

Books of The Times

You Can't Buy Happiness

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

HOWARD HUGHES. *The Hidden Years*. By James Phelan. 201 pages. Random House. \$7.95.

We can now be certain of at least one respect in which the rich are different from you and me. When you and I turn dotty, they take our toys away from us and ship us off to a safe place. But if you are rich—or as rich as the late Howard Hughes was—you not only get to keep your toys, you also can turn the whole world into your safe place. This, at least, is the major item of news imparted by James Phelan's enterprising work of reportage, "Howard Hughes: The Hidden Years."

According to Mr. Phelan, most of the grotesque rumors we have been hearing about the shy billionaire these last 15 years turn out to be true and then some—the whispers about the untended hair and nails; the physical deterioration; the drugs and medicines; the finickiness about food and people. As he tells it, Hughes was forced to retreat into isolation by a compulsiveness over details and secrecy that made it impossible for him to make decisions. (One illustration of this is a 1950 memo Hughes labored over for days and treated as if it were a Central Intelligence Agency directive, concerning the appearance of Jane Russell's breasts in a movie called "Macao.") What it all seems to add up to is that when Hughes went round the bend he took his expensive world with him.

An Appalling Account

Of course, this is not all that Mr. Phelan's brief but appalling account tells us. The book was made possible when two functionaries in the "palace guard" that protected Hughes came to Mr. Phelan after the tycoon's death in 1976 and declared their willingness to spill whatever beans they had in their possession. One, a Mormon named Mell Stewart, had been introduced to Hughes as his barber—at \$1,000 a haircut (not so excessive when you consider the lengths to which Mr. Stewart had to go to accommodate his subject's phobias)—and had risen to the position of Hughes's personal male nurse. The other, a Las Vegas waiter named Gordon Margulis, was hired in 1965 to prepare Hughes's meals and came to function as his bodyguard, as well as, during the last years when he could no longer walk, his means of locomotion.

Both Mr. Stewart and Mr. Margulis had known their master's daily routine intimately. So when they got in touch with Mr. Phelan—one would guess because the domestic nature of their relationship to Hughes left them without positions in the empire that survives him—Mr. Phelan was able to combine their quotidian observations with what he already knew as a veteran Hughes-observer.

As a result, he opens the door a crack on the last 15 years of Hughes's life. He details the secret movements of the emperor and his routine—from California to Las Vegas to the Bahamas to Nicaragua to Mexico, and so forth until Hughes was put aboard the jet to Houston on which the wasted body finally expired from kidney failure. Mr. Phelan explains the rise and fall of Hughes's regents—Noah Dietrich, Robert Maheu and Chester Davis. (The picture of the master's relationship with Mr. Maheu is particularly revealing, what with Hughes having apparently regarded the director of his Las Vegas holdings as a physical and psychic extension of himself.)

He analyzes Hughes's declining powers as a businessman, suggesting that men such as Mr. Dietrich and Mr. Davis should get more credit for having expanded his fortune and that the Mormon "palace guard" really worked to the detriment of his interests. And he gives us tantalizing glimpses of how Hughes tried, with all too frequent success, to influence elected officials and subvert the public weal to his own ends.

Wealth of Anecdote

But still, what is fascinating about "The Hidden Years" is its wealth of anecdote—the stories of how Hughes would lie naked in his sealed chambers endlessly watching rerun after rerun of his favorite action movies ("Skip those mushy parts!," he would order, like any prepubescent); how he would insist that a single can of Campbell's vegetable soup—his only fare during one period—be reheated 12 successive times because his attention had wandered between spoonfuls; and how during a period of partial emergence from his cocoon that occurred about six years before his death he would express his brimming joie de vivre by singing the single of the emperor and his retinue—from pop song of the early 1950's.

Does Mr. Phelan's story edify? I suppose it's always useful to be reminded that at no level of wealth or power does human nature cease to assert its needs, despite what we may be inclined to fantasize about people in high places. But aside from spilling all sorts of needed gossip from inside a boil that had been growing for 15 years, "The Hidden Years" teaches little more than the familiar bromides. Mr. Phelan goes fancy on us and quotes the lesson of Shelley's "Ozymandius": "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair! . . . Round the decay Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, The lone and level sands stretch far away." But it was more suited to the tone and character of "The Hidden Years" when it was asserted long ago: You can't buy happiness.