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Autobiography & Memoir

Howard Hughes: Hell's Angel
Darwin PORTER
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It is nearly impossible to say the name Howard Hughes without prefacing it with the word "eccentric." The man, after all, was as legendary for his mercurial temper, quixotic ambition, and dubious hygiene as he was for his accomplishments as a trailblazing aviator, business tycoon, and movie mogul. Such achievements, however, are given scant consideration in this explosive new biography. Although Hughes's squiring of Hollywood's most glamorous leading ladies and voluptuous ingénues was fodder for front-page headlines around the world, what was rarely spoken of outside Tinseltown's inner circles, and only hinted at in its tawdry gossip rags, was Hughes' best-kept secret: that his lust for steamy sexual experiences included men as well.

Male or female, virtually every major and minor Hollywood star at one time fell prey to Hughes's sexual advances, according to the author. Hughes might be romancing Jean Harlow, Kate Hepburn, or Ava Gardner to the public's delight one night, and sailing off for clandestine romantic trysts with Errol Flynn, Tyrone Power, or Cary Grant the next. Publicly, Hughes demonstrated a macho, heterosexual demeanor; privately, he employed a retinue of lawyers, publicists, and bodyguards, both to procure his lovers and protect his diverse sexual predilections.

Porter grew up in the midst of Hollywood royalty, and his previous works include biographies of Humphrey Bogart, Katharine Hepburn, and other stars of the silver screen, as well as literally hundreds of editions of Frommer's guides to a variety of travel destinations. His access to film industry insiders and other Hughes confidantes supplied him with the resources he needed to create a portrait that both corroborates what other Hughes biographies have divulged, and go them one better. Years in the making, Porter's dossier on Hughes cites interviews with people who have been dead for decades, and while he specifically credits these resources in his extensive introduction, the lack of attributed annotations for quotes and observations somewhat undermines the credibility of his more salacious findings.

Though the massive amount of anecdotal evidence that Porter has compiled is at times overwhelming—the point having long since been driven home that Hughes was what would now be termed a "sexual predator"—Porter revels in each titillating tidbit, recounting with gossipy breathlessness the "he saids, she saids" of every scandalous encounter. For instance, George Cukor recollects that "Howard told Cary that, 'I can't commit to anyone except you. All the others are using me … With you, it's unconditional love.'"

Whatever else is known or written about Hughes, make no mistake: Porter's biography is all about the sex. Detailing Hughes's erotic exploits in explicit language, this book draws conclusions that will be controversial, especially as it levels allegations of bisexuality against the multitude of Hughes's partners, many of whom remain entertainment icons.

Carol Haggas