

old patterns, the old novel, the novel itself. Yet they are destroying it only in order to re-create it.

What most shocks the general public in such works as *La Maison de Rendez-vous* or *Someone* by Robert Pinget, who has just won the Prix Fémina (these two books, like most of the other so-called New Novels, are published by Editions de Minuit), is that a moment is reached toward the end of them when it becomes apparent that nothing that has been said in them has really existed, that the story sketched out in them could have been a completely different story, that in fact they embody a number of possible versions of the same events, that the same characters appear under several different names, that the book itself serves the writer so that he may emerge suddenly from backstage like a puppeteer and cry out: "All this is only me, me alone!"

For many readers, it is like being plunged into a cold bath. But we must not allow ourselves to be taken in, like the people who once seriously believed that Picasso was only making fun of them. These writers intend no mockery, no forcing of bad farce upon an innocent public. What they want to do is to explain to the reader (and how can they explain except by making him experience it?) that literature is a story we tell ourselves, all of us tell ourselves, and that it ends by becoming our lives, and that there is nothing wrong with this. But it would be better, of course, if we were aware that what we tell each other are just stories because then, perhaps, we would fabricate stories still more beautiful and rich and human. We might even reach the point where we might all be able to tell them together.

There are writers today who do not want to write anything any more without the active participation of the reader, without his creative participation. Robbe-Grillet himself is adamant on this score. He demands that the reader cease to expect what he describes in *For a New Novel* as "a world completed, full, closed upon itself." He demands that the reader be willing at last "to invent in his turn the work—and the world—and thus to learn to invent his own life."



## The Invisible Billionaire

JAMES R. PHELAN

HOWARD HUGHES, by John Keats. *Random House*. \$5.95.

Four years ago, so many people were looking for Howard Hughes that at times Southern California resembled the chase ballet in *High Button Shoes*. The pursuit had its origin in the massive legal battle between Eastern financial interests and the billionaire Western loner over control of his Trans World Airlines. The Easterners engaged a posse of private investigators to serve Hughes with various court orders and writs, and Hughes promptly deployed a counterintelligence force to frustrate them. The drama of this war, enhanced by the intriguing fact that Hughes had not been seen in public for years, attracted a group of writers and photographers for national magazines. As the safari progressed, it was joined by a crowd of spear carriers, including a Los Angeles lawyer who specialized in suing Hughes, the way some lawyers confine their practice to maritime law.

AS A FREE-LANCE writer based on the West Coast, I was conscripted for the manhunt by four separate publications over an eight-month period. The Great Halloo generated some fascinating tableaux. Like an enormously wealthy Bugs Bunny, Hughes had so many rabbit holes that not even this army of hounds could keep them all under surveillance. In a typical week he was rumored to be simultaneously in Acapulco, Palm Springs, Rancho Santa

Fe, Las Vegas, and on a yacht off Lower California. One photographer, acting on a tip, chartered a helicopter and roared up a Bel Air canyon and over the closely guarded walls of one of the Hughes mansions, firing at everything in sight with a rapid-trigger camera. At the time, according to a subsequent third-hand report, Hughes was three thousand miles away on an obscure Caribbean island.

Several of us spent weeks pursuing a sloe-eyed mystery woman who claimed to have a recent photograph of Hughes taken by her brother. She used a variety of names, and would talk to us only in a dimly lit Polynesian-type bar near La Cienega Boulevard. She demanded \$1,500 for the picture, on the grounds that it was the only Hughes photo in existence taken since 1952. "How can you find Hughes," she argued, "if you don't know what he looks like now?" By a process too Byzantine in complexity to recount, we finally unmasked her as the girl friend of a Hughes security guard, and the photo as a fake.

Both the pro- and anti-Hughes forces were commanded by former FBI agents; this was a top-quality war employing only top-quality talent. The Hughes field general complained bitterly that his employer was in the intolerable position of financing both armies. "Hughes owns seventy-eight per cent of TWA, which is paying the law firm that is suing him, which is paying the investiga-

tors who are hunting him," he said. He once confronted the opposing field general and urged him to exercise diligence: "So long as Mr. Hughes is paying you for hunting him," he said, "he expects an honest day's work."

The great manhunt reached an absurd climax one afternoon at 7000 Romaine Street in Los Angeles, an old two-story building that served as the "message center" through which Hughes ran his vast empire via telephone calls relayed to his top executives. A lawyer for the Eastern forces showed up, armed with a subpoena *duces tecum* commanding that Hughes materialize himself forthwith with a long list of TWA records. He hammered imperiously on the locked door, where we more seasoned Hughes-hunters had hammered in vain weeks before. When it failed to open, he stepped back and read the entire writ to the impassive entrance, like a bishop exorcising a dwelling possessed by a hostile spirit.

The professional hunters suffered a complete shutout, and we journalists did little better. Thomas Thompson of *Life* obtained an interview with Hughes's ex-barber, who reported that Hughes had grown a beard. I had a brief message from Hughes's wife, the former actress Jean Peters. It was filtered to me through a dense layer of intermediaries, and it said that she and the invisible man were happily married.

NONE OF US found the real live Hughes, and neither does *Howard Hughes*, a 304-page biography bearing the by-line of John Keats, author of *The Insolent Chariots* and *The Crack in the Picture Window*. The book, the first biography of Hughes, is a by-product of the great 1962 hunt, although Keats did not participate in it. Random House originally commissioned Hughes-hunter Thompson to produce the biography, but in 1965 he withdrew from the project and his draft was handed on to Keats. "My role was confined to that of car washer," Keats has declared. "The book was really written by another man, who asked his name be kept off it, and I rewrote it at Random House's request."

