



LIGHTING FOR STILL LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

Quick Guide
Written by Stacey Hill



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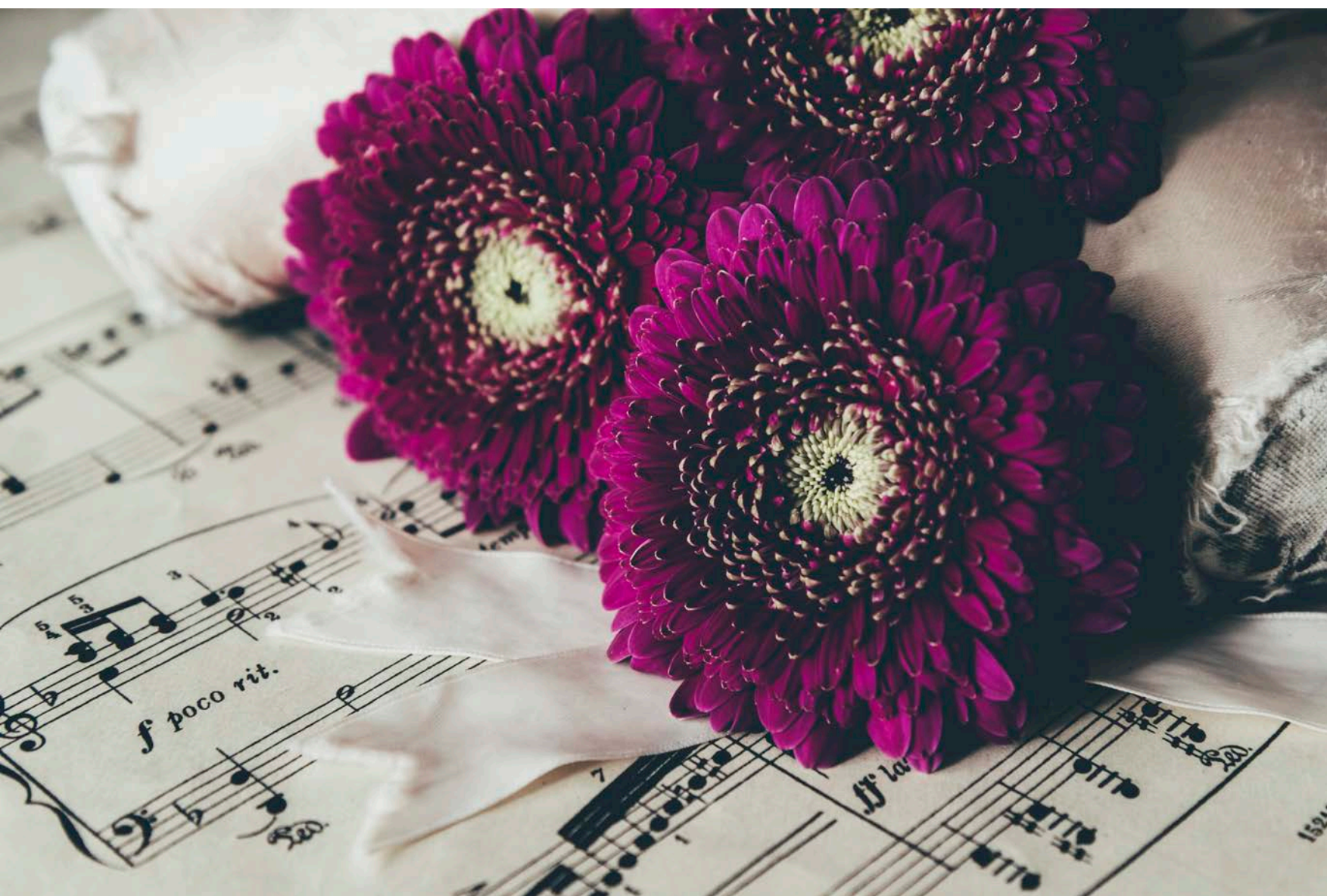
