

IN PRINT

The cream of the coffee table

Taking a reading on this season's most stunningly beautiful books

By **DOUG RIGGS**
 JOURNAL BOOKS EDITOR

Once again this year, neither war nor climate change nor economic meltdown has stayed book publishers from their annual extravaganza of oversized, full-color, glossy-paper and often exquisitely beautiful coffee-table books.

They want our money, of course. It's no coincidence that the trickle reaches a flood during the busiest shopping season of the year. But there's a stubborn pride at work here, too. At a time when cost-cutting and downsizing are the norms and the very future of books is in doubt, they continue to turn out works of art that stun us with their images, delight our imaginations, transport us to worlds we barely knew exist.

They can't all live up to that promise, but each year many do.

These do:

"NEW YORK 400"

By John Thorn.
 Running Press. 469 pages. \$40.

Every year brings a handful of major anniversaries, each providing a reason (or excuse) for a commemorative book. This one, published 400 years after Henry Hudson arrived at the river that now bears his name, showcases photographs, paintings and drawings from the Museum of the City of New York — so many lively images that they seem to jostle each other aside in their haste to be recognized, much as New Yorkers have done almost from the beginning. Arranged chronologically, the book includes essays by 15 distinguished Gotham historians and is a must for anyone who has ever lived in, or wanted to live in, or wondered what it would be like to live in New York City. Mere visitors may enjoy it, too.

"THE DARWIN EXPERIENCE"

By John Van Whye.
 National Geographic. 61 pages. \$50.

Another of the year's anniversaries is a double for Charles Darwin — 200 years after his birth, 150 years after he published "The Origin of Species," still kicking up a fuss in some of our most benighted school districts. This book, in a handsome slipcover case,

comes to us with its pockets full, much like Darwin himself after one of his expeditions: Some of the pages are glued together with slits cut into them, pockets containing facsimiles of Darwin's own handwritten notes, sketches, even some photographs from his collection. On other pages are pasted fold-out maps, notebooks and a diary. Again form follows

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function as the overall effect is of a curious and very busy man, neatly cataloguing seemingly unrelated bits of evidence, which the text by John Whye, historian of science at Cambridge University, stitches together into one of the world's greatest scientific breakthroughs.

"SCIENCE: The Definitive Visual Guide"

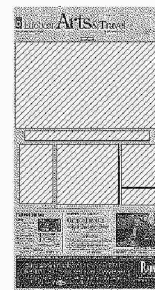
Edited by Adam Hart-Davis.
 DK Publishing. 511 pages. \$50.

Darwin would have loved this book. And just as Darwin's "Origin of Species" changed the way scientists looked at the world, so this immodestly named volume might alter the life trajectory of a teenager near you. I can't vouch that this is the "definitive" visual guide to science, but it's the best I've seen. It covers everything from the invention of the wheel to global climate change, with abundant illustrations, photographs, diagrams, a glossary, index and all sorts of other helpful tools. Best of all, it conveys the emotions of science, the passion for knowledge, the thrill of discovery, and profiles many of its practitioners. This is a book for anyone who shares that passion or yearns to do so.

"THE NATIONAL PARKS: America's Best Idea"

By Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns.
 Knopf. 403 pages. \$50.

Not an anniversary book exactly, but it has that feel, being the companion book to one of the most ballyhooed television series of the season. Whether the parks were America's best idea is debatable, but



they were a good one. So was the TV series, and so is this book. This is a year in which Americans needed reminders of the grandeur that is ours by birth — and here it is, in breathtaking photographs and inspiring words, such as these from naturalist John Muir: “This grand show is eternal. It is always sunrise somewhere; the dew is never all dried at once; a shower is forever falling; vapor is ever rising ... as the round earth rolls.”

“NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION”

By Michelle Delaney, foreword by Leah Bendavid-Val.
 National Geographic. 511 pages. \$50.

