: how do we create meaningful, interesting, and compelling portraits of our friends, family, and kids?

As with my other *Creative* photography titles, I believe that the two best ways to learn about photography are by looking at photos—and by taking photos. Each photographic portrait in this book is accompanied by a description explaining how and why I made the photo. It's a perfectly reasonable strategy to look at the photos, consider how they were made, and then dip into the text for those topics in which you'd like a little more in-depth information.

Please use *Creative Portraits* as an idea book. If you are moved to try a new technique when photographing someone you care about, then I will have succeeded in my goal for *Creative Portraits*. Enjoy!

Harold Davis

- I took this photo of my wife and sleeping baby by the light of a 15-watt bulb. To make the exposure, I needed to boost the ISO to 2000. This led to a noisy capture. Not all digital noise is bad—in this case it adds to the interest of the photo.

32mm, 1/8 of a second at f/4 and ISO 2000, hand held

