

Death in the Afternoon in which Mencken contrives simultaneously to praise Ernest Hemingway and skewer his all-time favorite target, the American South: "Not many current books unearth so much unfamiliar stuff, or present it so effectively. I emerge cherishing a hope that bullfighting will be introduced at Harvard and Yale, or, if not at Harvard and Yale, then at least in the Lynching Belt of the South, where it would offer stiff and perhaps ruinous competition to the frying of poor blackamoors. Imagine the moral stimulation in rural Georgia if an evangelist came to town offering to fight the local bulls by day and baptize the local damned by night!"

Joshi also supplies extensive and useful annotations that clarify a good many otherwise impenetrable period references, as well as an enthusiastic introduction in which he claims that Mencken "could almost be said to have invented a new genre, that of the satirical review." That is coming it a bit high, as Mencken buffs are wont to do, but Joshi is squarely on the mark when he says that Mencken "played his part—and it was a significant part—in establishing the American literary canon." Best of all, he did it with a smile.

—TERRY TEACHOUT

AN AMERICAN FAMILY:

A Televised Life.

By Jeffrey Ruoff. Univ. of Minnesota Press. 184 pp. \$19.95

Of all the phenomena that *An American Family*, Craig Gilbert's 1973 documentary series on the life of the upper-middle-class Loud clan of Santa Barbara, California, did not seek to promote, one was surely the law of unintended consequences. Yet, as *An American Family: A Televised Life* makes clear, that law reigned supreme. Not the least of those consequences was the first instance of the hall-of-mirrors effect that has become so achingly familiar in the age of O. J. and Monica, the remarkable way in which people and concepts ricochet back and forth between unbearable earnestness and self-parody, in which folks who've been on TV programs about themselves then turn up on other TV shows and write books to defend or explain themselves, after which

the whole process repeats till exhaustion. Published at the same time as the death of the first openly gay TV personality, Lance Loud, a member of the eponymous American family, this book can be regarded as perhaps the last faint note of that extended symphony of reverberation.

Among those echoes, I feel constrained to disclose, were two of the earliest mock-documentary feature films, both of which I helped create: *Real Life* (1979) and *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984). In the case of *Real Life*, cowriters Albert Brooks, Monica Johnson, and I were consciously reacting to Gilbert's 12-part series. We were comedically making the point, stressed by many reviewers of the show, that having a camera crew around the house inherently taints the "reality" one is trying to depict. In our film, a documentary maker's cameras so distract a veterinarian, played by Charles Grodin, that he botches an operation and kills a horse.

In this thorough and largely readable history and analysis of *An American Family*, film scholar Ruoff suggests that such Heisenbergian critiques are just as applicable to other shows. Who, after all, thinks the camera doesn't affect an interviewee on *60 Minutes*? Yet Gilbert, who devised the series, chose the family, hired the crew, and supervised the editing, was drawing on the tradition of observational documentary to present at least the illusion of something less constructed than a network newsmagazine feature.

As Ruoff points out, it was in large part an illusion. Though he dispensed with narrators, voice-overs, and interviews, Gilbert still felt the need to impose storyline, suspense, focus, even music, on the raw footage of reality. His colleagues in public television went further, offering in the publicity materials a series of analyses, comparisons, and conclusions that, though disavowed by Gilbert, provided the substance for a great deal of what reviewers and commentators eventually wrote about the broadcast. Ruoff is at his best here, exposing the umbilical cord that runs between cleverly devised publicity and the ensuing coverage and criticism.

Some of this material seems downright quaint now. The critics, wondering whether the Louds were a unique breed of idiots for

letting a crew film their life for the better part of a year, hadn't experienced the intervening period in which, thanks to Jenny Jones and Jerry Springer and *Fear Factor*, it has become grotesquely obvious that many Americans will do *anything* to be on television. And what seemed such sensational TV in 1973—the dissolution of an apparently ideal marriage, the efflorescence of a gay teenager—seems commonplace now. What remain goofily interesting are some of the details: how, for example, some years after the broadcast, the Los Angeles public television station offered, as a pledge-drive premium, a weekend with the splintered Loud family.

I look forward to talk-show appearances in which I can explain what I really mean in this review, and subsequently, one can only hope, a documentary on the making of one of those shows.

—HARRY SHEARER

THE REAL NICK AND NORA:
Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett,
Writers of Stage and Screen Classics.

By David L. Goodrich. Southern Illinois Univ. Press. 304 pp. \$30

Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, the urbane married couple who were as expert at writing for the stage as for the screen, once assigned themselves the cable address GOOD HACKS. This lighthearted bit of self-deprecation was characteristic of the wit and modesty they brought to a high-polish collaboration that glittered from 1928 to 1962 and, along the way, earned them four Oscar nominations, one Pulitzer Prize, and a Writers Guild Laurel Award for Lifetime Achievement. Goodrich and Hackett wrote films that continue to please today, including *The Thin Man* (1934) and its first two sequels, *Easter Parade* (1948), *Father of the Bride* (1950) and its sequel, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), and Frank Capra's Christmas perennial *It's a*



Thin Man stars Myrna Loy and William Powell mirrored their creators, Goodrich and Hackett.

Wonderful Life (1946)—which they didn't like—as well as the stage adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955), for which they won their Pulitzer and are probably best remembered today.

In this engaging and spirited biography—the title alludes to *The Thin Man*, of course: the duo were so charming and amusing that William Powell and Myrna Loy needed only to imitate them—David Goodrich, a nephew, reveals that the scriptwriters were much more than “good hacks,” and a very lucky thing for the rest of us, too, not to mention the stars they wrote for. They were eclectic craftsmen with the swank of Bel Air and the work ethic of dray horses. “We shouldn't take so much trouble,” Frances admitted, “but it is only to satisfy ourselves.” A friend likened their work to “fine cabinet-making.” They were “professionals whose name on a script [was] a guarantee of its excellence,” though assuring top quality involved many drafts, a willingness to “criticize freely,” and screaming matches that bystanders compared to “being near a bear pit.”

It was another world, the so-called Golden Age of Movies that began with talkies in the late 1920s and died when the studios did in the 1960s. It depended on a much-derided factory system that, as the author expertly details, nonetheless elicited memorable work from Goodrich and Hackett and their friends—Ben Hecht, Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, Dorothy Parker, Philip Dunne, Samson Raphaelson, Lillian Hellman, Robert Benchley, and many others—who came west to pick up some easy money and stayed long enough to inject wit, character, and style into what had been a barely literate popular art.

Writers have always been third-class citizens in Hollywood, even when highly paid, and being marginalized may—paradoxically—have saved Goodrich and Hackett. It gave them perspective, so that when “we started throwing up and crying into our type-

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