

Edithe Beutler: Beautifying Hawaii with Color

C.J. Cook

Robert L. Harned

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With its vibrant and bespoke images, Edithe Beutler is an eye-catching biographical art book.

C. J. Cook and Robert L. Harned's conscientious biography of an artist who made the South Pacific her home, *Edithe Beutler*, traces the black-and-white photograph colorist's trajectory from California to Hawaii and back again.

Edithe Beutler led a rich and varied life as an artist, entrepreneur, and traveler who rubbed shoulders with some of the twentieth century's most significant corporations. Placed in foster care as an infant, Beutler grew up in a well-off Oakland family and went on to break ground as a woman working in Hollywood's First National Pictures studio in the 1920s. Later, she became an ambassador for Eastman Kodak's photography-coloring kits in Hawaii, teaching the public how to colorize their own black-and-white pictures and initiating a lifelong passion for the sights and shades of Hawaii. This book recounts the artistic trajectory that played out alongside Beutler's business ventures as she became a Kodak franchise owner and, later, a salesperson in a Hawaii gift shop.

Interspersed among episodes from Beutler's life are lengthy digressions that cover her children, her first husband, and her grandson, but without relating back to Beutler. These discursive moments diffuse the book's focus, as when Beutler's first husband, Albert Bogdon, is shown becoming a major player in Denver politics by associating with the Ku Klux Klan, leading to another digression about the Klan's power in 1920s Denver. All this takes place years after his and Beutler's divorce and is not shown to have had an impact on Beutler's life.

By contrast, the countless images that fill the book's pages provide a refreshing visual perspective on Beutler's story, with portraits showcasing her among her family members across decades. The most prevalent images by far, however, are her colorized photographs of Hawaii. The heightened colors that result from the oil paint-based colorization process make them vibrant and bespoke. Colorized seascapes, flora, and traditional Hawaiian fishing practices are juxtaposed with their black-and-white originals, demonstrating the impact of color on an image and showing the painstaking process that goes into coloring a photograph. One image of a red hibiscus is shown in four iterations, each more finished and colorful than the next.

The images themselves are arranged in collages on the page, appearing in different sizes and orientations and forcing the text into columns and other nontraditional shapes. Indeed, images take priority for much of the book. The absence of any specific written commentary on the photographs, excluding citation captions, is glaring.

Beyond imagery, the book's biographical elements have a haphazard flow. Events are touched on—as when Beutler came into money by selling her home and art shop—without being integrated into a larger narrative about her identity. She gave up her children to foster care, went on a three-year trip to Europe, and took up work as a gift shop salesperson in her sixties. These concrete details accumulate but aren't explored or used to make larger arguments about Beutler's character; a full picture of her as a person remains elusive.

A photographic biography of an intrepid twentieth-century film colorist, *Edithe Beutler* attests to the value and artistry of an old technological process while documenting the life of a groundbreaking woman.

WILLEM MARX (August 16, 2024)

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