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Katharine the Great: Hepburn: A Lifetime of Secrets Revealed

Darwin PORTER
Blood Moon Productions (February 2004)
Softcover $16.95 (560pp)
978-0-9748118-0-2

The author's interest in Katharine Hepburn began with an argument between his parents. His father wanted to see *The Grapes of Wrath* and his mother demanded to see *The Philadelphia Story*, starring Hepburn; his mother won out. Porter was inspired to write this biography by his mother's scrapbook of Hepburn's movie reviews and press clippings; he later began his own collection of magazine and newspaper stories about the actress.

Porter, the author of *Hollywood's Silent Closet* and *The Secret Life of Humphrey Bogart: The Early Years*, traces Hepburn's career in films and the theater as well as her long and troubled affair with Spencer Tracy. He writes about the stars Hepburn acted with and recounts her successes and failures. "She was a hit in hit pictures and a flop in flops," Pandro Berman, an assistant to director David O. Selznick, is quoted as saying.

The author does not gloss over Hepburn's idiosyncrasies, like taking five to six showers a day in cold water. She had a habit of breaking into her friends' homes, he writes, and was suspended for five days from Bryn Mawr College for smoking a perfumed cigarette.

The book's cast of characters reads like a who's-who of the rich and famous, and Porter spares no one. He tells readers that Tracy, Robert Walker, and Clark Gable were alcoholics, that most of the actors were womanizers, and that Cary Grant's longtime personal secretary had accumulated "what might be America's greatest collection of male pornography," which he shared with Grant and actor Randolph Scott.

Part of the book is devoted to the relationship between Hepburn and the heiress Laura Harding, an affair that would span decades. Porter writes that on Hepburn's honeymoon cruise with Ludlow Smith to Bermuda in 1928, she spent the night cuddling with Harding while the groom slept in the arms of his boyfriend. As to her on-again, off-again affair with actor Van Heflin, Porter quotes Hepburn as saying, "He views lovemaking as a performance, with me as the director. Every minute or so he stops and asks me how he's doing and if he's hitting all the right spots."

Even in today's politically correct society, some readers may be offended by the overt sexual references, and some of the stories may be lost on younger readers who may not be familiar with the stars of that bygone era.

Although Porter offers a portrait of Hepburn that's somewhat less than flattering, his admiration for her is obvious. "You can say or write anything about me you like…just don't, for any reason, ever tell the truth," Hepburn once said. Porter tells the truth and that's what makes his book so fascinating to read.
(November / December 2004)

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