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### Edward Sorel's Love Letter to Mary Astor

The star's intimate diary was so scandalous that moguls conspired to keep it secret. Edward Kosner reviews "Mary Astor's Purple Diary: The Great American Sex Scandal of 1936."



PHOTO: LIVERIGHT

By Edward Kosner  
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**Who can forget Mary Astor as Brigid O'Shaughnessy, with her limpid eyes and quivering chin, imploring Humphrey Bogart's Sam Spade to save her from the cops at the end of "The Maltese Falcon"?**

Astor more than held her own in a cast of scene thieves including Sydney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre and their gungel, Elisha Cook Jr. Her turn as the deviously pathetic femme fatale ensured her place in the film-noir pantheon, but she was already a substantial star before the 1941 hit.

She had first turned heads as a virginal 17-year-old opposite John Barrymore in "Beau Brummel" in 1924, going on to play with Clark Gable and Jean Harlow in "Red Dust" (1932), Edward G. Robinson in "The Little Giant" (1933), and Walter Huston in "Dodsworth" (1936). Her last movie was the 1964 camp classic "Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte" with Bette Davis, Olivia de Havilland and Joseph Cotten, when she was 58. Over the years, she published two memoirs and five novels. Astor made big money in her time but spent much of it supporting her greedy parents and a couple of shiftless husbands.

None of this was what got Astor billing in "Hollywood Babylon" (1965), Kenneth Anger's brilliant if unreliable compilation of movie-colony scandals. Mary Astor made the book because in the late 1930s she had compiled what came to be known as her "love diary," an X-rated account of her amorous life, especially her affair with the Broadway playwright and Hollywood scriptwriter George S. Kaufman.

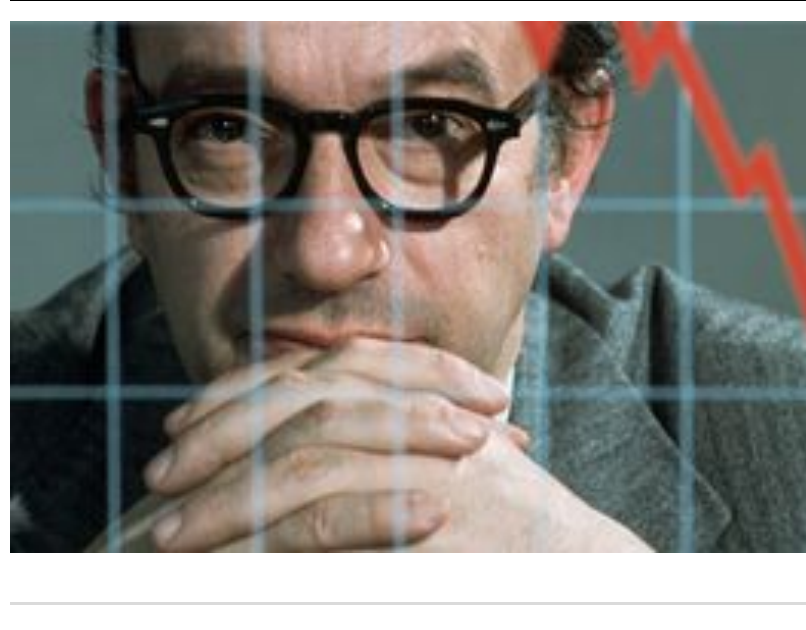
**MARY ASTOR'S PURPLE DIARY**  
 By Edward Sorel  
*Liveright, 165 pages, \$25.95*

Edward Sorel, the illustrator celebrated for his rapier-sharp work for the New Yorker, Rolling Stone and New York magazine and in many books, has been carrying the torch for Mary Astor forever. Now 87, but as acute as ever, Mr. Sorel has produced a love letter to his unlikely heroine, "Mary Astor's Purple Diary: The Great American Sex Scandal of 1936"—a slender volume with four dozen full-color illustrations that reanimates a footnote in American popular culture into a ribald romp.

As he tells it, Mr. Sorel decided to become Astor's mixed-media Boswell in 1965 when he happened on a trove of new York tabloids from 1936. The musty, yellowed copies of the Daily News and Daily Mirror splashed hyperventilating stories about the diary—the centerpiece of a child-custody trial pitting Astor against her ex-husband, an ambitious obstetrician and gynecologist named Franklyn Thorpe. "Astor's Sensations Scare Film Moguls," blared one headline. "Astor Diary 'Ecstasy' [sic]," read another.

It took Mr. Sorel a half-century to fulfill his ambition, but the wait was worth it. With a tip of his pen to Daumier, the artist evokes the quaint, febrile glamour of Astor's Hollywood, and his affectionate, conversational prose gives Mary and her story a kind of valiant dignity never bestowed while she lived.

