

Hedda and Louella

By George Eells.
Illustrated. 360 pp. New York:
G. P. Putnam's Sons.
\$7.95.

The Show Business Nobody Knows

By Earl Wilson.
Illustrated. 428 pp. Chicago:
Cowles Book Company.
\$6.95.

A State of Heat

By Sheilah Graham.
244 pp. New York:
Grosset & Dunlap. \$6.95.

By **NORA EPHRON**

I suppose I should begin this with a few smartly-chosen words about gossip columnists and their decline (era waning... star-system dying... morality changing... newspapers folding... blah blah blah), but it is almost impossible to write a sentence that could be applied to all four of these gossip columnists. Sheilah Graham's book doesn't even have anything to do with gossip columns; "A State of Heat," as it turns out, is about her sex life. And I probably should have sent it back to The Times to be included instead in the sex-manual roundup or the crazy-lady roundup or the garbage can, but it is such a weird and incredible book that I couldn't part with it. Earl Wilson is a Broadway columnist—a special, primarily male breed out of "Front Page" by Variety. Nightclubs. Making rounds. Bosoms. Blind items. Whereas Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons were the most famous of the Hollywood columnists, gussied-up sob sisters in a long-running soap opera called "Love of Hollywood," and they dealt in behavior, manners, morals, divorce and marriage.

Like so many Hollywood children, I grew up knowing a great deal more about Hedda and Louella than was really necessary. Part of the ritual of being taken to the Brown Derby, for instance, was hearing the story of how Louella frequently dined there. I knew about Louella's husband, a perpetually-inebriated physician she called Docky, whom 20th Century Fox hired as studio doctor in order to ingratiate themselves with Louella. "Leave Docky alone," Louella said once, after her husband fell off a couch and passed out at a party. "He has to operate in the morning." I was told about Hedda and her 150 hats a year and her fanatical crusade against shoes with pointed toes and her addled anti-Communism. (She once took the trouble to assure her readers that the title of "The Red Badge of Courage" had "absolutely no Commie implications.")

I knew all that, most of it fairly silly stuff, but I also knew that when Dorothy Parker became pregnant in 1935, the first person she called to tell the news was Louella Parsons. And in Louella's column, next day, was a picture of Miss Parker knitting booties. *Dorothy Parker!* I still find it hard to accept, but it happened, it really (Continued on Page 38)

Nora Ephron, now a New Yorker, grew up in Hollywood, where her parents were screenwriters.



From the top: Sheilah, Louella, Earl, Hedda, Docky, etc.

Hedda, Louella, Earl, Sheilah

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happened; and it shows, I think, how truly influential these columnists were if they could reach not just the vast colony of fools populating Hollywood back then but also people—New York people, New Yorker-Algonquin-Round-Table-temporarily-dislocated-intellectual people—who were supposed to be smarter about such things.

Hedda and Louella were powerful women, the strong right arms of the tycoon system, the enforcers of morals clauses in the days when morals mattered. They had a combined readership of 75 million. Their readers cared about what they thought and cared not at all that neither of them could write worth a damn. They never went to interview anyone; their subjects came to them and were literally granted audiences.

"Louella reclined on a floral couch with her heavily ringed hands folded and would have made a perfect model for the Queen Mother at Toad Hall," wrote Hildegard Knef in "The Gift Horse." "... 'My dear, how nice to see you. I hear you're so talented, dear sweet Tyrone told me all about you in the most glowing terms—there's nothing going on between the two of you, is there now?' She waved a finger back and forth as though I'd got my nursery rhymes mixed up. . . . 'You know that dear Tyrone's married don't you? . . . I often worry about him, not sure that dear Linda's quite right for him. Poor Lana Turner was so upset when he married dear Linda.' They were all either 'dear' or 'poor' and she kept me on tenterhooks wondering which she would apply to me or whether she had another adjective up her sleeve which would qualify me for the one-way ticket to purgatory."

Louella Oettinger Parsons was born and raised in Freeport, Ill., and landed her job with the Hearst syndicate after two marriages and a brief stint as a scenario writer. Her first produced film, "Chains," was said to have asked the question, "What happens to an innocent girl who foolishly marries a condemned murderer before he is sent off to serve a 26-year prison sentence and then requests he free her so she can wed his lawyer?"

Louella's column was written in a childlike style reminiscent of alumnae magazines or small-town newspaper women's pages; it was full of malapropisms and misinformation. A typical pronouncement: "Not

until such great books as 'War and Peace,' 'The Red and the Black' and 'Sons and Lovers' became motion pictures was there any demand for them." She once called Mussolini "one of our most picturesque statesmen."

Hedda Hopper, a strait-laced former actress who was born with the distressing name of Elda Furry, was far more elegant and bitchy than her rival. She once summoned Elizabeth Taylor and Michael Wilding to her office and advised them not to marry because of the age difference between them. How to explain that they went at all, much less stayed to listen? Once she heard that Bing Crosby was philandering in a New York hotel (he later denied it) and immediately let him know that if he didn't stop taking advantage of young girls, she would use the information against him. Her fierce reputation for morality so impressed the film colony, she claimed, that one wag of her finger at a cheating producer was enough to end an affair.

