

MASTERING NIK SILVER EFEX PRO 3

THE SECRET TO DRAMATIC BLACK & WHITE
PHOTOGRAPHY

ROBIN WHALLEY



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PREFACE TO THE LATEST RELEASE



I published the first edition of this book in 2013 and then the second edition in August 2018. Throughout this time, it's proven a popular resource for photographers wanting to create the best black and white photography that they can. Now the Nik Collection has evolved again and with it, Nik Silver Efex Pro.

Nik Software was launched in 1995 and initially developed the Nik Collection. Nikon then became involved in 2005 before the company was sold to Google in 2012. Before its acquisition by Google, the Nik Collection could be purchased as separate products or as an entire collection. Google then dropped the price of the Nik Collection and stopped selling individual products. What once cost hundreds of pounds became affordable and many more photographers began using the tools.

For a time, the future of the Nik Collection was looking good. Google even launched a new application, Nik Analog Efex Pro before following it with Analog Efex Pro 2. But gradually, the new releases slowed and then stopped. Then Google changed direction and announced they were giving away the Nik Collection for free. Many people were delighted by this move, but it caused concern for long-term fans of the product who now questioned the future of the software. Not long after, Google broke

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the news that it was stopping support for the Nik Collection and that there would be no further releases.

Many expected the Nik Collection would die as software and systems changed. Fortunately, in the Autumn of 2017, DxO stepped in and acquired the Nik Collection from Google. They then quickly integrated the U-Point technology into their PhotoLab software (the Control Points that make the Nik tools so easy to use). Most importantly, they began working on a new release of the Nik Collection.

In June 2018 the Nik Collection 2018 was released by DxO. On the surface, little had changed, but below the surface, enhancements were underway. DxO had fixed several significant bugs that had crept into the software over time, and the code was now fully compatible with the latest Adobe CC releases. Most importantly the software was back under support with DxO planning further versions.

Since the first release of the “new” Nik Collection in 2018, there have been annual upgrades, each bringing new features. Notably in the Nik Collection 4, Silver Efex Pro advanced from version 2 to version 3. This included the release of a new user interface with several important new features. The results from the software were still excellent but now easier than ever to achieve.

Initially, I resisted writing a new version of this book, thinking that the original book still served its purpose. But following regular requests and questions, I decided it was time to write a new volume. I have adopted the same popular structure as the previous two books, and whilst some of their content remains, most of the text has been rewritten. Everything has been checked and updated and the examples from the second part of this book have been reworked to take advantage of the features in the latest version. You will also find an additional full-length example to add to the others.

Here’s to the future of the Nik Collection and Nik Silver Efex 3, the best black and white converter available.

Robin Whalley, October 2022

PREFACE TO THE LATEST RELEASE

INTRODUCTION



My intention in writing this book is to provide you with the knowledge and skills to create powerful black and white photography with Silver Efex Pro 3. I will do so whilst also explaining all the features and powerful adjustments you can apply. Without utilising Silver Efex Pro you would likely find it extremely difficult (or impossible) to replicate its effect with other software. Silver Efex Pro is probably the best black and white photo conversion software on the market today and has been for a long time. It's widely used by both amateurs and pros alike and with good reason. Use it well and you will be rewarded with excellent black and white images.

Using Nik Silver Efex Pro is not though an excuse to rescue poor photographs by converting them to black and white. You must start the editing process with a strong, well-composed image. I have therefore started this book by sharing a few black and white image conversions made with Silver Efex Pro. Use these as a simple guide and for ideas of what might work when converting to black and white.

Once acquainted with these examples, we explore the Silver Efex Pro user interface, covering the many tools and features it provides. Each element of the user interface is explained, helping you improve your

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productivity when working with the tools. We then explore the different adjustment controls you can use with complete explanations of their effect on an image. This will help you select the best approach to achieving a finished black and white photo.

In the final part of the book, you will find five full-length examples, where we work through black and white conversions applying Silver Efex Pro 3. These examples draw together everything from the earlier chapters of the book. I also share my thinking and workflow when it comes to converting an image to black and white.

To support these examples, you can download the starting images from the “Downloads for Books” page of my Lenscraft website <https://lenscraft.co.uk/learn-photo-editing-books/useful-downloads-books/>. You will then be able to follow the editing on your computer.

Who is this book for?