Astor—born Lucile Langhanke in Quincy, Ill., in 1906—was addicted to bad choices, especially in men. Her first leading man, the drunken lothario John Barrymore, 41, lured her to the Beverly Hills Hotel for a sentimental education billed as "acting lessons" after he cast her in "Beau Brummel." Her first husband was the director Ken Hawks, the younger and less talented brother of Howard Hawks. He had such a wan libido that his 21-year-old bride turned to a producer for attention, promptly got pregnant and had to have an abortion. Within a year, Ken Hawks was killed when his World War I biplane collided with another while filming dogfights for a movie called "Such Men Are Dangerous." Widowed at 23 and drinking herself to sleep, Astor came under the care of Thorpe, whose ambition was to be Hollywood's ob-gyn to the stars. He soon became the second Mr. Astor.



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The affair with Kaufman was the emotional peak of Astor's life. She had to contend not only with the surly Dr. Thorpe but with her wastrel father, Otto, an immigrant schoolteacher with an insatiable appetite for the high life. While Mary lived with her husband and daughter in a modest house in Toluca Lake, Otto and Mary's mother luxuriated in a mansion with two cars and three servants, all paid for by their daughter. In the depths of the Depression, Otto lavished \$300,000 in today's money on a swimming pool fashioned to look like a lagoon. Over the course of a decade, Mary later testified, she had given her parents the equivalent of \$6.6 million today.

She and Thorpe had each cheated on the other, and Mary was ripe for escape. On a break from filming in 1933, she flew to New York, where "male nymphomaniac." Astor was fairly discreet about her adventures with Kaufman in her memoir, published while he was still alive. So the author reimagines the episode by conjuring Mary's spirit and then interviewing her. This flight of fancy may put off some readers, as will Mr. Sorel's chatty digressions about his own marriages.

His Mary sounds a little like Brigid O'Shaughnessy as she describes a romantic whirl of dinners at 21 and chic supper clubs, drop-ins at Broadway hits by Kaufman and his pals, pre-dawn carriage rides through Central Park, and endless, energetic sex. "And the stamina!" Mary exclaims. "I snapped back pretty fast myself in those days, but George was a phenomenon."

Astor went into much more detail about her trysts with the indefatigable Kaufman in what the papers labeled her "purple diary" (although it was actually written in brown ink). Excerpts from the diary appeared in "Hollywood Babylon," and Mr. Sorel uses some and paraphrases others in his chat with Astor's ghost.

Unfortunately for Astor, Thorpe somehow got hold of the book. When they divorced in 1935, she had to cede custody of their daughter, Marylyn, to Thorpe, who threatened to use the diary to expose her as an unfit mother and ruin her movie career—or so Mary later claimed in a lawsuit to regain custody of the child.

That case began to unfold just as Astor was starting to film the biggest role of her career as an expat widow in "Dodsworth," based on the Sinclair Lewis best seller. Sure enough, Thorpe began leaking excerpts from the diary—some of them doctored—including a scorecard Astor supposedly kept grading her partners' performances. "Panic rose in the offices of the major producers," writes Mr. Sorel. "What if one of their macho stars had gotten a zero for the old in-and-out?"

The diary was supposed to be safely locked away with Thorpe's lawyers, but Florabel Muir, the Daily News's top sob sister, scored a copy, and the media frenzy was on. Was the "G" in the diaries George S. Kaufman? Time magazine splashed a forged extract quoting Mary's "many exquisite moments . . . twenty—count them, diary, twenty . . . I don't see how he does it . . . he's perfect." Kaufman, in Hollywood writing a script, panicked at the idea that he might be grilled on the stand. First he fled to Catalina Island on Irving Thalberg's yacht but was served with a subpoena anyway. Then Moss Hart smuggled him out of his Malibu beach house in a laundry bin and had him driven to the train for Chicago. "I was just a friend," Kaufman insisted later.

Studio moguls feared that the scandal would trigger a crackdown on Hollywood immorality—and hurt business. So they got together and decided to shut down the production. Pressure was put on the governor, the ambitious trial judge, Mary, Thorpe and their lawyers.

In a miraculous Hollywood ending, Judge Goodwin Knight brokered a settlement in which Mary regained majority custody of her daughter, Thorpe went away quietly and the diary simply vanished into legal limbo safe from the tabloids.

It would be nice to think that Astor lived happily ever after, but she didn't. She married twice more and nearly drowned in alcoholism. She played mother to Elizabeth Taylor, Judy Garland, Kathryn Grayson, June Allyson and Margaret O'Brien in the movies, wrote her books and died at 81 in 1987 at the Motion Picture Country House. Brigid O'Shaughnessy, though, lives on forever in Hollywood heaven.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New Yorker, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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