

# PDN READER SURVEY: **The Best** Workshop Instructors

Photographers can be overwhelmed by photo workshop options, and while there are many criteria for choosing a workshop, an obvious one is the quality of the instructor. That led us to wonder: Who are the best instructors? We turned to our readers to find out by posting a survey online this summer. In addition to asking respondents to name the best workshop instructor they've had in the past five years, we asked for names of instructors who had been highly recommended to them by colleagues and friends.

We promoted the survey on Facebook and Twitter, and asked workshops around the country to help us get the word out. We also asked workshops to name their instructors who are evaluated most favorably by students. Finally, we did our best to filter out those instructors who campaigned by asking their former students to fill out the survey. In all, we received more than 1,800 responses, and 13 instructors emerged as clear favorites. They teach different topics in different venues, with varying course lengths and prices.

Note: Our survey was not designed to rank the instructors, so we present them here in alphabetical order.



Above: Participants in Bobbi Lane's "People and Places" workshop on location at Eve's Ranch in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Opposite page, top right: "Scenic" from Imagined Experiences by Aline Smithson.

## Zack Arias

Atlanta-based editorial and music photographer Zack Arias is known for his OneLight workshop, which is promoted as an "Off Camera, Manual Mode, Old School" approach. He teaches the one-day workshops in various cities as well as online, and they often run 12, 14, or 16 hours. "A ton of great information presented in an easily understandable way," said one former student. "He teaches in a language that anyone can understand, whether a beginner or pro," said another, who added, "He even followed up with each student a few months later to see how we were progressing." Another liked the hands-on shooting approach, and notes that Arias possesses "knowledge, humor, and doesn't leave until everyone has their questions answered."



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## Tom Bol

Though travel photographer Tom Bol conducts workshops on landscape and nature photography in locations like Antarctica, the Galapagos, Patagonia and New Zealand, students note that it's in his Flash Clinic lighting seminars that his individual attention and strengths at "adapting to the individual student needs" are at the fore. "He broke his flash lessons down into logical and easy to understand chunks," wrote one former student. Even in exotic locations, another said, "He does not take personal photos on workshops, but instead spends all of his time with students." A third one wrote, "He seems more genuinely excited when a student gets the shot than he is to get it himself."

## Carol Dragon

In her private workshops and ICP seminars on digital photography, Photoshop and workflow, Carol Dragon conveys a wealth of technical knowledge, "but talks in terms of creativity," says one former student. "You learn how to solve technical and esthetic issues." Her critiques are described as "strict, demanding," and "constructive." Past students report that she "is a terrific motivator" and "a great problem solver" who can listen and understand her students' goals and then help them achieve them. Several students commented that her classes are "well thought out and highly organized."



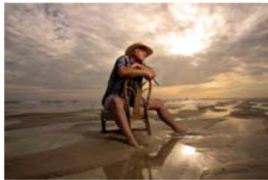
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## Jerry Ghionis

Australia-based Jerry Ghionis, named “one of the top five wedding photographers in the world” by Wedding and Portrait Photographers International, frequently sells out his five-day workshops fast in cities around the world and in the U.S., including Atlanta, Portland, Chicago and Boston. One student of his wedding and portrait poses classes says he is a “tireless teacher offering great examples, honest and thorough critiques, and non-stop learning while pushing boundaries and comfort zones.” Another says, “He is great at what he does (photographic and business) and is very articulate about what he does, how he does it and why he does it. [Ghionis] is an all around great instructor.”



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## Don Giannatti

Don Giannatti teaches two-day sessions once or twice a month throughout the country, and also does special weeklong workshops in places like the Bahamas and Mexico. His “Lighting Essentials” workshops are billed as affordable, no-nonsense primers on how to create great lighting setups using simple tools. “Less me, more you; less bluster, more shooting,” reads a line on his Web site. And according to former students, he delivers. They praise his “practical and hands-on” approach, and appreciate his “fun” and “casual style of teaching.” He “doesn’t stray into self promotion,” as one former student said, and another credited his focus on “profession and art, not gear.”