This book was written for anyone who wants to use Silver Efex Pro 3 to maximum effect, producing the best possible black and white conversions. This isn't a long or complex book because it doesn't need to be. Silver Efex Pro is easy to use but it does take some effort to master. Read the book, follow the examples, and practice using your photography

IMPORTANT NOTES

I wrote and illustrated this book using the Nik Collection 5 on a Mac computer. Whilst you may recognise some of the full-length examples from an earlier book, they have all been revised to take advantage of the latest Silver Efex Pro software. This book is fully compatible with the Nik Silver Efex Pro 3 which was first released in the Nik Collection 4.

MAC AND WINDOWS PC NOTES

Whilst there are differences between the Windows and Mac versions of the Nik Collection, these are minor. Silver Efex Pro 3 is very similar on both platforms although the keyboard shortcuts differ slightly. I have

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therefore provided both versions of these in the text. If you are a Windows Silver Efex Pro 3 user, you should have no problem following and applying the techniques covered in this book.

TRADEMARKS

Throughout this book, I may have referred to different organisations and their products. Where I refer to any trademarks or product names within this book, the reference is purely in an editorial capacity. There is no intention of Copyright infringement whatsoever.

DISCLAIMER

Whilst I have made every effort to ensure the information in this book is accurate, up to date and factual at the time of writing, it does represent my views and approach. Some may disagree with the information I present but I have not intentionally made any omissions or errors. If you find something you believe needs to be corrected, please contact me by email using robin@lenscraft.co.uk.

Thank you, and I hope you enjoy the book.

IMPORTANT



Before continuing, please take a moment to download the accompanying image files for the book. These allow you to follow the later examples on your computer which is an important part of the learning process. The files are free to download from the following page of my website.

<https://lenscraft.co.uk/learn-photo-editing-books/useful-downloads-books/>

Whilst visiting my website to do this, please also take a moment to sign up for my monthly newsletter. I'm sure you will find it quite different to the usual newsletters you may have subscribed to in the past.

ONE

WHAT MAKES A POWERFUL BLACK & WHITE PHOTO



Before we examine the Silver Efex Pro software, we should look at some fundamentals of what makes a powerful black and white photograph. I don't mean having a good composition or capturing a wonderful moment in time; those are a given with any photograph. Instead, we should consider the things we can control when converting colour to black and white. It's important to understand these as they contribute significantly to the quality of your results.

APPROPRIATE TONAL RANGE

The first characteristic is having an appropriate tonal range in the image once converted. This is more important than it may seem because the conversion to black and white will affect image tones.

Let's look at a simple histogram.



Example histogram

When we talk about the tones in an image, we mean how dark or light a pixel (or group of pixels) is, without considering colour. This histogram shows the tonal range of a sample image, as well as how much of each tone there is in the image. The horizontal axis of the histogram represents the range of tones. On the far left, we have pure black, with the tones gradually becoming lighter as we move right. When we reach the far right of the range, the pixels are white. The vertical axis of the histogram shows how much of each of these tones there is in the image. The higher the histogram, the more that tone appears in the image.

When we look at this histogram, we can see most of the tones clustered in the highlights area, towards the “white” end. This indicates the image is quite light or bright. If we look over to the far right, we can see there is a further spike in the histogram, showing some pixels have turned white. When the image has pixels that become pure white, the histogram is said to be clipped in the highlights. We sometimes call these “blown highlights”, depending on the situation.

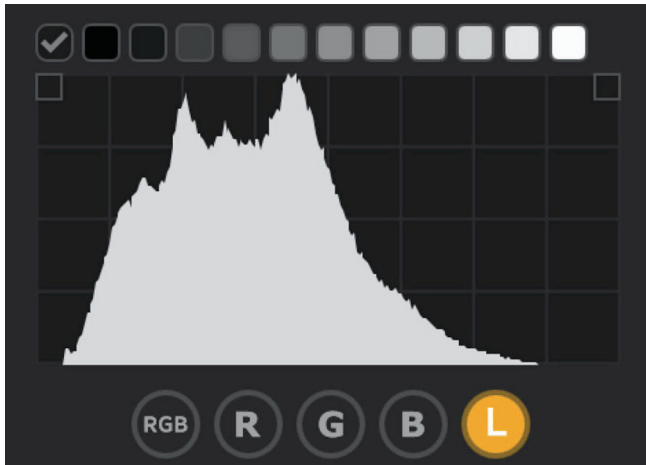
Over on the left side of the histogram, we see similar clipping has occurred but to a lesser degree. Here the dark tones in the image have become pure black. When this is severe, it can cause a loss of detail in the shadows as they turn black.

