

In Print

Understanding Kate

Even by Hollywood standards, Katharine Hepburn's 1991 autobiography, *Me*, was a particularly unrevealing affair, albeit a chatty one. Happily, Orson Welles biographer Barbara Leaming makes up for the dirty-linen deficit in her recently published *Katharine Hepburn* (Crown; \$27.50). We witness a series of tragic suicides on both her mother's and father's sides of the family (culminating with Hepburn herself stumbling upon the body of her brother), we see a charming John Ford miss his opportunity to leave an unhappy marriage and be with her, and we learn about the piv-



otal role Hepburn's mother played in the suffrage movement. But all of that pales in comparison with the book's most unsettling tale: Leaming paints the portrait of a decidedly one-sided relationship between the guilt-ridden, unhappy, and demanding Spencer Tracy and Hepburn—who pretended to bow to no man, but is depicted here as spending her life anxiously catering to this one's needs. Predictably, the

families of Hepburn, Tracy, and Ford have all denied that Leaming's book has even a passing resemblance to reality. And Leaming herself says it will be difficult for some fans to read certain passages that she found "sad" and "difficult" to write. "The images from those movies are so powerful and wonderful," she says. "If you've seen people together onscreen for that long, you feel you know them. And that's a tribute to both of them—you really came away from those movies thinking, I know them and I know what their relationship is like. And you don't."

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