The book is an unofficial biography, lacking Hughes's blessing or

help. Thompson didn't talk to Hughes and Random House forbade Keats even to inform Hughes of the work in progress, on the grounds that he would try to block publication. In view of Hughes's attachment to his privacy, this approach was probably the only way to get a book between covers.

There are many good biographies done as adversary proceedings; official biographies, indeed, are often fawning bores. But Hughes presents a unique problem for an unauthorized biographer: how does one recount the life story of an invisible man? It has been ten years since Hughes vanished into the total privacy that a man with a billion dollars can command. The handful of people who still see him are intensely loyal and respond to all questions about Hughes with polite smiles and stony silence. Nowhere in the Keats book is this elite group even identified, much less quoted.

The book was plainly inhibited by Hughes's hostility to close and candid scrutiny. It is timid in its critical appraisals and ambivalent in its conclusions. It opens with a disclaimer ("This book is, hopefully, merely an interim report") and closes with speculation ("One wonders what the view from San Limbo must be").

In between is an oddly bland synthesis of a life that boldly scorned the conventions. It dutifully recounts Hughes's eccentricities but does not illuminate them with motivation. And certainly there is more to Hughes than his well-known peculiarities—his secretiveness, his careless garb, his topsy-turvy working hours, his adherence to one-man rule in an age of corporative endeavor. He has proved himself, on the record, to be an off-beat sort of twentieth-century Renaissance man, flexible in action and possessed of a wide-ranging curiosity and an astonishing array of talents. He nurtured a \$600,000 inheritance into an empire worth more than a billion dollars. Twenty years ago he designed, built, and briefly flew a giant wooden plane that could carry 750 passengers, a capacity still unequalled in the jet age. He gave the world Jean Harlow, a major international airline, and a cannon that can be fired like a machine gun. "Away back in 1957," says an asso-

ciate, "he told me he was going to put a device on the moon that would send back pictures." The Hughes-built Surveyor I is up there now, and has relayed photographs of stones no bigger than a man's hand.

THE KEATS BOOK went to the printer only a month or so before the conclusion of the great TWA battle, and thus missed an ironic story. The Eastern forces finally won out; early this spring Hughes agreed to divest himself of his entire holdings in the airline, more than six million shares. Back in 1960, when he lost voting control of TWA to the Easterners, the stock stood at \$13. He was bought out in May at over \$83. In vanquishing him, the Eastern forces enriched Hughes by close to \$500 million. The news stories of this enormously profitable setback brought to mind the laconic comment of one of his top aides early in the TWA battle. "Don't count Hughes out," he said. "He didn't get where he is by losing the big ones."

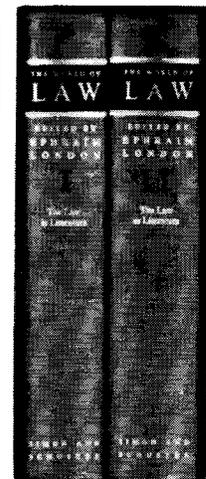
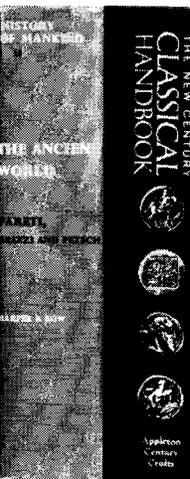
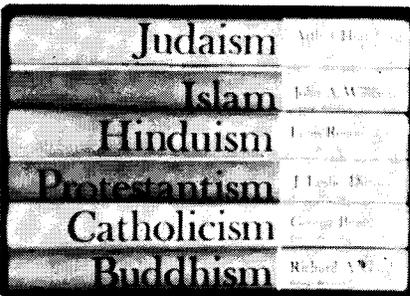
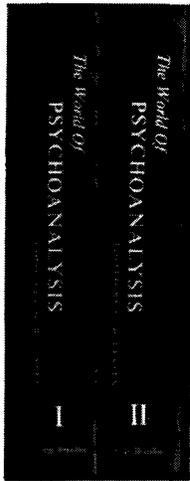
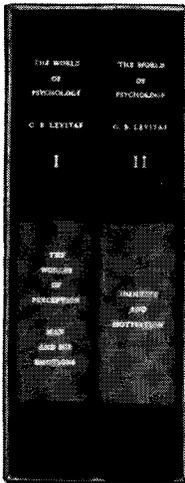
He is now involved, at least peripherally, in another court fight that reflects his well-honed sense of proprietorship. An organization called Rosemont Enterprises has sued Random House over publication of the Keats book. Indeed, according to a report in the *New York Times*, Random House has charged that Hughes created Rosemont precisely for this purpose. The Rosemont suit asserts that Hughes has conveyed to Rosemont "sole and exclusive world-wide rights" to exploit commercially "the name, personality, likeness or the life story or incidents in the life of Hughes," and it complains that Random House has poached on a private preserve. Rosemont has subpoenaed all of the Thompson-Keats-Random House correspondence. The secretary and general counsel for Rosemont Enterprises is none other than the chief counsel for Hughes in the TWA battle. If the suit is to succeed, it must establish that an individual owns the events he took part in throughout his life, and can dispose of accounts of them at his discretion, like the stock in an airline. Such a ruling would revolutionize the publishing industry, and the implications stagger the mind—like the notion of a camera on the moon.

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