Over the years, a lot of advice has been published saying that clipping histograms is bad and must be avoided. This is probably because when

large areas of an image are clipped to pure black or white, they can look ugly and be distracting. Whilst this is true, it isn't always the case. Some images look better when there is clipping, so always judge the photo on its appearance and not just the histogram. The histogram is only a tool to guide you in your editing.

I believe Ansel Adams was once quoted as saying many images will be improved by having areas of true black or white in the frame. Again, whilst this is often the case, it is only a rough guide and should be treated as such.

Consider the following histogram viewed in Nik Silver Efex Pro 3.



Example histogram for an image without a full tonal range

This histogram shows us that most of the pixels in the image must be dark and in shadows. But there's also a small gap on the left side of this histogram, showing the darkest image tones are grey and not true black. The right side of the histogram also falls short of the white point, meaning there isn't a true white in this image either.

On seeing a histogram like this, some people may try to convince you that the image must have problems, but it doesn't. You can see the image the histogram is from next.



Misty black and white image example

The image on the left is the original image of a misty canal and produced the histogram we've just discussed. The image on the right is the same photograph but "corrected" to have a full tonal range across the histogram. Notice how the softness of the mist and subtle tones of the original have vanished. This is the danger of trying to adjust an image to conform to a technical view of what a histogram should look like.

The tonal range must be appropriate for the image.

GRAPHIC SHAPES – SPURN POINT

Spurn Point is a small tidal island at the end of the Humber Estuary in East Yorkshire, England. The area is flat with very little there other than a lifeboat station, lighthouse, and this water tower. This image also produced the first of the two histograms we discussed above.



Spurn Point Water Tower

This image was captured on a very bright summer day. The sky was blue and with few clouds except for the few you can see, just above the horizon. The area of white clipping we saw in the histogram was the white border that's surrounding the edge of the image. The actual image doesn't have any white clipping at all. There is a small element of black clipping in the deep shadows around the base of the water tank, but this doesn't cause a visual problem in the image.

This conversion is the result of the careful choices made as to how light or dark each colour in the image should be when converted. By creating this lighter version of the image, it was possible to emphasise the textures in the tower and the water tank as well as the foreground waves.

It was also possible to create a very light sky that still allows the viewer to see the thin clouds.

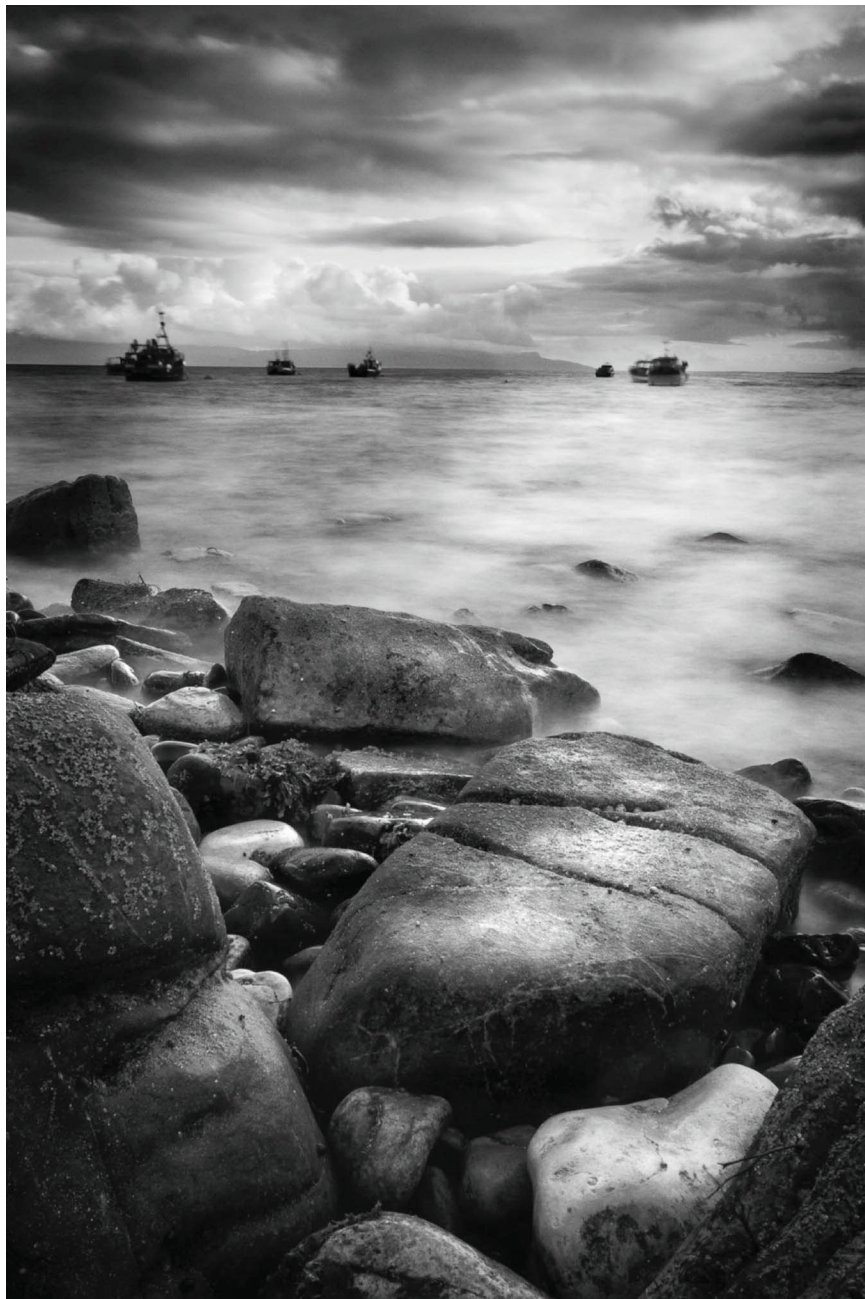
What makes this image work when converted to black and white is the unusual and strong shape of the subject. Careful decisions were made about how to convert and refine the tower. It would be very easy to lose the fine detail and texture in the tower, allowing the viewer's eye to wander. Adding the border around the edge also helps to retain the viewers' attention in the centre of the frame.

