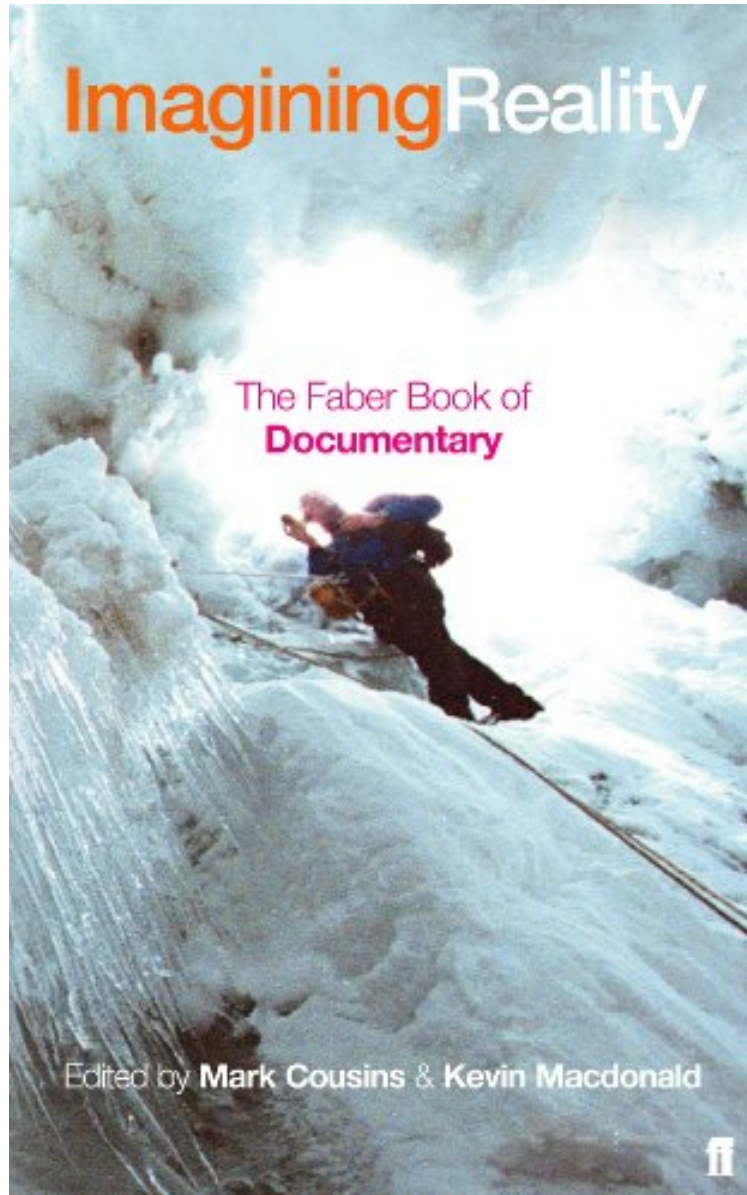


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## **Imagining Reality**

*Kevin Macdonald, Mark Cousins*  
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**Kevin Macdonald, Mark Cousins : Imagining Reality** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *Imagining Reality*:

20 of 21 people found the following review helpful. *Imagining Reality* By John Darling Macdonald, Kevin and Cousins, Mark, *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, Faber and Faber, 1996. "Imagining Reality" is a book of short, sharp readings by filmmakers and critics about documentary film from its beginnings with Edison and Lumiere, to the feature documentary "Crumb" (1995). After years of seeming neglect through the middle of this

