The high school prom, perhaps the most important social event of a teenager’s life, is one of America’s most anticipated rites of passage. Prom, a new photography book by the internationally recognized documentary photographer Mary Ellen Mark, celebrates this important ritual of youth. Although the traditions of finding the perfect outfit and the perfect date for this formal occasion remain much the same as they have since the 1950s, today’s prom incorporates individualistic clothing, same-sex dates, high security, and teen pregnancy. In Prom, Mary Ellen Mark takes an unvarnished stark look at dozens of young women and men from a diverse range of backgrounds on this memorable night in their lives. Prom (Getty Publications, $49.95, 164 pages, 10 x 12¾ inches, 129 color illustrations, ISBN 978-1-60606-108-4) will be published in April 2012.

“I’ve always been interested in photographing traditions and customs—especially in America,” writes Mary Ellen Mark in the preface to Prom. “I’ve kept several photographs from my high school days. The one that has
intrigued me the most is my own prom picture. There I am, my hair in a perfect pageboy, wearing pearls and high heels. I’m in a beautiful white dress with pink flowers. I have a corsage and a gold bracelet on my wrist. Behind me is Stuart, my prom date. He has a white jacket and a perfect little bow tie. Both of us have big hopeful smiles. We were facing our perfect futures. The world was ours—or so we thought.”

From 2006 to 2009, Mary Ellen Mark traveled across the United States to photograph prom-goers at 13 schools—parochial, private and public—from New York City to Houston to Los Angeles. From her own alma mater in Philadelphia to a suburban enclave in Austin to inner-city Newark, Mark worked with a rare Polaroid 20x24 Land Camera and some of the last remaining stock of Polaroid-manufactured 20x24 instant film to create this captivating document. Mark’s husband, the filmmaker Martin Bell, collaborated with her on the project to produce and direct a film, also called Prom, which features interviews with the students about their lives, dreams, and hopes for the future. Quotations—both humorous and heartfelt—from the student interviews appear throughout the book, and a DVD of the film is packaged with the book. The result is a revealing document of American youth at the beginning of the 21st century.

One of the couples pictured in the book, private school students Matt Graziano and Stefanie Saperstein, attended their Harvard-Westlake School prom in Los Angeles on May 17, 2008, and commented on their anticipation of the event. Matt: “She’s been waiting for this moment for four years. She’s been dreaming about it.” Stefanie: “No, since I was a baby.”

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City holds a yearly prom for patients in the pediatric ward. At her celebration on May 17, 2009, Ashley Conrad, looked to her future: “I would like to get married. I mean, what girl doesn’t? The fairy-tale wedding is always something that every little girl dreams of, getting a big white dress and looking beautiful. And it would be wonderful.”

For the inner-city Malcolm X Shabazz High School prom in Newark, New Jersey, on May 18, 2006, many of the female students chose local designers to make their custom dresses. “I had my dress designed because prom is a once-in-a-lifetime thing,” said Taneya Hammer. Another student at the school, Donald R. Lewis, Jr., was more concerned about his environment: “Where we grew up definitely is not peaceful at all. There’s a lot of violence in the streets there, so I would definitely not recommend bringing any kids up, even though I was raised there and I turned out fine. You just can’t live the hood out; basically you just have to change how, who you are.”

Meghan Connolly, at the Cheltenham High School prom in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, on June 6, 2006, said, “The worst thing about high school is the drama. We are all just a bunch of teenagers who want to kill each other.”

At the Tottenville High School prom in Staten Island, New York on June 16, 2006, Samantha Monte said about her date Khalil Samad: “The best thing that happened to us in high school was being nominated as cutest couple. Unfortunately, we didn’t win.”
“Mary Ellen Mark is one of the great documentary photographers of our time,” observes Brett Abbott, Curator of Photography at the High Museum of Art. “Plumbing the basic commonality of human experience, she has reported on the state of the world’s social environments for more than four decades. Prom shows her at the height of her career, with powerfully tender work that speaks to one of the diverse and unifying cultural rituals associated with growing up in America.”

Adds Martin Z. Margulies of The Margulies Collection at the Warehouse, Miami, “Mary Ellen Mark is one of the outstanding American photographers depicting the human condition. A true American artist who has dedicated her life to photography, she ranks as one of the best.”

Prom was photographed at the following schools: Malcolm X Shabazz High School, Newark, New Jersey, May 18, 2006; Cheltenham High School, Wyncote, Pennsylvania, June 6, 2006; Tottenville High School, Staten Island, New York, June 16, 2006; Saint Michael Academy, New York City, May 16, 2007; Fontbonne Hall Academy, Brooklyn, New York, May 25, 2007; Riverview School, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, June 16, 2007; Charlottesville High School, Charlottesville, Virginia, April 26, 2008; MacArthur Senior High School, Houston, Texas, May 9, 2008; Westlake High School, Austin, Texas, May 10, 2008; Palisades Charter High School, Pacific Palisades, California, May 16, 2008; Harvard-Westlake School, Los Angeles, California, May 17, 2008; Ithaca High School, Ithaca, New York, June 21, 2008; and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York City, May 17, 2009.

Mary Ellen Mark has achieved worldwide visibility through her books, exhibitions, and editorial magazine work. She is a contributing photographer to the New Yorker and has published photo-essays and portraits in Life, New York Times Magazine, Rolling Stone, and Vanity Fair. Her books include Seen Behind the Scene: Forty Years of Photographing on the Set (Phaidon, 2008), Exposure (Phaidon, 2006), and Twins (Aperture, 2005). Prom is her 18th book. Her photographs are in the permanent collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art; Corcoran Gallery of Art; George Eastman House; International Center of Photography; J. Paul Getty Museum; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; National Portrait Gallery; Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among others.

Martin Bell is a filmmaker whose documentary Streetwise (1985) was nominated for an Academy Award. He has directed narrative features films including American Heart (1992) starring Jeff Bridges and Hidden in America (1996), featuring both Beau and Jeff Bridges. He has collaborated with Mary Ellen Mark on several projects including Circus of Dreams (1993), Twins (2004), and Alexander (2006). His ongoing film project, A New York Story, aims to capture the energy and resilience of New York City since September 11, 2001.

**About the 20x24 Camera**

All of the photographs in Prom were shot with a 20x24 Polaroid Land Camera on Polaroid film. As the era of Polaroid was rapidly coming to an end, Mark had to act quickly before the film was discontinued. There are only seven of these large format instant cameras extant in the world – five of which are in use. Mary Ellen Mark has
been working with the 20x24 camera for more than 15 years and for the Prom project she used two of them—one based in San Francisco, the other in New York. The large format instant camera requires specially qualified technicians to operate it. As of mid-2009, 20x24 Studio had rescued the remaining stock of 20x24 Polaroid film components and the unique production equipment needed to spool and package it. Although supplies are limited, 20x24 Studio is currently researching ways to keep this technology alive for many years to come.

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