I spent time thinking about the finished image before starting to work on the image in Silver Efex Pro. It's important to understand the result you want to achieve before you start editing.

CAPTURE LIGHT - ELGOL STORM

This next image was shot one evening in the small fishing village of Elgol on the Isle of Skye, Scotland. I had hoped for a dramatic sunset, but poor weather rolled in before the sun was low enough in the sky. This did though make for a dramatic sky which I tried to balance with the shapes of the rocks in the foreground and strong reflected light.

The conversion works because it conveys a feeling of light from the sky, reflections, and deep shadows.



Elgol on the Isle of Skye

Whilst shooting this image, I attempted to extend the shutter speed to blur the motion of the waves and boats. I did this using a 4-stop Neutral Density (ND) filter together with a Polarising filter. Unfortunately, this was the first time I had used the ND filter and it turned out not to be neutral, producing a strong red colour cast. The resulting image was a rather odd shade that proved impossible to correct. Rather than delete the image, I decided to convert it to black and white which was much more successful. Sometimes you just need a bit of luck.

Whilst converting this image I was careful to enhance the contrast and textures on the rocks. It was also important to selectively lighten areas of the rock to strengthen the effect of the reflected light. Without these changes, the image appears rather dull and flat.

STRONG CONTRAST - STANLEY FORCE FALLS

This is Stanley Force in the Lake District of England. Looking at the image I hope you can feel that it's wet, although it's very difficult to convey exactly how wet and unpleasant the conditions were. By increasing the contrast and ensuring there is a true deep black in the scene, I was able to emphasise the wet rock.



Stanley Force image converted with Silver Efex Pro

The foliage in the scene appeared brilliant green and the colour image was dominated by green and black. By applying a yellow colour filter in Silver Efex Pro, the foliage became lighter, improving its visibility against the dark rock. The use of coloured filters is something you may already

be familiar with if you have done any traditional black and white film photography

The water in the falls also appeared too white in the initial conversion. The dark conditions in the gorge produced a longer exposure than I would have ideally liked. It was however possible to add some definition to the water using the Structure tools in Silver Efex Pro. Large areas of white with no detail can appear ugly and distracting in a black and white image.

Many conversions to black and white suffer from poor contrast. Often, the conversion from colour reduces the contrast in the image. It's then necessary to increase contrast and structure or the image appears flat and boring

SEPARATION - THE ABBEY

This is the ruin of Whitby Abbey on the North Yorkshire Coast in England. Here, its Gothic architecture has been captured using an infrared camera which can be great for extracting detail in shadow areas. The composition also placed the dark doorway where it will lead the eye into the frame.



Whitby Abbey shot with an Infrared converted camera

Infrared black and white conversion can sometimes be difficult as there is very little colour information to work with. Good black and white conversions often start with strong or distinctive colours which can help to differentiate objects in a scene. Referred to as separation, this ensures

objects don't blend into each other visually. Without separation, an image can become difficult to understand and confusing to view.

