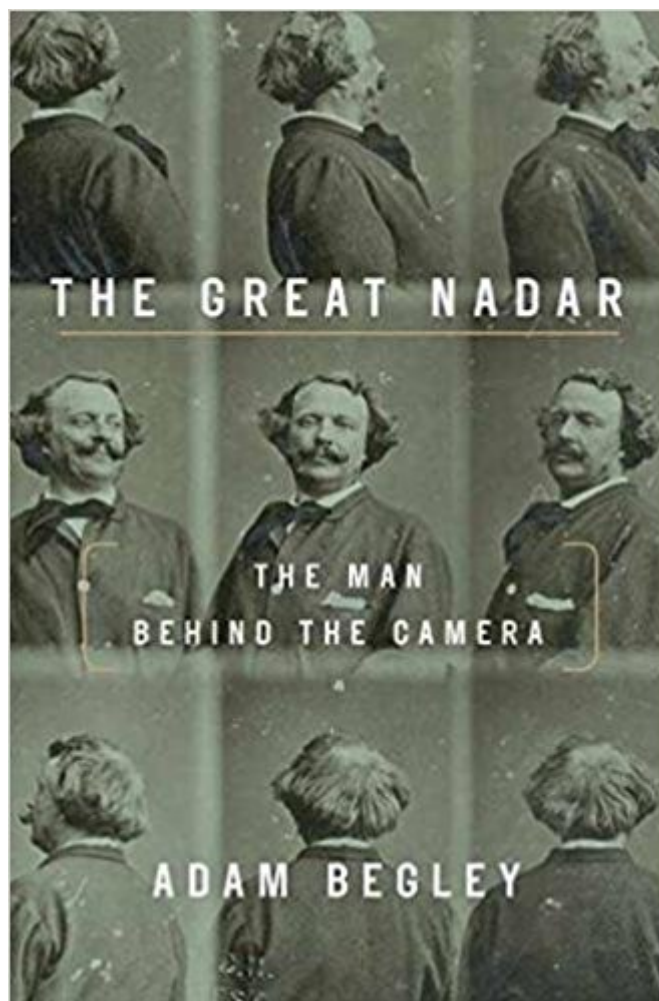


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# The Great Nadar: The Man Behind The Camera



## Synopsis

A dazzling, stylish biography of a fabled Parisian photographer, adventurer, and pioneer. A recent French biography begins, Who doesn't know Nadar? In France, that's a rhetorical question. Of all of the legendary figures who thrived in mid-19th-century Paris—a cohort that includes Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, Gustave Courbet, and Alexandre Dumas—Nadar was perhaps the most innovative, the most restless, the most modern. The first great portrait photographer, a pioneering balloonist, the first person to take an aerial photograph, and the prime mover behind the first airmail service, Nadar was one of the original celebrity artist-entrepreneurs. A kind of 19th-century Andy Warhol, he knew everyone worth knowing and photographed them all, conferring on posterity psychologically compelling portraits of Manet, Sarah Bernhardt, Delacroix, Daumier and countless others—a priceless panorama of Parisian celebrity. Born Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, he adopted the pseudonym Nadar as a young bohemian, when he was a budding writer and cartoonist. Later he affixed the name Nadar to the façade of his opulent photographic studio in giant script, the illuminated letters ten feet tall, the whole sign fifty feet long, a garish red beacon on the boulevard. Nadar became known to all of Europe and even across the Atlantic when he launched "The Giant," a gas balloon the size of a twelve-story building, the largest of its time. With his daring exploits aboard his humongous balloon (including a catastrophic crash that made headlines around the world), he gave his friend Jules Verne the model for one of his most dynamic heroes. The Great Nadar is a brilliant, lavishly illustrated biography of a larger-than-life figure, a visionary whose outsized talent and canny self-promotion put him way ahead of his time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"New York Times Editors' Choice" Concise and thoughtful. . . . Begley delivers a subtle accounting of Nadar's career as a photographer while reminding us of his subject's many other talents and exploits. . . . This book, like Nadar's life, roars past with a whooshing sound." • "Dwight Garner, The New York Times" "A delightful biography. . . . It comes across as a labor of love. Yet the word 'labor' hardly characterizes the suavity, swiftness and economy of its text. The book is a pleasure to read, though one could almost buy it just for the pictures." • "Michael Dirda, The Washington Post" "A window on an era of extraordinary artistic endeavor. . . . Mr. Begley has combed through an array of literature, letters, guest books, invitations, drawings and other miscellany to tease out a nuanced portrait of one of the world's first celebrity artist-entrepreneurs." • "Tobias Grey, The Wall Street Journal" "Masterful. . . . Begley's vibrant new biography tells Nadar's story in all its colorful detail. . . . We can be grateful to Begley for capturing some of that quicksilver spirit, that quintessentially Parisian sensibility, which left us with images that are, in their bewitching way, timeless." • "Thad Carhart, The New York Times" "A sympathetic and judicious book. . . . crammed with character and incident. . . . Nadar was one of the greatest portraitists in photographic history. . . . He would have been very much at home in our day." • "Luc Sante, The New York Times Book Review" "If genius is the capacity to astound, then Nadar is up there with the greatest. . . . With this book, Begley . . . puts him back where he truly belongs. . . . Battered into submission by the man's glorious character, towards the end of this book I arrived at the last known photograph of him "an old man in his garden, a newspaper in his lap. I teared up, realising that Adam Begley had made me love him as much as he evidently does." • "Bryan Appleyard, The Sunday Times (UK)" "A superb account of one of the nineteenth century's most irrepressible spirits. Nadar was the founding genius of photography, especially portraiture, a heroic, disaster-prone balloonist, as well as a journalist, cartoonist, would-be revolutionary and one of the first 'bohemians'. Adam Begley brilliantly evokes the Paris of the Second Republic and Second Empire, its gloriously impoverished and eccentric artistic milieu, its squalor and political turmoil. Nadar knew everyone and took the photographs of the men and women who defined the era. Here the best work is excellently reproduced and discussed with great sensitivity and insight; from every point of view The Great Nadar is a beautiful book." • "Ian McEwan" "Nadar described himself as a reckless enthusiast, a hyperkinetic presence, every father-in-law's worst nightmare, someone who never missed an opportunity to talk about rope in a house where someone has been hanged or ought to be hanged." • "That was nowhere near the half of it." Adam Begley fills in the rest, providing a portrait every bit as seductive as was its

