THE PENGUIN POOL MURDER (Rko Radio, 1932) Directed by George Archainbaud; Executive Producer, David O. Selznick; Associate Producer, Kenneth MacGowan; Scenario by Willis Goldbeck from a novel by Stuart Palmer and a story by Lowell Brentano; Camera, Henry Gerrard; Music, Max Steiner; 7 reels
With Edna May Oliver, James Gleason, Mae Clarke, Donald Cook, Robert Armstrong, Clarence Wilson, Edgar Kennedy, Rochelle Hudson, Mary Mason, Guy Usher, James Donlin, Spee O'Donnell, Joe Hermano, William LeMaire, Gustav von Seyffertitz.

The first, and one of the two best of the series of six Hildegarde Withers mysteries made by Rko, "The Penguin Pool Murder" still has the freshness of most initial entries in movie detective series. The two lead roles could have been written for Edna May Oliver and James Gleason, and they work beautifully as a team. (Gleason starred in all six, but Oliver dropped out after the first three, to be replaced by Helen Broderick and, far less successfully, Zasu Pitts). At first the series was carefully if not elaborately produced, and they were well-spaced at only one a year; the last two with Pitts however, were tired and obvious "B"s. "Penguin" starts out beautifully and can't quite sustain the imagination of the opening reel, but it does keep nicely on the move, the plot has quite a few surprises (although the identity of the "mystery" killer is certainly not one of them) and the Oliver-Gleason repartee is consistently amusing, as are Oliver's caustic cracks to her schoolchildren charges. (Having given a bag to an obviously Jewish lad, she tells him that he's only supposed to hold it, not appraise it?) Rkos of the early thirties were, on the whole (Long and Astaire-Rogers excepted!) not a very scintillating lot, and they are not helped by the dull, lack-lustre 16mm nags made up for "preservation" and tv usage. Pictorially, "Penguin Pool" has no zip or sparkle, although the camerawork is often imaginative, and in original 35mm prints it undoubtedly looked a good deal better.

THE GHOST SHIP (Rko Radio, 1943) Directed by Mark Robson; produced by Val Lewton; Scenario by Donald Henderson Clarke from a story by Leo Mittler; Camera, Nicholas Musuraca; Music, Roy Webb; 7 reels

"The Ghost Ship" has long been withdrawn and unavailable due to a plagiarism suit which, by all accounts, was totally unjustified. To my knowledge, its last NY showing was our own more than 15 years ago. On that occasion we had an original print so dark and black (it was a film noir physically as well as psychologically) that much of the detail was lost. That print then went to Europe, and our print tonight is a dupe from that original; while some of the glossy quality has gone, it has been lightened a little, so that one can see what is going on in the shadows of those dark holds. It's a fascinating film, but (especially by Joel Siegel in his book on Lewton) an over-rated one, due mainly to Robson's pretentious direction. The plot really needs not a plethora of pictorial style, but more time for the plot, tensions and characterisations to build steadily and logically. In order to fit it into 70 minutes, there are too many short-cuts - such as the Skelton Knaggs character, coming Long's Destiny figure with a Greek Chorus. Robson, like Wise, was a former editor, but the Wise Lewtons were far superior - just as Wise's subsequent career has been more interesting than Robson's. (It'll be interesting to compare Wise's "Hindenburg" with Robson's "Earthquake"). Nevertheless, it's an intelligent, stylish, above-average Lewton, and we're glad to have it back. — W.K. Eisenberg —