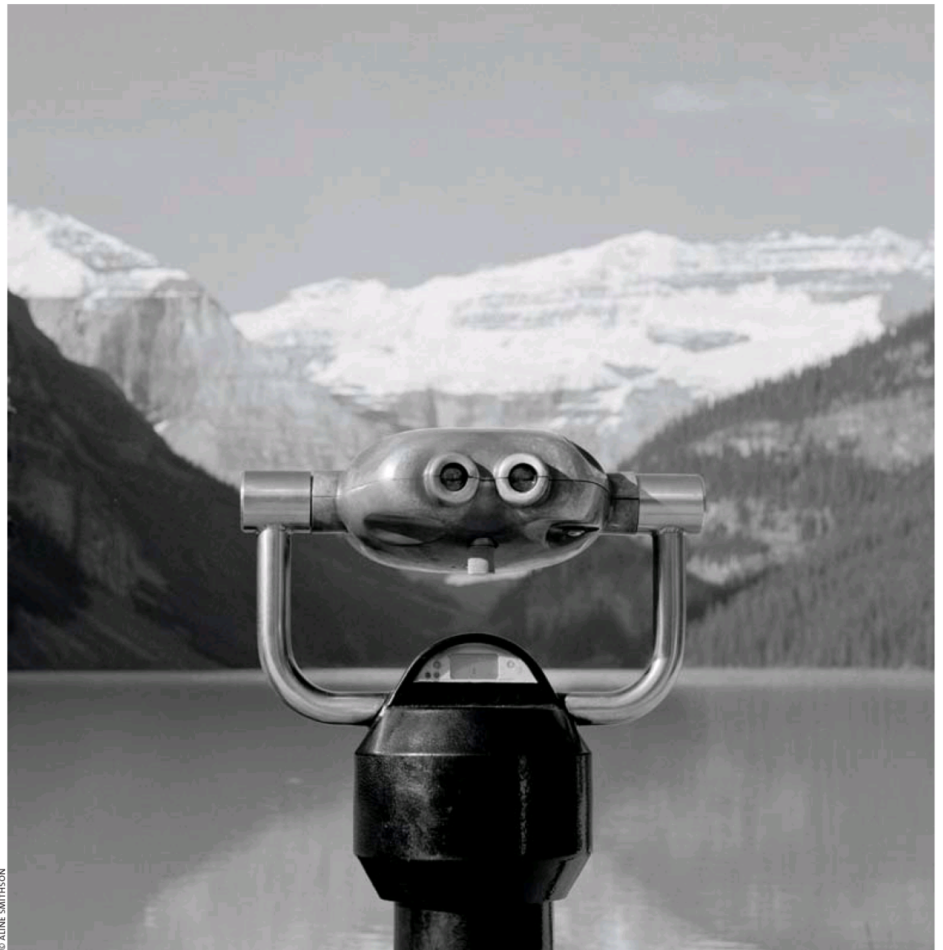
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## Bobbi Lane

An instructor at ICP, and the Julia Dean, Santa Fe Photographic, and Maine Media workshops, Bobbi Lane teaches portraiture and lighting courses that draw on her experience as a commercial and editorial photographer. She also teaches private courses in Connecticut, where she is based. Workshop attendees appreciate her passion for photography and her ability to “bring out the very best” in her pupils. A former student said she makes sure “each and every student understood the concepts she was teaching.” In her workshops Lane delivers an “immense” amount of information clearly, and is “more interested in her students than in showing off her own work.”

## Jay Maisel

In the years Jay Maisel has been teaching seminars and workshops on street



© ALINE SMITHSON

photography and “Light Gesture and Color,” he has inspired many fans. His classes are fundamentally about how to see the world. It’s not an easy topic, and students report that Maisel’s courses are “diverse, compelling and challenging.” “He teaches what makes a great photo, not how to take it,” explained one student. Many commented on Maisel’s wit and his “candid,” “brutally honest” critiques, but according to one student, Maisel is “crusty on the outside, soft and caring on the inside.” Said another former student, “My time with him produced the greatest improvements in my work: revolutionary versus evolutionary changes.”