century, documentary film is again undergoing a wholesome reassessment by a new plethora of practitioners, commentators and academic scrutineers. We can hope that this will contribute to the long-standing integrity and innovation in this form of film, which founded the beginnings of cinema. It all began in 1895 with Lumiere's patrons diving under their seats as a locomotive rushed towards them on the screen. The fiction film then took over in 1903, coincidentally, with the intervention of film editing techniques. The literature about documentary of recent years is preoccupied by the questions of where to now, the imminent death of the documentary and how close to the "truth" is this film genre? After this questioning and the continual pushing of the boundaries of form, style and means of expression the documentary is still very, very alive. Heated debate continues for definitions of the very essence and nature of the genre. Many of the innovations introduced over the years by documentarists have been quickly adapted into mainstream television and feature films. Recent titles of books about documentary film express this lively debate: "Representing Reality", "Blurred Boundaries", "Claiming the Real", "Theorizing Documentary", "Fields of Vision", "The Art of Record", "Documentary Dilemmas", "Framer Framed", "Innovation in Ethnographic Film", "New Challenges for Documentary" and the book that is the subject of this review "Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary". If "Imagining Reality" had been published before the debates raised in the recent books mentioned above, it could well have been titled *Imaging Reality*. The editors of "Imagining Reality", Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins from the UK have made a careful, considered and very readable compendium from which to consider the major issues concerning documentary. It is a book that should interest all, especially documentary aficionados. It will also become a valuable resource for teaching about documentary film. However, from an Australian point of view their book seriously underestimates our contribution to this exciting film genre. There is no mention of any Australian films or filmmakers throughout the book. It is a serious failing. Another area found wanting is a consideration of the impact over the last forty years of films by women that provide a unique perspective on the human condition. Although they acknowledge it in the preface, the editors have excluded the now controversial area of ethnographic film and the issues of "representation", "rights" and "reflexivity" relevant to all forms of documentary. The current debate on "reflexivity"; the open positioning and acknowledging of the filmmaker's views (and sometimes themselves, e.g. Broomfield, Mike Rubbo, or Alby Mangels) in the body of the film. In this way further layers of "truth" are manipulated by the filmmakers, as they provide the viewer with information concerning who they are and why they are making a film. The very humorous piece in this book on the British filmmaker, Nick Broomfield broaches the issue, but we miss a follow-through. Opinion is now leaning towards the view that documentary film is as much a fiction as any other fiction. Yet practitioners of the documentary are generally well aware that from idea to final mix, their film is the product of the process of many thousands of selective decisions. These many decisions will, they hope, create a realistic re-creation and representation of the mood, atmosphere and meaning of the actual events that they are shooting and then editing into their final product. The new development of small hand carried camcorders in the Hi-8 and digital format has allowed both non-professional and professional film-makers to make low-budget, credible and often unusually intimate stories such as the "Video Diaries" series that were produced and broadcast recently by the BBC and SBS-TV. I would have enjoyed a more detailed investigation here. Despite these limitations "Imagining Reality" remains a fascinating read as many of the selections chosen have not been published in such an accessible form before. There are incisive and new insights into the greats of documentary such as Flaherty, Ivens, Balzac, Vertov, Grierson, Wright, John Huston, Reifentahl, Jennings, Warhol, Welles, Ophüls, Malle, Marker, Leacock, Rouch, the Maysles brothers, Wiseman, De Antonio, Morris, Loach and Pennebaker. What a roll call, and what fascinating reading they provide! Documentary, we realize, can be all things to all. As the Canadian turned French filmmaker Chris Marker comments, near the end of this book, we are in a technological age during which "reality has rarely needed so much to be imagined". John Darling Documentary filmmaker and Lecturer in Media Studies, Murdoch University, 1997 of 7 people found the following review helpful. *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary* By Nora This anthology includes the following essays: "Filming Death" By Beate Balzac; "Lowell Thomas and 'Lawrence of Arabia'" By Kevin Brownlow "Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life" By Merian C. Cooper "The Failings of 'Berlin'" By Siegfried Kracauer "Making 'Rain'" By Joris Ivens "Jean Painlevé" By Raymond Durgnat "First Principles of Documentary" By John Grierson "Leni Riefenstahl, Art and Propaganda" By Manohla Dargis "Worlds of Command" By Tom Waugh "Iwaskai and the Occupied Screen" By Erik Barnouw "Nuit et Brouillard" By Annette Insdorff "Warhol's 'Sleep'" By Jonas Mekas "Orson Welles's 'F for Fake'" By Richard Combs "Phantom India" By Louis Malle "Chris Marker and 'Sans Soleil'" By Terrence Rafferty "Narration Can be a Killer" By Robert Drew "Gimme Shelter" By Pauline Kael "Editing as a Four-Way Conversation" By Frederick Wiseman "Filming Torture Victims" By Haskell Wexler "Roger Me" By Roger Ebert "Death of a Nation" By Ken Loach "The Unique Role of Documentaries" By Krzysztof Kieslowski "Werner Herzog's New Directions" By J. Hoberman "The Unpredictable Revelations of Nicolas Philibert" By Howard Feinstein "Clearing the Fog: Errol Morris Answers for His Film" By Livia Bloom "L.A. Confidential" By Amy Taubin "By No Half-Measure" By Kevin Macdonald "True Confessions, Sort Of" By Paul Arthur "Siamese Spin" By Chuck Stephens "The Egos Have Landed" By Jon Ronson "Paradocumentary in Iran" By Mark Cousins

In *Imaging Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, Oscar-winning documentary-maker Kevin Macdonald (*One Day in September*, *Touching the Void*) and leading broadcaster/historian Mark Cousins (*The Story of Film*) offer an expanded, revised edition of their 'definitive, inspirational' (Independent) compendium on the roots and history of the documentary film. *Imaging Reality* takes the reader on a tour of the evolution of documentary film as an increasingly vibrant, polemical, experimental and entertaining form. It gathers a wide-ranging collection of writings by and about such groundbreaking documentary-makers as Vertov, Flaherty, Marcel Ophuls, Chris Marker, Kieslowski, Claude Lanzmann, and Nick Broomfield. The story is carried up to date by attention to the success documentaries have had among mainstream movie audiences in recent years, including Michael Moore's *Bowling For Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *The Buena Vista Social Club*, *Spellbound*, *Capturing The Friedmans*, *tre Et Avoir*, and *The Fog Of War*.