

Katharine Hepburn Book Reviews

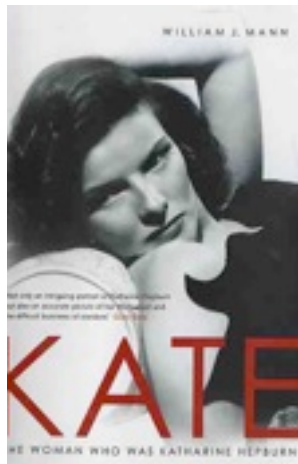
By Simon Weaving

Kate by William J. Mann. Faber and Faber. 621 pp. \$49.95

At Home With Kate by Eileen Considine-Meara. J. Wiley & Sons. 230pp \$38.95

It would be difficult to find two more different books on the subject of Katharine Hepburn. Their sizes and shapes alone provide the first clue as to what lies beneath the covers. William J. Mann's economically titled *Kate* is a hefty biography that would do any doorstep proud, weighing in at over 600 pages including notes and acknowledgements. By contrast, Eileen Considine-Meara's book is as slender as the young Hepburn herself, compensating perhaps with its extended title: *At Home With Kate - Growing Up in Katharine Hepburn's Household – An Intimate Portrait*.

Finding the real Katharine Hepburn is never going to be an easy task. She is perhaps the greatest female legend ever to come out of Hollywood, with a career spanning and spinning over seventy years. She still holds the record for the most number of Academy Awards (and nominations) for Best Actress, with four little gold statues to her name. The first was won in 1933 (for *Morning Glory*) and the last in 1981 for *On Golden Pond*. More significantly Hepburn is widely acknowledged as being one of the first stars from the classical era of Hollywood to have taken careful control of her own career, and it is this that enabled her to stay on top for so long and which also makes the search for the real person so difficult.



Mann's approach is careful and scholarly. In his preface he argues that there are plenty of conventional biographies already written, and that he has no interest in "rehashing the familiar." He frequently shows the reader how many of these biographies actually contribute to the legend through over-reliance on un-substantiated events. His approach is to carefully peel away the years of mythology, tracking stories and anecdotes generally regarded as "true" to their carefully managed sources – often Hepburn herself. Mann tries, and in the main succeeds, to provide us with both a portrait of the public persona 'Kate', and the private person 'Katharine'.

In the space between these two personalities we also learn an immense amount about how Hollywood operated over much of its history, warts and all.

Of particular interest to Mann is the issue of Hepburn's sexuality. She was married young but unsuccessfully, and Mann finds evidence that the relationship – with Ludlow Ogden Smith – was profoundly non sexual. Likewise with the great "love affairs" she had with Howard Hughes and Spencer Tracey that feature so prominently in the Hepburn legend. Mann, who also wrote *Behind The Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood*, carefully describes how Hepburn surrounded herself with gay and lesbian friends – most significantly the director George Cukor - and makes it clear that she was much more comfortable in the company of women. Some interviewed by Mann believed Hepburn to be lesbian, others suggest not, and Mann ultimately leaves the answer behind as the actress heads into old age. She died at the

age of 96, outliving most of her closest friends, including Phyllis Wilbourn with whom she lived for 40 years. However, Mann's most insightful stories, the ones that may provide some clues as to the ambiguous nature of Hepburn's sexuality, include her alter ego "Jimmy", the young boy she transformed herself into as a child – complete with cropped hair and trousers - and those about her teen years spent with strong and independent "aunts" in daring, bohemian Greenwich Village. Hepburn, it seems, grew up in a privileged and open environment in the 1920's when gender identity was far more flexible than it has been since.

Mann's greatest strength is his ability to take the long view and to help us live the entire life and career of Hepburn, placing the emerging challenges of her life into a continually advancing retrospective framework. He dwells not just on the romantic, successful Hollywood moments, but reminds us, for instance, that in 1938 Hepburn was written off after a series of flops, dubbed "box-office poison" and sacked by RKO. The life expectancy of a female studio star was about ten years at the time, and with her prickly and forceful personality, her difficulty accepting criticism and her mannish behaviour, she'd managed only six. The qualities that got her to the top so incredibly quickly were clearly different to those needed to stay there. But these should would rapidly learn and use to her advantage, outplaying all in Tinseltown.

Yet Mann does have a need to simplify human motivation, and often uses the same sets of causes as determinants for explaining Hepburn's path through life: she was driven by the need to be admired, she would do anything, sacrifice everything, for that need. If people loved her she would never be out of work. Yet humans are rarely so straightforward and are driven by a myriad of desires and necessities. It is interesting that Hepburn appears a more real person in Mann's early chapters where he traces her childhood and school years. Once she arrives in Hollywood in the early 1930's, there is the sense of a veil descending between us and Hepburn, despite Mann's meticulous research. But this is to take nothing away from Mann's success, rather demonstrating how successful Hepburn was at guarding her private life. There's a line in *The African Queen* when Humphrey Bogart (playing the craggy old boat hand, Allnut) says to Katharine Hepburn, (playing Rose, a spinster missionary), "You! Business afore pleasure every time." The line sums up Mann's assessment of the woman who was Katharine Hepburn.



At Home With Kate by Eileen Considine-Meara has all the hallmarks of cheap opportunism and has very little literary merit when compared to Mann's biography. Considine-Meara is the daughter of Norah Considine Moore, who was Katharine Hepburn's cook and housekeeper for the last thirty years of Hepburn's life. Considine-Meara is certainly no writer, and claims she was encouraged in her endeavour by publicist Liz Smith – who also knew Hepburn. The book comprises a series of short reminiscences, (many of which have clearly come from Considine-Meara's mother) each ranging in length from a few paragraphs to a few pages. To fill out the book, the stories are accompanied by family photos, recipes and assorted ephemera ranging from the bizarre (a handwritten invitation for Hepburn to join Bob Dylan's daughter's party next door) to the desperate (handwritten shopping lists).

The reminiscences are written in a simple childish style and often end with an attempt to find a deep and meaningful reflection from an otherwise straightforward and often banal event. Despite her privileged position inside the household, Considine-Meara has no insights about the human nature she observed there: living characters connected to Hepburn are all “sweet”, and dead ones “beloved”. But it is the choice of stories where Considine-Meara is most wayward. One involves the discovery of a jar containing Hepburn’s hipbone, replaced in an operation when she was in her seventies. Another, in Hepburn’s last years, is of her nighttime disorientation as a dementia sufferer. One can’t help but feel that the fiercely private Hepburn would have been appalled at this project – one that really should have remained a personal scrapbook.