

BY JOSÉ ARROYO

*Home Movies: Tales from the Canadian film world* by Martin Knelman  
Toronto: Key Porter Books 1987, 248 pages.

Every filmmaker who's ever been trashed in print by Martin Knelman should be delighted by the publication of his latest book. *Home Movies: Tales From the Canadian Film World* is the revenge they've been waiting for.

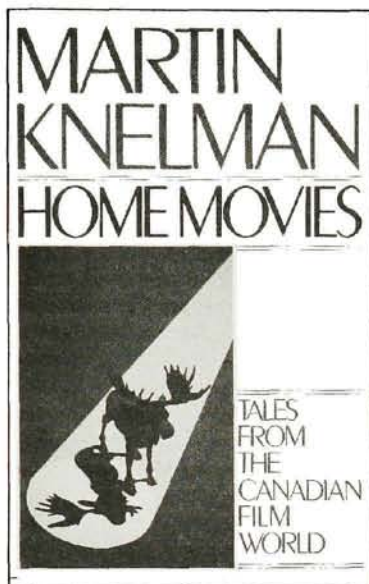
The front flap promises Knelman will look at "the financial, artistic and political complexities of our movie-making over the past two decades." The back-flap more modestly confides that it is "part consumer survey, part business analysis and part gossip column." But those who believe book-flaps and their money are soon parted.

*Home Movies* is divided into three sections - Dancing with Hollywood, Mixing Media and Slouching Towards China - framed by an introduction (Opening Shot) and a conclusion (Closing Shot). In his introduction Knelman writes, "Wherever Canadian movies were made, they were made in the shadow of the American eagle, or the MGM lion, or of Mickey Mouse" and that, "there was an unmistakable sense that if you were in the game of making major movies, sooner or later Hollywood was the place you had to go to even if the movie was about a Canadian who goes to China."

This sets the tone not only for the lengthy Dancing with Hollywood section, but for the entire book. For these are not so much Tales From the Canadian Film World as tidbits about Canadians who've made it big in Hollywood. Thus in the first section we get anecdotes about Daniel Petrie, Ivan Reitman and Norman Jewison. *Louisiana* (Thanks Margo); *Joshua Then and Now* (ditto Ted, Mordecai); *The Decline of the American Empire* (Merci, Oscar) and Garth Drabinsky (Love ya, MCA); each rate a chapter.

The book's title, seemingly self-evident, takes on another dimension. Home movies means not only movies made in Canada or movies made by Canadians but also that they are amateurish, to be shown only to friends and family, not fit for public consumption. If there's no "California connection" it's not worth looking at. The Canadian Moose depicted on the cover only deserves attention when he's hit by the spotlight from Grauman's Chinese.

It also becomes clear that Quebec only rates outhouse status in Knelman's home. *The Decline of the American Empire's* Oscar bid and a few anecdotes on Jutra, Simoneau and Mankiewicz make up the Québécois content of the promised look at the "financial, artistic and political complexities of our movie-making over the past two decades." Lefebvre, Forcier, Groulx, and other great original filmmakers from Quebec who never wanted to go to Hollywood, just don't rate. Knelman's 50 Notable Home Movies 1978-1987 list includes



*City on Fire*, *If You Could See What I Hear*, and *Tribute* but not *La Femme de l'hôtel*, *La Guerre des tuques* or *Les Fleurs sauvages*. It's very revealing of the extent of our cultural colonization, and the continuing existence of our two solitudes, that the author is seemingly aware of Mickey Mouse's every move while oblivious to the Quebec film industry.

In his acknowledgments Knelman admits that *Home Movies* "evolved from a series of lunches." The book reads as if the lunches subsequently devolved into a few lazy spurts at the word-processor. In the Mixing Media section there's a predictable chapter on SCTV and its famous alumni, and an embarrassingly gushy one on *Anne of Green Gables* ("[Sullivan] has created so much glory that there's plenty of room for Telefilm, CBC and Walt Disney - perhaps the oddest ménage à trois in this country's cultural history - all to bask in Anne's glory").

The Heroes for the Small Screen chapter has anecdotes on *King of Kensington*, *Seeing Things*, *Stratosphere*, *Prison Mother*, *Prison Daughter* and *Charlie's Grant's War*. Some of them feel like sloppy versions of ones we've already read, probably in the *TV Times* Supplement to the Saturday paper. Or it could just be that Knelman has already mentioned them for he has the most annoying habit of repeating information. For example on page two we are told that Garth Drabinsky has "become a major player in the States" and has a "complicated partnership with the Music Corporation of America (which) raised puzzled questions about who was taking over whom." On page 11, while not yet letting on that Universal is a subsidiary of MCA, Knelman "reveals" that Drabinsky "continues to buy up theatre chains

in the United States and has a complicated, ongoing corporate relationship with Universal, a giant among the Hollywood majors."