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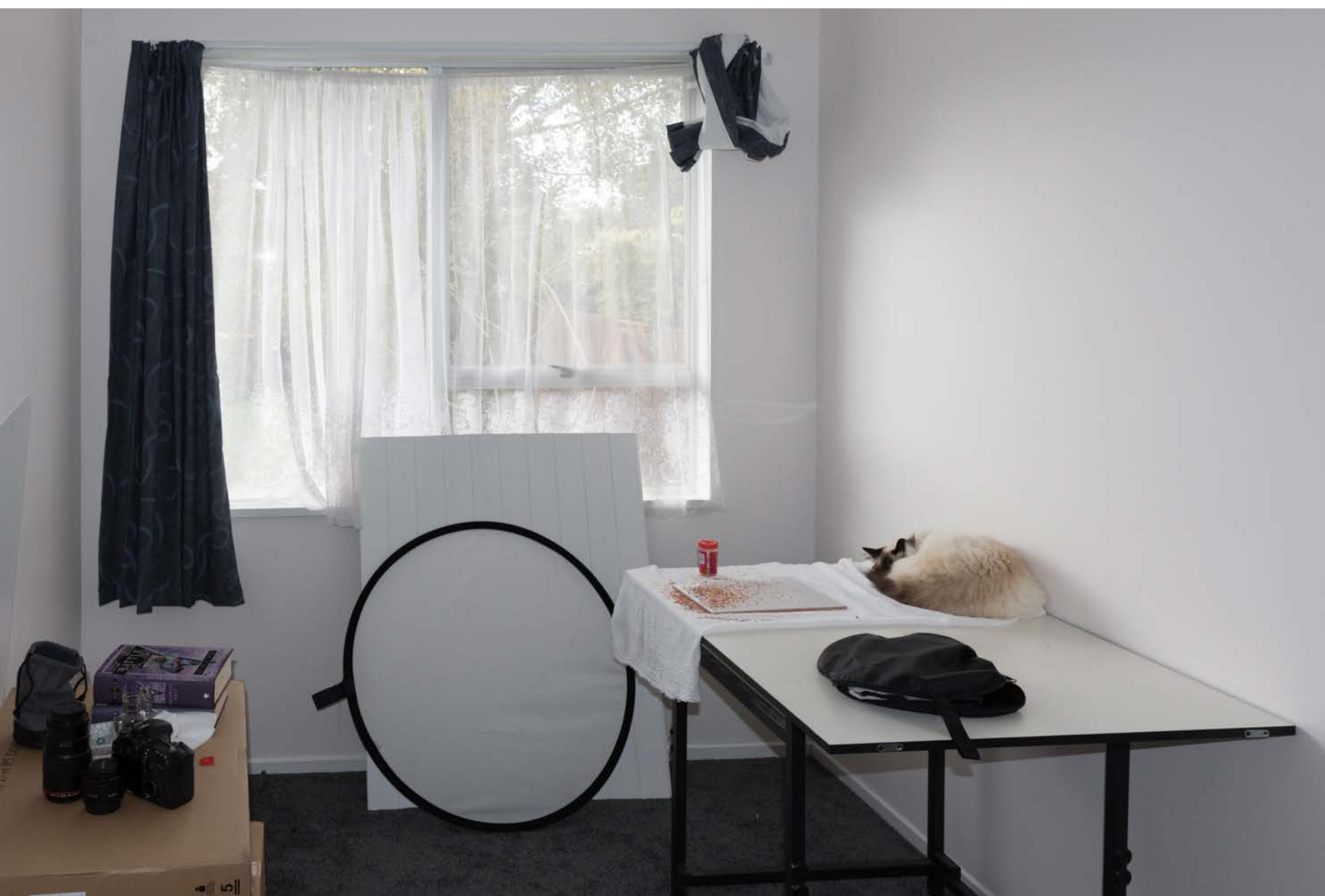
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Photograph by Stacey Hill

