E

very filmmaker who’s ever been trapped 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 cover promises Knelman will look at the financial, artistic and political complexities of our movie-making over the past two decades. The back-cover, more modestly, confides that it is “part consumer survey, part business analysis and part gossip column.”

But those who believe back-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, “Whatever Canadian movies were made, they were made in the shadow of the American eagle, of 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 California.”

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 those who’ve made it big in Hollywood.

For example, Ted Allen’s threats to sue and other stories that came out after Knelman published his book.

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 Dancing with Hollywood section there’s a predictable chapter on SUTV 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 magazine ever 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, Statdown, Prison Mother, Prison Daughter and Charlie’s Ghost 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, yet not writing on that Universal is a subsidiary of MCA, Knelman’s 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 wood-processed book written on the top of Knelman’s head. He jumps around from subject to subject to subject. 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 Taxi Driver, a little bit of Canadian theatre history, back to a bit of Henry, a comparative review of The Ten Flats and The Wards, 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 zig-zag boomers 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 Boros, Jacques Dufresne and Pierre Kronenberg 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 the troubled shooting in China. We’ve read gossip about Sutherland and Boros 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 over could have used more original material. With more facts he wouldn’t need to resort to such mythical speculations as: “It was as if all these people believed the screenwriter saint could heal the nation’s infected movie industry, purify it and effect some magical cure.”

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 Ten Flats has “no redeeming qualities”. Neither does his book.

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 irony tower-by-products as scholars’ recants 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... 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 30’s when it was producing the most popular films in the Spanish-speaking world. The film was targeted by a U.S. government who thought Mexico was a frontier country and refused Argentina the raw materials. The film was targeted by U.S. government who thought Mexico was a frontier country and refused Argentina the raw materials. The film was targeted by U.S. government who thought Mexico was a frontier country and refused Argentina the raw materials. The film was targeted by U.S. government who thought Mexico was a frontier country and refused Argentina the raw materials.

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