 BOOK REVIEWS

Dead spread will feed the heads

A LONG STRANGE TRIP
THE INSIDE HISTORY OF THE GRATEFUL DEAD
DENNIS McNALLY
(BROADWAY: 690 PGS.; $30)

By PHIL GALLO

Rock 'n' roll and its associated lifestyles usually look most attractive to the fringe players, the folk who concertgoers see standing on the side of the stage during the show with all-access passes around their necks and — in the case of many during the '60s and '70s — a pass of drugs in tow. Dennis McNally, who approached the Dead 22 years ago with the intention of being their biographer and historian, and then became their publicist in 1984, certainly has that vantage point over the last 14 years of the band's existence. But it's the deep digging into the players' origins and the social setting from which the band sprang that makes "A Long Strange Trip" such an engaging read. "Trips" is certainly proof that lightning only strikes once: Any band that uses the Dead's tale (as a primer on how to succeed in the music business without really trying) will find themselves collapsing in the starting blocks.

It's no surprise that Jerry Garcia is his central character. What is a surprise is how Garcia's personal email and the Zen-like peace he derived from leading without decisiveness gave the Dead their overriding character. The Grateful Dead, quite bizarrely, was a sum of its parts... 

Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters

MICHAEL TIERNO
(HYPERION: $19.95, 192 PGS.)

The author digs deep into players' origins and the milieu of the band.

My big fat Greek guide helps scribes

LOGIC AND CHARACTER COMES FIRST. THE ABILITY TO PLOT COMES LATER. Aristotle, and by extension Tierno, is most helpful with story structure, focusing for the balance of the book on the approach that has made Robert McKee and Syd Field household names to the devotion of screenwriters and producers alike. More, McKee and Field have yet to tap into the appeal: Focusing only on recent movies like "American Beauty," "Titanic" and "Road Trip" (yes, that "Road Trip"), he has clearly chosen to go after an audience not steeped in the Greek classics.

In an unfortunate effort to add his own voice to the proceedings...