*Home Movies* is a word-processed book written off the top of Knelman's head. He jumps around from subject to subject within chapters. One can almost tell where paragraphs used to be, where they have been rearranged. For example, the Stage Fright chapter begins by telling us how Martha Henry has been neglected until recently. The next paragraph moves on to the neglect of Jackie Burroughs, and subsequently we get a review of *The Grey Fox*, a little bit of Canadian theatre history, back to a bio of Henry, a comparative review of *The Tin Flute* and *The Wars*, and on to a review of *Dancing in the Dark*. The first and last paragraph in the first eight pages of the chapter both focus on Henry but in between he turns tenuous threads into a zig-zag boomerang route through a large chunk of the Canadian cultural landscape.

Much of the book deals with recent events. And much of the book seems rushed. For example, Knelman is able to tell us that Jackie Burroughs made a low-budget film in Mexico but not that it came to be called *A Winter Tan*.

The Slouching Towards China section recounts various attempts at bringing a biography of Norman Bethune to the screen. We get to read how Ted Allen, Donald Sutherland, Philip Borsos, Jacques Dorfmann and Pieter Kroonenberg got involved with the project. But the making of *Bethune* received extensive press. A cover story in *Maclean's*, for example, covered a lot of the same ground Knelman does. Moreover, newspapers across the country printed frequent updates on *Bethune's* troubled shoot in China. We've read gossip about Sutherland and Borsos rewriting the script, Ted Allen's threats to sue and other stories that came out after Knelman published the book. The film hasn't even finished shooting yet. Nevertheless, the stories Knelman does cover could have used more original source material. With more facts he wouldn't need to resort to such mystical speculation as: "It was as if all these people believed the surgeon saint could heal the nation's infected movie industry, purify it and effect some miraculous cure," "(Sutherland) felt some mystical bond with the turbulent doctor," and "(Borsos) too had fallen under the spell of a movie that had drawn so many people into its strange, obsessive powers." *Puh-lease!*

I don't want to denigrate the gossip-peppered genre of journalism *Home Movies* belongs to. I usually enjoy it. But muckraking is an essential element of the genre. *Home Movies* would have benefitted from a thorough, opinionated writer who's not afraid to stir things up a little - the Martin Knelman who used to write abrasive film reviews wouldn't have been a bad choice.

Unfortunately *Home Movies* is gushy, sloppy journalism and even its gossip is the kind you can dish out to the subject without embarrassment. Knelman writes that *The Tin Flute* has "no redeeming qualities". Neither does his book.

*Argentine Cinema* edited by Tim Barnard  
Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986, 177 pages,  
\$10.95.

We should know more about other national cinemas. Like daily exercise and quitting smoking, familiarity with other film cultures is good for us, and it's something we often find ourselves promising to do more of. When we do try, however, we find our efforts are often frustrated. Texts on national cinemas have become the domain of academia. And most of us can't overcome such common ivory tower by-products as scholaresse, reams of shot-by-shot descriptions of films we've never heard of, and writers who assume we're already familiar with their subject. *Argentine Cinema*, edited by Tim Barnard, avoids these pitfalls and provides a useful and stimulating encounter with one national cinema Canadians should get to know.

In his foreword, Barnard warns us that "this monograph on Argentine cinema has been prepared with a view to providing a general introduction to the subject," and that "no attempt has been made to maintain a thematic unity between the articles." He also admits there's an absence of women contributors and a discussion of women filmmakers in the book but notes that "this absence is a reflection of the continued exclusion of women from the feature film industry... and from intellectual life in general." He thus foresees, and neatly sidesteps, much of the possible criticism against the book. But *Argentine Cinema* needs no excuses.

The history of Argentine cinema, like Argentine history, is very dramatic and makes a great subject. The industry enjoyed its golden age in the '30s when it was producing the most popular films in the Spanish-speaking world. The '40s saw it sabotaged by a U.S. government who thought Mexico was a friendlier country and refused Argentina the raw film it needed. Later years witnessed new successes and greater setbacks as classes fought for pride of place on the screen and government intervened not only with financial help, but also with censorship and its own agenda for the industry.

This gave rise to alternative cinemas in Argentina. In the '50s, Fernando Birri, who believed "the first step to be taken by an aspiring