Among other things, the National Geographic Society is a vast storehouse of photographic images. Like most major museums, its permanent collection is far too extensive to be on display all at once. So it puts on exhibitions around a theme from time to time, using a tiny fraction of the whole collection, just as the museums do — only in the form of coffee-table books. As the title of this one implies, it is a potpourri, purporting to reveal the full range of the Society’s nearly 11 million images for the first time. In short, a distillation of a distillation of the work of some of the finest photographers during more than a century. Who could ask for more?

“THE WORLD IN VOGUE: People, Parties, Places”

Edited by Hamish Bowles.
 Knopf. 389 pages. \$75.

Say, isn’t that ... ? Yes it is ... our own Tom Brady, wearing a tux and looking somewhat uncomfortable on the cover of this 40-year Vogue magazine retrospective as he arrives at the “Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy” Costume Institute gala in Manhattan in 2008. (On the Patriots’ quarterback’s arm, looking right at home, is his then-girlfriend, now wife, supermodel Gisele Bundchen.) Clearly the most glamorous of this year’s crop, and the most expensive, this book is a must for any social butterflies and/or celebrity-watchers on your gift list. The image of an unshaven Tom Brady might even

rope in a few football fans. Clever folks, those Vogue people.

“TOTAL PATRIOTS: The Definitive Encyclopedia of the World-Class Franchise”

By Bob Hyldburg.
 Triumph. 803 pages. \$29.95.

Chances are, most of Tom Brady’s biggest fans would rather have this book, where he’s on the cover passing a football and looking far more at ease. This is about as unglamorous a book as the previous one is glamorous, filled with black-and-white photos from the Boston Globe, and lots and lots and LOTS of names, dates and statistics of the sort that only a diehard football fan could love. As you know, there are a lot of them out there.

“THE ONION PRESENTS OUR FRONT PAGES: 21 Years of Greatness, Virtue, and Moral Rectitude From America’s Finest News Source”

Edited by Joe Randazzo.
 Scribner. 304 pages. \$28.

This is the only book with a grandiloquent title on this list that does NOT take itself seriously. If you haven’t encountered The Onion before now, know that it is to newspapers as Mad Comics is to Time magazine. Or think of it as a print version of Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert. Just don’t take it literally. And if your Uncle Harry is a dyed-in-the-wool conservative, don’t give it to him. One look at headlines like this one from 2006 on page 256 — “Bush Urges Nation To Be Quiet For A Minute While He Tries To Think” — and he may strike you from his will.

“WHY DOGS ARE BETTER THAN CATS”

By Bradley Trevor Greive.
 Andrews McMeel. 223 pages.
 \$19.99.

Author Bradley Greive quotes James Thurber at the outset to establish his argument: “I am not a cat man, but a dog man, and all felines can tell this at a glance — a sharp, vindictive glance.” Many pro-canine Greivances follow — most of them quite accurate, as

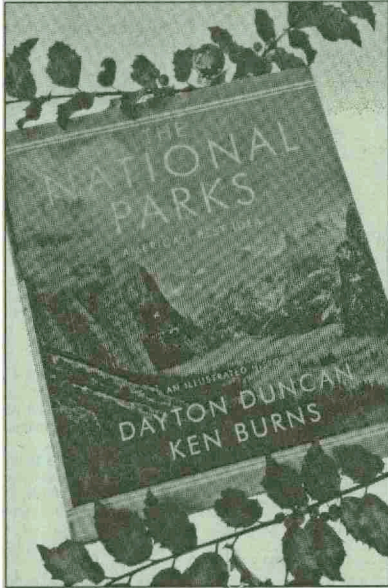
anyone who has owned a dog or been owned by a cat will attest. Nevertheless, he fails utterly to prove his point, his words completely undone by Rachael Hale's photographs. I won't go so far as to assert that she is a closet cat lover, but the fact is cats are irresistibly appealing, even at their haughtiest. Just look at the cover image. Anyone who can do so without smiling deserves a lump of coal in his stocking.

"THE GLORY OF ANGELS"

By Edward Lucie-Smith.
Collins Design. 192 pages. \$35.

