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The Secret Lives of Amtrak Passengers



The photographer McNair Evans grew up in a small town in North Carolina. During the summers, he worked repairing railroad ties on a local freight line. His photographic work has often explored the connections between landscape and history and psychology, and in the past three years he's returned to his early connection to the American rail system. For the series "In Search of Great Men," Evans has taken a series of two-week trips on Amtrak, traveling all over the country to capture the lives of his fellow-passengers during their long-haul sojourns across the continent.

Evans, who was recently named a 2016 Guggenheim fellow, captures the peculiar state of enforced relaxation that long-distance travel imposes. His subjects are draped awkwardly across seats, passing time with books and phones and headphones, cuddled up under blankets from home, usually fuzzy. Maybe it's the way the light slants in through the train windows, or maybe it's the contrast be-

tween the stillness of the passengers and the motion of the train, but many of the portraits convey a sense of wistfulness, of remorse and waiting. The trains themselves have wildly romantic names—the Aristocrat, the Empire Builder, the Sunset Limited—but signs of neglect show in some of their outdated interiors. Still, they offer the sense of romance that trains often do—as places a bit outside of time where another kind of life might be possible. A teen-age boy with a puffy halo of hair and spindly teen-age-boy arms might not look like much, but he told Evans that he was wanted for mescaline possession—or maybe he was borrowing the story from a character in his William S. Burroughs novel.

The title of the series, Evans wrote in an e-mail, comes from something the Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., once said: "Greatness is not in where we stand but in what direction we are moving. We must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it—but sail we must and not drift, nor lie at anchor." Many of the people Evans encountered on the train

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were in the process of life transitions. A young woman with a shock of Kool-Aid orange dyed into her hair was travelling across the country to connect with a family she'd never met before. In Evans's portrait, she looks equal parts brave and vulnerable. Like many in the series, her image speaks to the hopes and dangers inherent in change. A journey might invite a rebirth or it might kill a dream, as one young man from Miami discovered. In the photo, he is on his way back to Florida from New York after only one night in Manhattan—the city was not what he expected, so he was going home.

McNair Evans's "In Search of Great Men" is on view at San Francisco City Hall through November 18th.