In my first article, [Beginner's Guide to Still Life Photography](#), I talk about the physical and storytelling elements involved in setting up a still life scene. Of course, the missing component of that article was the lighting, and such is its importance that I am dedicating an article specifically for the lighting of a still life photograph.

One of the benefits of still life photography is that it doesn't necessarily need to take up a lot of space. My spare bedroom functions as my studio. My still life work is done on a craft table that measures 2 x 3 feet and folds up out of the way when necessary.



Photograph by Stacey Hill


Studio setup with a cat sleeping where he shouldn't be.

I am lucky that I have a spare room with a window. The window allows me to use natural light as the basis for my photography. Natural light is my preferred choice, but it isn't the only option.

What you will use to light up your still life photos may depend upon your preferences or requirements, and while there are recommended concepts to consider, how you create your lighting is up to you.

Here we will consider the following:

1. What is light and why does it matter?
2. Shaping and controlling light
3. Mood and impact
4. Tools

 **Recommended Reading:** If you're interested in learning more about light and how you can use it to improve your photography, grab a copy of Photzy's bestselling premium guide, [Understanding Light Book Two](#).



Photograph by Stacey Hill
High-key lighting scenario

1 WHAT IS LIGHT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

There are all sorts of scientific explanations about what light is, which I won't bore you with. From a photographer's point of view, light is the necessary ingredient that allows us to see our world and capture images of it.

Light is made up of two components that are especially important to still life photography: light waves and shadow.

If you only have direct (frontal) intense light shining upon your scene, then there are no shadows, which means your shot will look very flat. You will also likely have colors that are washed out and highlights that are blown out.

While harsh bright light can be used artistically – often in high-key lighting scenarios – if you are taking photos of food, it may be difficult to make the subject look tasty and delicious with very harsh bright lighting.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

Low-key lighting scenario

The reverse is when you have minimal light and lots of black and shadows – this is referred to as a low-key lighting scenario. When you incorporate lots of dark shadows, it makes the color tones rich and intense, and this lighting scenario can work very well as a style choice for your still life photography.

Lighting is critical to the mood and the story that you might be telling with your still life photo.

For example, if the scene is a cold winter night, with a hot chocolate sitting in front of a fire, you will probably go for a darker, moodier lighting option.

However, a summer cocktail would likely be best portrayed with a lighting scenario that is brighter, with light tones, and displaying a more cheery mood.

⚠ Key Information: The brightness and intensity of the light that you have on your scene is important. It has a direct impact on the quality of the image and the mood/story that you are trying to tell.

2 SHAPING AND CONTROLLING LIGHT

When you are outside working with landscapes, you have little control over the lighting conditions. You can't turn the intensity of the sun down.

So instead, you go out when the light is softer: on overcast cloudy days or at the Golden Hour. You make choices that impact the lighting on your scenes.

One of the benefits of shooting still life photography indoors in a studio is that you have a lot more control over the lighting.

Here are some of the ways that you can shape and control the lighting in your scene:

- Choose the direction of the light – back, front, or side lighting
- Choose the angle of the light
- Filter the light to make it softer and more diffused
- Opt for natural, or artificial, light sources
- Reflect or block the light
- Change the color of the light

The easiest (and cheapest) option for lighting is to go with natural light, especially if you are just getting started. Hopefully you have access to a room with a window that you can work in front of.

Natural light is preferred because it is the color that we expect it to be, and it can be managed through diffusion and using bounce techniques.

Artificial lighting can vary in color temperature, especially the low-end affordable options. It can be quite focused, directional, and intense. This means it will take a lot more management on your part to be made to look natural. It is also more expensive as you have to buy it. However, if your only option is to shoot in a garage, or a basement room, then artificial lighting may be your best option.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

This was shot with an electronic flash. The shadows are very hard and dark as a result of the lighting.

We can control and shape the results of artificial lighting in different ways as well:

- If there are shadow areas, we can bounce or reflect light back into them to lighten them up.
- We can intensify and deepen the shadows by blocking light.
- The color of the background, and any reflectors we use, will have an impact on the tone of the image.
- Black cards create and deepen shadows by blocking light.
- White reflectors add more light by bouncing the light back into the scene.
- Diffusion material can soften the light.
- Mirrors can intensify, bounce, and focus light back into the set.

Shaping the light, and managing the shadows, has an important impact.

The balance between light and shadow is what gives the physical elements on your set their 3-dimensional presence, and that can be part of your creative style when lighting a still life photograph.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

Gerbera flower – backlit by a window covered in white fabric to diffuse the light.

This is why many still life photographers prefer side lighting, as it allows them to use both light and shadow as a physical element within their scene.

Backlighting offers different creative choices.

⚠ Key Information: You can control, shape, and manage your lighting to enhance your image, and you can also add your own personal style, or creative flourish, to the final image by making lighting choices.

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Photograph by Stacey Hill

Notice how the side lighting provides “curvature” to the blueberry.

3 MOOD AND IMPACT

Let’s look at a range of different images that were shot in my studio (my setup for these different shots was always the same).

The primary light source is a window on the left so that the light comes from the left, and slightly behind camera.

The window has a translucent net curtain to soften the light (sometimes I use an extra piece of white gauze if it is a particularly bright sunny day).

