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Wes D. Gehring. *Carole Lombard: The Hoosier Tornado*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2003. xx + 264 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87195-167-0.

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Nobody did it better. She did not invent the type, the scatterbrained blond who spoke faster than she thought, but Carole Lombard made it her own. When I think of her my mind wanders first to *My Man Godfrey* (1936), a film that without Lombard would be forgotten today. Except for a few fine character performances, and a couple of patches of nice writing, it is not really that good of a film. But her breathless charm, her inability to finish a sentence without gasping for air or mouth a sentence that seems to contain a period, carries the entire production. Five minutes into the film the viewer is hooked. How could William Powell, or anyone else, resist her? I cannot imagine another actress in the role without wincing, nor can I picture anyone but Lombard being able to carry Ernst Lubitsch's brilliant, sardonic, and poignant *To Be or Not To Be* (1942). The two films illuminate another vital aspect of Lombard: she brought out the best in her leading men. William Powell and, particularly, Jack Benny were never better. Although Lombard lacked the range of Barbara Stanwyck, she is like Stanwyck in the respect that their finest films are ageless, as fresh today as they were in the 1930s and 1940s.

Wes D. Gehring's *Carole Lombard: The Hoosier Tornado* is a brief, valuable examination of Lombard's life and films. Part of the recently inaugurated Indiana Biography Series, it reminds us that she was born Jane Alice Peters on October 6, 1908, in Fort Wayne, though Indiana only played the part of bookends in her life. Her mother relocated the family—sans husband—to California when the future star was still a young girl, and, of course, Lombard was returning from Indianapolis to Los Angeles after a war bond drive appearance when the plane she was in crashed west of Las Vegas. She died on January 17, 1942, three months after her thirty-third birthday. What was most important about her life, the films she domi-

nated as an actress in the years between 1934 and 1942, had almost nothing to do with Indiana.

Gehring, a professor of film, does not take a fashionable academic approach to Lombard's career. Today, more than ever before, writing about movies is divided between two poles: the theoretically oriented and the biographically inclined. Gehring largely goes the biographical route. He traces Lombard's early career, her automobile accident that scarred her face (never very noticeable) and changed her conception of herself, her marriages to William Powell and Clark Gable, and her salty language and fine sense of humor. But most of his biography is devoted to her films, her relationships with cast members and directors. What emerges is the portrait of an actress caught between worlds. We use the word "Hollywood" with exquisite imprecision. Is it a place, an industry, a product, or a state of mind? It is all these things—and more. It is worlds inside worlds—worlds of agents and producers, directors and stars, the Coconut Grove circle and the Ronald Colman clique. Lombard maneuvered through these various worlds, attempting to define herself when everyone else (mostly powerful men) wanted to control her. It all makes for an interesting story—a Hollywood story about Hollywood.

What finally made her great was what was great in her. Howard Hawks, as the story goes, saw Lombard at a party one night after she had one (or more) too many drinks and witnessed a "marvelous gal, crazy as a bed-bug." He thought, "If she could just be herself, she'd be great" in a part he had in mind (p. 118). This chance meeting led to Lombard's breakthrough role in *Twentieth Century* (1934), where she became a star by being herself. In the mid-1930s who Lombard was and screwball comedy met and matched perfectly. In 1936 *Love Before*

Breakfast, The Princess Comes Across, and My Man Godfrey confirmed Lombard's status in the industry.

By 1937 Lombard was a star, about the time she fell in love with a much bigger star, Clark Gable. In the few years they had together they seemed very much in love, and they became Hollywood's golden couple. Her death added a tragic note—always a nice Hollywood touch—to their short marriage. What would have happened to Lombard? Could she have continued to live in Gable's

shadow? Doubtful. Would her lack of acting range have proved more of a problem as she aged? Probably. But she did not age. She died, suddenly, patriotically, in the opening month of the war. And so we are allowed to remember her at the pinnacle of her life—a beautiful, successful star in love. And her final film, *To Be or Not To Be*, released the month after she died, was, I think, her best. It would be many years before Hollywood could make a film that laughed at the serious state of world affairs.

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