Two Paramount "B" melodramas

"CAR 99" (Paramount, 1935) Directed by Charles Barton; produced by Rayard Veiller; Screenplay by C. Gardner Sullivan and Karl Detzer from original stories by Karl Detzer; Camera, William C. Mellor; 7 reels
With Fred MacMurray, Ann Sheridan, Sir Guy Standing, Frank Craven, William Frawley, Russell Hopton, Marine Schubert, Dean Jagger, John Conlan, Nora Celio, Joe Sawyer, Charles Wilson, Mack Grey, Eddie Dunn, Peter Hancock, Howard Wilson, Alfred Dalembr, John Howard, Douglas Blackley (Robert Kent).

Although "Car 99" is very much of a "B", and a good one, it was sold as something rather more ambitious at the same. Fred MacMurray zoomed to such sudden popularity as a result of his work with Claudette Colbert in "The Gilded Lily", that "Car 99" was rushed into release as an "A" picture, advertising stressing both the MacMurray name and the film's somewhat casual relationship to the then-current gangster cycles. It may well have disappointed on that basis, since the film is a rural actioner, something that that the ads played down. The delight of the "B" is that it so often delivers more than one has a right to expect, but as an "A" this might have delivered less. Anyway, it's a brisk little film, with a good deal of location work. Sections of the studio double as the Michigan State Police station and there's a minimum of the obvious studio work that marred so many bigger Paramount films. There's no excess of action, but what there is is good, and the lively climax wrapped up with a particularly good stunt. The writing too is a interesting: much of it is deliberately over-dramatized, but that, oddly, gives the film an interest. The cost is solid, and full of interesting characters. The writing, with all its over-dramatization, is first-rate, and there are a number of characters who come across with particular force. One could also do without Frank Craven entirely, an irritating character that just slows the pace down. Sir Guy Standing is his usual old self; his performances are always the same and familiarity with his mannerisms makes them increasingly less effective, but he is such a delightful actor that one can't help him.

"DEATH OF A CHAMPION" (Paramount, 1939) Directed by Robert Florey; Screenplay by Stuart Palmer and Courtland Fitzsimmons from the short story "Dog Show Murder" by Frank Gruber; Camera, Stuart Thompson; 7 reels.

Coincidentally, "Death of a Champion" runs exactly as long - 67 minutes - as "Car 99", but despite uncommonly good reviews, was sold for what it was - a B, pure and simple. Usually, Robert Florey brought dazzling style and pace to his Bs to beef them up; here his basic material is good enough on its own not to need artifice, so he plays down technique and lets the story tell itself via the many interesting characters. There are still typically atmospheric Florey touches, and the pace is smart and it's well up to his usual standards. The Overman/O'Connor team is a winning one, and it's surprising that Paramount didn't follow through with a whole series - though probably the freshness would have worn off quickly. No prizes for guessing the fairly obvious identity of the hidden killer, but it's a most entertaining comedy-thriller trifle, originating with the prolific Frank Gruber, who never quite made it to the Hollywood upper-schlech, but certainly contributed a lot of original stories and screenplays.