

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-

© 1998 Al Hirschfeld. Drawing reproduced by special arrangement with Hirschfeld's exclusive special representative, The Margo Ferdin Galleries Ltd., New York.

writers” over misbegotten projects or moronic producers, they could pack up their Smith-Coronas and go back to the theater, as they did with *The Diary of Anne Frank*. And when the entire system began crashing around their heads, they simply said, “Let’s get out of here.” And did.

The system denigrated writers and depended on them, and it will continue to do so as long as movies tell stories. The value of “hacks”—the good and even the bad—was defined by one of Hollywood’s legendary talent users and abusers, Irving Thalberg, the boy genius of MGM, who called writers like Goodrich and Hackett “the most important people in film”—and then added, mogul that he was, “and we must do everything to keep them from finding out.”

—STEVEN BACH

*A BOLT FROM THE BLUE:
And Other Essays.*

By Mary McCarthy. Edited by
A. O. Scott. New York Review Books.
443 pp. \$24.95

Introducing this selection of Mary McCarthy’s occasional writings from the 1930s to the 1980s, *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott writes that “one of the ambitions of this book . . . is to make a somewhat paradoxical case for [McCarthy’s] importance as a novelist—one of a handful of indispensable American writers of realist fiction in the immediate postwar era.” The collection succeeds in this ambition, though by a path different from the one Scott likely had in mind. The occasional staleness of McCarthy’s quintessentially midcentury voice as an essayist—its political fierceness, its axiomatic contempt for the tastes of the middle class—serves to point up the contrast with her novels, which remain fresh and even topical, particularly such masterpieces of social observation as *The Company She Keeps* (1942) and *The Group* (1963).

Those books, as it happens, also splendidly demonstrate the theories of the novel that McCarthy (1912–89) puts forth in the sturdiest of these essays, “The Fact in Fiction” (1960) and “Ideas and the Novel” (1980).

Novels, she notes, are first and foremost repositories of *news*: The great 19th-century novels “carried the news—of crime, high society, politics, industry, finance, and low life.” By the mid-20th century, it seemed that such realities as war, Auschwitz, and the bomb had made fictional depictions of “reality” incomprehensible or irrelevant, and realism’s effectiveness as a literary technique began to weaken. But such developments came too late to hurt McCarthy’s own novels, which, if not exactly “realist,” are crammed with documentary miniatures. *The Company She Keeps* records the precise progress of an adultery in a certain literary set, while *The Group* features an exact account of the procedure by which an unmarried woman got fitted for a pessary, or diaphragm, in 1933.

All this immediacy flags when McCarthy casts her observations in the mold of general cultural criticism, perhaps because her vocabulary takes on a palpable residue of the 1930s sectarian political wars that shaped her. Though her perceptions remain firm and scintillating when she talks of Tolstoy or Salinger, her declarations about “Americans” can descend into meaningless political posturing. “What the foreigner finds most objectionable in American life is its lack of basic comfort,” she wrote in 1947—at a time when Europe still lay in ruins. It does not help to be told a paragraph later that “the immigrant or the poor native American bought a bathtub, not because he wanted to take a bath, but because he wanted to be in a *position* to do so.”

McCarthy’s lasting allure comes partly from her personas, literary and otherwise—on the one hand the authorial voice, sharp, sure, sensuous, and on the other the beauty, the many marriages, and the lurid, abuse-filled childhood detailed in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1946). The memoir and novels hold up best, followed by the wry, perspicacious theater and literary criticism. With so much of McCarthy’s work still in print, this collection necessarily has the feel of odds and ends. Still, if it sends readers in search of the rest of the corpus, that may be success enough.

—AMY E. SCHWARTZ