SUMMARY

Nothing conveys mood and emotion in photography quite like a good black and white image. But only removing the colour from an image is unlikely to create this. Here are a few simple guidelines that may help you achieve better black and white conversions. These are not unbreakable rules, but they will help in a wide variety of situations:

1. Forget about trying to create a perfect exposure and histogram. Instead, rely on the feeling an image conveys and your reaction to it. If you think the image looks better with most of the tones being dark or light, then do that. Don't conform to someone else's opinion of what is the correct exposure for your image. How you want an image to look is much more important.
2. It can help to have a true black in your image. Whilst a true black won't contain any detail, this is true to life. Do try to avoid large areas of black though, unless they are present in the scene. For example, the entrance to a tunnel. If you don't have an area of true black, your image may lack contrast and look flat. Of course, if your photo is of a foggy day then it probably won't contain black and creating one could ruin the photo. Remember point 1 above, how the image looks is the most important thing.
3. Many images can benefit from having a true white point or a near white. This can help the contrast, but it's not essential.
4. Try to separate objects. Converting objects so that their colours produce different tones can help to make an image easier to understand. Having different objects converted with the same tone can make them blend and be difficult to distinguish.
5. Create the effect of distance using tone. Distant objects often appear lighter than nearer objects, an effect which is probably most obvious in landscape photography. The tree next to you should be clearer and have more contrast than a tree on a distant hillside. This can help to create the illusion of depth in the image.

6. Use tones to create a feeling of light or shadow in an image which can be used to convey mood. Make night scenes dark so the viewer knows it's night. Make bright sunny days light and with high contrast.
7. Black and white images often benefit from increased levels of contrast. Often you need to increase the contrast for a black and white conversion to look its best.
8. Try to retain good details in the shadow areas as it can often make for a more interesting image.
9. Having some form of border around an image may help to retain the viewer's attention. Borders don't need to be wide to do this. Often a single pixel line around the edge of an image is enough. Effects like burned edges and vignettes can also help to hold attention to a subject in an image.
10. Don't be afraid to experiment and break the rules. These are not fixed rules but guidelines to help you.

If you find you are struggling with a conversion, it may help to print the image to study. A black and white image will sometimes come to life when printed and is often easier to assess. You can often learn more about an image by printing and viewing it, rather than staring at the pixels on a screen.

Now it's time to explore the Silver Efex interface and features.

TWO

LAUNCHING SILVER EFX PRO 3



There are two ways you can use Nik Silver Efex Pro 3:

1. As a standalone image editor.
2. As a plug-in for a host application like Photoshop.

In this book, most of my examples will be using Silver Efex Pro as a plug-in to a host application. Let's look at some of the options for launching Silver Efex Pro from a host program as well as using it standalone

ADOBE PHOTOSHOP

After opening an image in Photoshop, you have two ways to launch Silver Efex Pro:

1. Select the Plug-in from the Filter menu.
2. Use the Nik Collection Selective Tool and click the Silver Efex Pro 3 option.

Silver Efex Pro will then open and load the current image for editing.

If the Nik Collection Selective Tool isn't open when using Photoshop, you can launch it. You will find it in the Photoshop "File" menu under the "Automate" section. There, select the "Nik Selective Tool 2..." option.

One advantage of using Silver Efex Pro in Photoshop is its ability to use layers. In Photoshop it's possible to configure Silver Efex Pro to apply changes to either new or existing layers in either the plug-in or the Selective Tool.

To change your preference for where Silver Efex Pro applies its changes, open an image in Photoshop and launch the plug-in. After the plug-in launches, open the Preferences dialog. On a Mac, the Preferences are under the "Silver Efex Pro 3" menu and on a Windows PC, the Edit menu

In the Preferences dialog, you will find the option "Apply effect to:". Here you can set the dropdown list to either "Separate Layer" or "Current Layer". Using the "Separate Layer" option causes Silver Efex Pro to generate a new image layer consolidating the other layer in the image and applying the adjustments to that.

The option for the Nik Selective Tool is discussed below.

NIK SELECTIVE TOOL

The Nik Selective Tool is a floating toolbar which is only available in Adobe Photoshop and is installed automatically with the Nik Collection. You can see a screenshot of the tool below.

End of Sample

To continue reading please purchase the full book from the [Lenscraft website](https://lenscraft.co.uk).

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