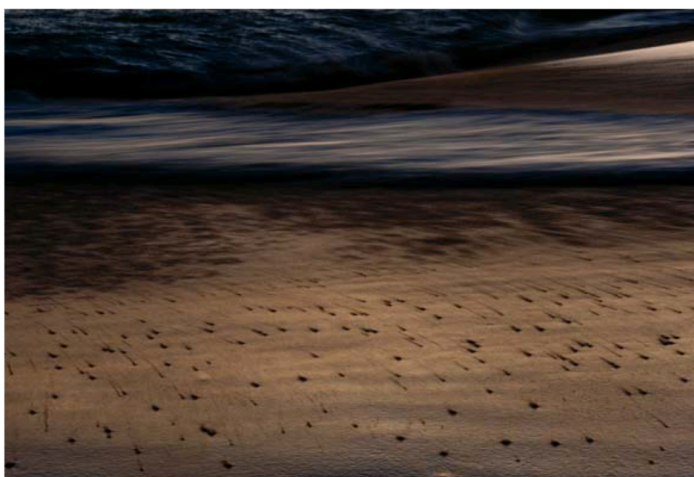
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## Joe McNally

Lighting on location, lighting with flash, portable strobe lighting and off camera flash are a few of the topics Joe McNally has taught at Santa Fe, Maine, PhotoPlus Expo, and other venues around the country. McNally, whose career has spanned



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30-plus years, is described as a patient instructor who is "generous with his knowledge and hilarious to be around" with "no ego to break through." Former students reported that he "throws a lot at you," but he manages to do so in a way that "makes sense and does not seem overwhelming," as one said. "The information he provides is current, informative, and most of all, very accessible, especially to those of us newer to the trade."

### George Simian

Alums of George Simian's workshops in intermediate and advanced lighting, taught through UCLA and Samy's Camera, consider him both a teacher and a mentor. "He is always available for any questions or concerns. . . just a phone call or e-mail away," says one. An L.A.-based commercial photographer who also teaches an annual workshop in Ubud, Bali, Simian draws on his own assignment work but also incorporates other examples and trends in his instruction. As a mentor to fellow pros, he's described as "an incredible information resource" on matters of business as well as technique.



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### Aline Smithson

Aline Smithson teaches various courses at the Julia Dean Photo Workshops to help aspiring fine-art photographers find their voice and advance their careers. Former students praise her inspiration, encouragement, teaching skill, generosity and genuine kindness. They also credit her for helping them get results. "She presented the most concise—and successful—path to becoming recognized as a fine-art photographer," said one who has since exhibited work. Another wrote, "If it was not for her I would

not be as far as I am in the process of breaking into the art business." Students noted that Smithson's tireless mentoring and community building among fine-art photographers has also helped their careers.

### Eddie Soloway

Eddie Soloway has taught his "A Natural Eye" workshop on landscape and nature photography since 1995, at places like Santa Fe, Julia Dean, Maine Media, and the Toscana Photo Workshops in Italy. Soloway also teaches "Eyes Wide



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Open," a workshop that helps photographers delve into abstraction and conceptual photography in urban and natural environments. He emphasizes creativity and vision as much as craft, and gets high marks from students for the clarity of his lessons, which he achieves by showing, not just telling. Former students rave about his "constructive and encouraging" instruction, the "personal attention" paid to each participant, and his "inspirational" ideas about photography. His "love of photography" comes through in the course, past students say.

### David H. Wells

Photojournalist David Wells has taught workshops on documentary photography, travel photography, the photo essay, street photography and business topics such as grant applications. He teaches frequently at Calumet, but also at ICP, Maine Media Workshops, Julia Dean Photo Workshops and others. Former students praised him for his communication skills, individual attention, tirelessness and patience, and for providing a wealth of practical advice, from how to focus a camera to how to pitch your work. "He takes time to understand each student and the purpose behind their photography. . . and pushes you constantly to do better," one student wrote. "Helped us put principles into practice. . . practices were then reinforced throughout the workshop so that [they] became habit," wrote another.



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### Nevada Wier

Nevada Wier specializes in photographing people and landscape in remote areas of the world, and her images have appeared in numerous publications. She teaches travel photography workshops at Santa Fe and for Pixelchrome, as well as some lighting and digital workflow classes. Wier wins over students with her all-around teaching skills. "Good communicator without ego," reported one. "Not just a great photographer who's trying to teach. She's accomplished at both," said another. A third listed Wier's strengths as: "Technical knowledge, approachability, ability to explain in comprehensible terms, real life business experience, open to taking the class diverse directions, fun person, stature in her field, honest in portfolio reviews, [and] able to handle very diverse student personalities." **pdn**



© NEVADA WIER

Above: Rassa Dance for Krishna, Manjuli Island, India, photographed by Nevada Wier. Top left: "Retorno," from Eddie Soloway's series "The Edge of Light" which captures the transition from daytime to nighttime at the ocean's edge.