I use white or black foam core for the backgrounds, reflectors, and flags (a flag is used to block light).

My personal preference is toward the dark moody style, but I have included something for everyone here as inspiration.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

My favorite style – dark and moody



Photograph by Stacey Hill

An example of a high-key still life photograph. Notice how it has a light, dreamy, and ethereal mood.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

Proper lighting can make colors pop.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

The shadows give depth to a still life photograph.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

When the lighting comes toward the subject from a very low angle, it can dramatize the shapes of your subject.

When I shoot dark moody images, I have a particular message in my mind. I want the colors to be rich and intense.

In a food still life photograph, the food should be a focus and look tasty and delicious. In fact, I want it to appear sexy!

The brighter images (for me) are a bit more playful because there is more light to work with.

I can experiment with techniques like pouring a liquid and then capturing the motion – while the rest of the still life retains sharpness.

I can tell more of a story with different props and backgrounds.

The food shown in a still life photograph is always the star of the show, but the props and backgrounds can make the food more approachable and help set the story.

As far as impact goes, here is a sequence of images (pages 16-19) that I shot with exactly the same setup, except for one thing...

I used a dark flag to increase shadow, and block light from hitting the set, by positioning it in different places around the scene.

You can't see where the reflector is. It is sitting outside of the frame, but you can see the impact it has had on this series.

Sometimes the difference is very subtle; it might just tone down the highlights around the rim and handle of the jug, for example.



Photograph by Stacey Hill



Photograph by Stacey Hill

The jug is lighter in comparison to the first image. My flag darkened the jug.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

My flag created more shadows to the camera left side of the jug, but the raspberries in the jug are still quite evenly lit.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

There is more light on the foreground and the jug to camera left. My flag was placed to camera right of the jug.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

This was my setup, showing the tripod in position and at the angle that it was being used for all the images of the raspberries in a jug on the previous pages.

Controlling the light in your still life scene has a direct impact on the whole feel and tone of the image.

It also has technical implications.


If you block a lot of light to go for the dark, moody, heavy, shadow style, you absolutely need to shoot on a tripod.

Some of my shutter speeds were as low as 1/10th second, or it can be even slower.

You may also need to raise your ISO; however, this can affect the quality of your final image, depending on how well your camera copes with the higher ISO settings.

If you want to practice capturing some movement, try sprinkling some sugar or pouring salad dressing while you click the shutter release.

You will need to have the right shutter speeds to get the outcome that you want, and that may impact the decisions that you will make on how to light the scene.

 **Key Lesson:** We already know that controlling the light has direct impact on the feel and mood of your final image. It may also require you to make technical adjustments to the way you shoot a scene. The intensity of the light accounts for exposure settings and, ultimately, image sharpness.

4 TOOLS

Artificial Light Source – Accessible options for beginners might be the Lowel Ego Light Unit or a camera flash (I recommend off-camera lighting with an electronic flash). You can also start out using simple household lamps.

Reflectors/bounce cards/flags – A 5-in-1 unit option gives you a translucent base and also a White, Black/Silver and Gold reflector covers to put around the base. These are available in a range of sizes. Earlier, I mentioned foam core. This product is very useful as a reflector or a flag as well. It can generally be found at art supply stores or some camera shops. It's inexpensive and can be easily cut to size.

Tripod – A good sturdy one for extended exposures.

Light stand for the electronic flash (if you're using one).

White fabric for covering a window light source

– This is very important. You don't want an opaque fabric unless you're trying to eliminate all of the light coming through the window. You want a white translucent fabric. Many fabric stores sell a material called "white rip-stop nylon." This works really well for diffusing window light. It also comes in black, and if you're handy you can make some neat flags with black rip-stop nylon.

White/Black (or colored) large foam core sheets for backgrounds and backdrops.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

For this dark raspberry shot, the background is a black painted card. The backdrop and the side drop are black foam core. The shallow V-shaped light modifiers are heavy black cardboard.

Let's look at a couple of my shoot setups so that you can see the different elements being used.

💎 Key Lesson: Having the right tools to modify your light allows you more control over the final outcome. Plus, it allows you to extend the scope of your creative lighting choices.

👤 Recommended Reading: If you're interested in learning more about light and how you can use it to improve your photography, grab a copy of Photzy's bestselling premium guide, [Understanding Light Book Two](#).