Hedda died in 1966 at the age of 80; Louella, now 90, is in an old-age home in Santa Monica. There will fortunately never be anyone like them again. But in their small way, they were important; and I have always thought that there was a book in them, always thought that such a book would tell us something—I'm not sure what, but something—about Hollywood in the old days. George Eells, who wrote a well-received biography of Cole Porter some years back, has tackled the job. He has brought together a great many interesting stories and details about the two women; parts of the book are fascinating. But other parts are heavily padded; because the book is not well-written, many of the stories fall flat; most important, the point of "Hedda and Louella" is never quite clear. The picture of Louella in two pages of Miss Knef's book is drawn more effectively than anything in Mr. Eells's biography. All of which is a shame, because Hedda and Louella were not such major figures in history that anyone else is going to write another, albeit better, book about them.

Earl Wilson is a good-natured Ohio boy who has managed to maintain an air of distressed wonderment and puritanical prurience as he writes column after column on starlets who wash their hair in mayonnaise and actors who play their first nude love scenes. I have an affection for him based partly on the fact that there isn't that much else to read in *The Post* and partly because his blind items are stunning. Because I read his column so faithfully, I found "The Show Business Nobody Knows" somewhat fa-

miliar: a good portion of it is simply old columns pasted together. There is an electrifying chapter on the death of Longy Zwillman, but then, I am hooked on the death of Longy Zwillman. There are also stories Mr. Wilson could not print in his column (the real story behind the real story behind the death of Marilyn Monroe) and lots of off-color jokes from Friars Roasts.

In "A State of Heat," Sheilah Graham has written a sort of combination sex memoir and sex manual, and I would like to attribute its candor to Miss Graham's long career as a gossip columnist but I'm afraid it all has more to do with bad taste. The thesis of her book is that any woman can follow Miss Graham's success and "use her sex to envelop herself and her man in a state of heat." As the book unfolds, however, it becomes clear that sexual advice from Sheilah Graham is about as reliable as etiquette lessons from Attila the Hun. Her first husband, whom she stayed married to for years, was completely impotent. And an astonishingly large number of the subsequent men in her life were either terrible in bed or were so successfully enveloped in a state of heat that they soiled Miss Graham's clothes. I would not bother you with such gamey information were it not for Miss Graham's own obsession with these incidents and with the failure of

dry-cleaning establishments to rectify matters.

Miss Graham's writing is as astonishing as the indiscriminate details she subjects us to. Some of her sentences could not be diagramed on a flat surface, to wit: "He took her home to her apartment, and while Patsy was not the promiscuous kind, they might have made love then and there, but her roommate was home." She uses adjectives like raisins, sprinkling them here and there: "I was cool but automatically charming to this fat, bewitched man." I could go on quoting all day, but here is my favorite sentence in the entire book: "As Swann said ruefully about Odette, he was not my type."

Miss Graham suffers from a lack of something a television producer I know calls a Selectivity Index: in addition to the sex, we get to hear her views on real estate, dieting and trains in Italy. There is an extraordinary section wherein Miss Graham confesses that she once lay down on the floor and put her breasts on a bathroom scale in an attempt to weigh them. "I would put them at ten pounds apiece," she concludes, after conceding the experiment did not work. "A State of Heat" also contains an answer from Miss Graham to Hemingway's remarks in "A Moveable Feast" concerning F. Scott Fitzgerald's fears about his masculinity. "Personally," Miss Graham writes, "given the choice between a donkey or a chipmunk, I might choose the latter."

I'm afraid that I may have made "A State of Heat" sound like one of those so-bad-it's-good things. I don't mean to. It's as close to being unpublishable as anything can be these days. Sheila Graham has been in on a pass for years as a result of her affair with Fitzgerald; it's about time it ran out. ■

Start by marking "The Show Business Nobody Knows" as Want to Read: Want to Read savingâ€¦ Want to Read. Currently Reading. Read. The Show Business Nobody Knows by Earl Wilson. Other editions.Â Written in 1971, author Earl Wilson, known for expounding on both scandalous and heartwarming stories of Hollywood in front of and behind the cameras, shares intimate glimpses into the lives of the stars of celluloid. This book written stylistically as one might expect coming from a newspaper columnist of a forgotten era is a must for any film industry buff. ...more. There has always been a show business shibboleth that says: "Uptown is uptown and downtown is downtown, and never the twain shall meet." In other words, you may be a hit off Broadway but you will never be able to transfer successfully on Broadway. This particular aspect of Broadway's credo has always seemed a little foolish. It's rather like that other old saw, "The show must go on," when we have all been witness to countless shows that very clearly should not have gone on under any circumstances.Â "The Me Nobody Knows" is the story of the ghetto. It is the New York story no one really wants to hear about. It is based upon writings from classes of ghetto children, collected together by a teacher, Stephen M. Joseph.