irresistible, irrepressible subject." Stacy Schiff "Adam Begley has found the perfect biographical subject in Nadar "an irrepressible artist, a daring pioneer, a wild-eyed visionary, an outrageous self-promoter, and an enfant terrible, who, like some sort of Zelig, seemed to turn up alongside every major figure in Paris during the heady period of the mid-nineteenth century. But what makes this book so mesmerizing is Begley, who, with his own artistry, brings Nadar roaring to life on every page." David Grann "A completely fascinating, thoughtful and most elegantly written biography of one of the great early photographers." William Boyd

Adam Begley is the author of Updike. He was a Guggenheim fellow in 2010 and a fellow at the Leon Levy Center for Biography in 2011; from 1997 to 2009 he was the books editor of The New York Observer. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Guardian, The Financial Times, The London Review of Books, and The Times Literary Supplement. He lives with his wife in Cambridgeshire, England.

Not bad. The author goes into the history of bohemian Paris, such as Nadar's *champêtre* inspired by an earlier party which Theophile Gautier hosted. He gives a pretty good account of Murger who wrote *Scenes from Bohemian Life* which inspired Puccini's *La Boheme*. If you're interested in the early phases of urban hipster life style I'd recommend the book. Baudelaire, it turns out, was a kind of trust fund kid. A lot of interesting photos and drawing too." The opportunistic twenty-four-year-old who had signed on as secretary to a reactionary delegate in the Chamber of Deputies was now, in his late twenties, in permanent revolt against the government, even if the government was democratically elected." Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

An interesting story, but a little dry for my taste. Considering his bon vivant subject, this biography advertises more than it delivers

I was looking forward to reading this book. I am familiar with Nadar from a number of photography shows at museums. But I was disappointed with the book. It is just a compilation of people's names with very little narrative. I think if you removed names this short book would be only a couple of dozen pages. A more thoughtful book of Nadar's life is still out there for someone to write

The book shows that Nadar was emphatically a man of his era. His passions were shared by

intellectuals, artists and journalists of his day. The author presents the web of connections in a way that presents the concrete cultural life of 19th century Paris with stinging sharpness. We walk the boulevards with the flaneurs, drink with Baudelaire, ascend in the airship with Nadar. The book is fluent, vivid, powerful..

Good survey of the complex life of "Nadar"

First, my only complaint about this book are the photo reproductions. There aren't any plates, the photos reproduced here tend to be small and dark. The writings and newspaper reproductions are too small to read. This book has a biographic, not archival, goal. Having said that, the book is highly readable and highly entertaining. Nadar (1820-1910) is primarily known for his portraits, and knowing little about his life, I was expecting to read about the evolution of his craft. Instead, I was pleasantly surprised to find that Nadar was both an eccentric and a bohemian, one could almost say he was exploiting his high tech toy (the camera) to promote aggressively his other ventures. Every page is a new twist and turn in this man's life, some impressive feats, some eye-rolling embarrassments, but the reader definitely walks away a bit inspired by this man's energy and accomplishments. Nadar was, in fact, one of the first great self-promoters of the modern era. Much of this biography reminded me of the likes of PT Barnum and Houdini. Nonetheless, Nadar has legitimately earned a spot in art history, for photography and portraits, cartoons and sketches, as a journalist, balloonist, and more. He definitely pushed the boundaries and influenced the direction of the photographic art form. There have been three biographies published about Nadar, all in French and none translated into English yet. Here, Begley brings this highly entertaining character to life, and frankly I'm looking forward to a movie.

What a character! Although Nadar is well known in France, even a hundred years after his death, he is practically unknown in the rest of the world. Adam Begley seeks to correct this situation. You just know that someone who can pull off being known by a single name, as Nadar was (born Felix Tournachon), is a brilliant self-promoter. Nadar was indeed that, but he was also able to back up his claims of greatness. He threw himself into several long term projects during his life, and was enormously talented at most of them. He turned his artistic talents to drawing and caricature, then to the new art form of photography, and also made time to dabble in lighter than air flight with passenger balloons. He was a man about town (usually Paris) as well as a friend of many. He had a sense of humor, even of the absurd, and you get the feeling, that despite a few serious spats with

family members, he enjoyed life enormously and found it mostly amusing.

This is a highly readable book that to start it is to finish it. I had never heard of this remarkable figure but really enjoyed learning more about him and the era into which he lived. Nadar's contemporaries included Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, Gustave Courbet, and Alexandre Dumas, yet most modern records overlook this eccentric, manic Bon Vivante. The text is well written and makes for a great travel or beach book. I took mine on a mountain getaway and read the whole thing in a week. It was highly entertaining.

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