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*With this much lighter, brighter shot,
the background is white painted
beadboard. The backdrop is white
foam core draped with a white
gauzy fabric that gives a seamless
universal background in the distance.
It also adds a bit of fabric texture
to the right side of the shot.*



SUMMARY

Light is a critical factor in all photography, but not just any light. It has to be the **right** light for the situation.

Still life photography that is shot within a studio setting offers you a greater scope of control over the lighting.

The color, direction, angle, and balance of light/shadow are critical components in composing your still life image.

Not only does the lighting have technical considerations, but it is also a key element creating the mood, or feeling, that you wish to bring to the image.

By using your light creatively, you can elevate your still life images from Good to WOW.

Self Check Quiz

- 1) What are the lighting styles called that are either very bright tones or very dark tones?
- 2) What kind of lighting is preferred for still life photography when starting out?
- 3) Does the light generally need to be softened or diffused?
- 4) Does light affect the story your image is telling?
- 5) What kind of materials can you use to control light?

Answers:

- 1) High-key and low-key
- 2) Natural light
- 3) Yes. This helps to avoid blown-out highlights, and it softens the shadows for a more natural look.
- 4) Yes. Absolutely.
- 5) Foam core, mirrors, paper, cardboard, and different types of cloth (translucent and opaque)



Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



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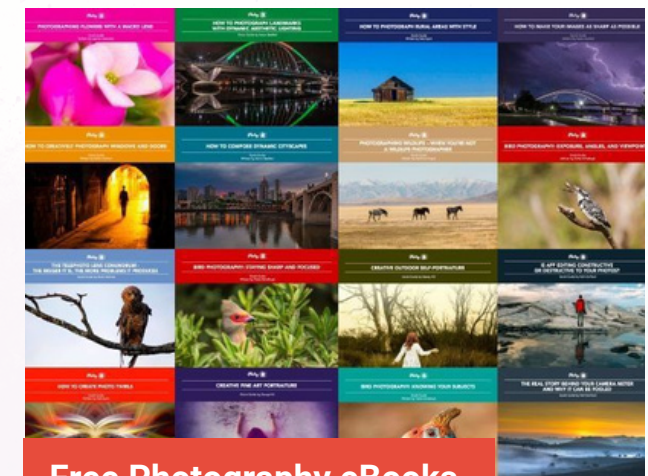
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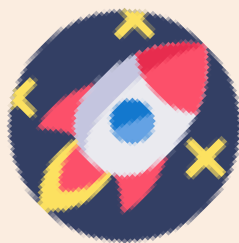
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



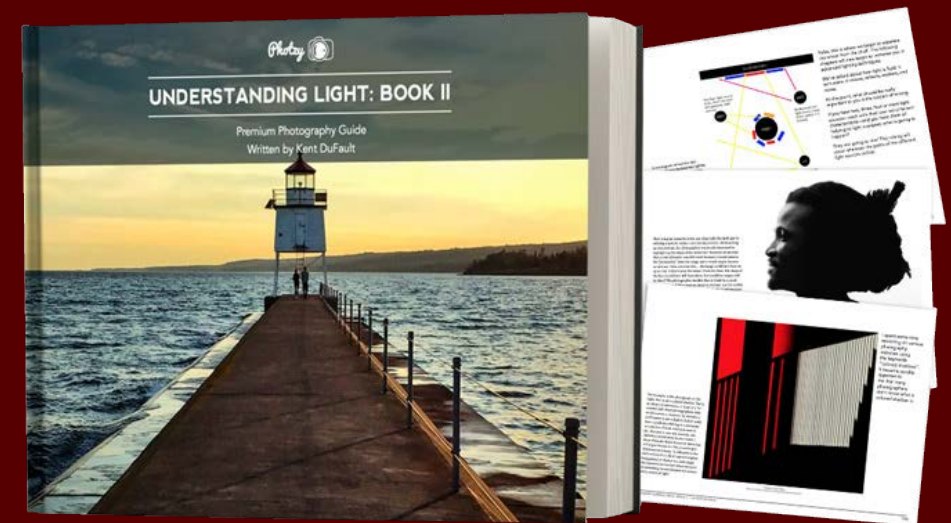
Stacey Hill invested in her first DSLR back in 2007. While having many adventures out and about in the South Island of New Zealand, Stacey took to blogging about her experiences learning photography. Eventually she discovered the fun and creative possibilities to be had with Photoshop. Stacey can be found having an opinion all over the place:



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