To go from the ridiculous to the sublime, this is the only true art

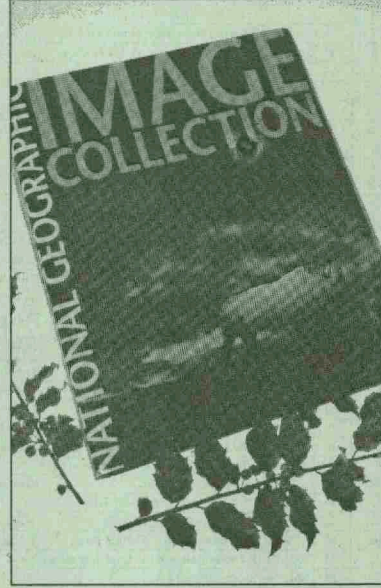
book on this year's list, and clearly the one most in keeping with the season. The book itself is a work of art, opening out like a triptych, filled with glorious, luminous images of angels by artists down the ages. Edward Lucie-Smith — an internationally known art critic and historian, author of more than 100 books, a poet, anthologist and photographer — also provides a history of these ethereal beings, and even a sort of organization chart explaining their ranks. Believe in them or not, it is sad to reach the final section, "Angels in the Modern World," and see how diminished they (and we) have become.



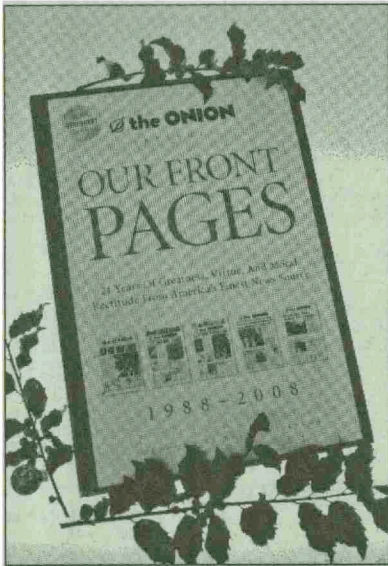
"The National Parks: America's Best Idea" is by Dayton Duncan and documentarian Ken Burns.



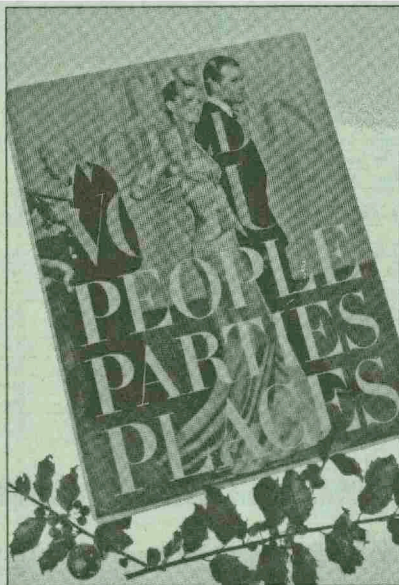
"Why Dogs Are Better Than Cats" by Bradley Trevor Greive is fun for feline fans, too.



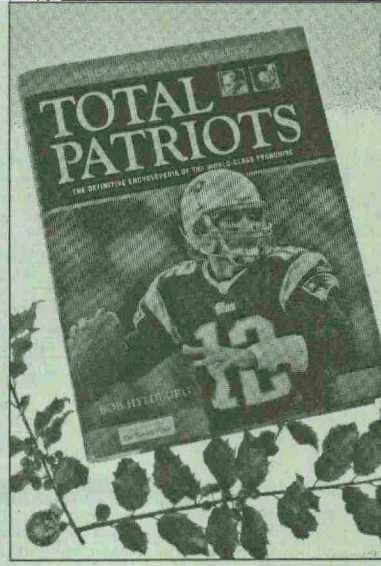
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"The World in Vogue: People, Parties, Places" features Tom Brady and Giselle Bundchen on the cover.



"Total Patriots: The Definitive Encyclopedia of the World-Class Franchise" also has Tom Brady on the cover.