



Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film

Maureen Sabine

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A provocative, interdisciplinary study of nuns on the big screen, from *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945) to *Doubt* (2008), that shines fresh light on the cinematic nun as a woman and a religious in the twentieth century.

Ingrid Bergman's engaging screen performance as Sister Mary Benedict in *The Bells of St. Mary's* made the film nun a star and her character a shining standard of comparison. She represented the religious life as the happy and rewarding choice of a modern woman who had a "complete understanding" of both erotic and spiritual desire. How did this vibrant and mature nun figure come to be viewed as girlish and naive? **Why have she and her cinematic sisters in postwar popular film so often been stereotyped or selectively analyzed, so seldom been seen as women and religious?**

In *Veiled Desires*--a unique full-length, in-depth study of nuns in film--Maureen Sabine explores these questions in a **groundbreaking interdisciplinary study covering more than sixty years of cinema**. She looks at an impressive breadth of films in which the nun features as an ardent lead character, including *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945), *Black Narcissus* (1947), *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957), *Sea Wife* (1957), *The Nun's Story* (1959), *The Sound of Music* (1965), *Change of Habit* (1969), *In This House of Brede* (1975), *Agnes of God* (1985), *Dead Man Walking* (1995), and *Doubt* (2008).

Veiled Desires considers how the beautiful and charismatic stars who play chaste nuns, from **Ingrid Bergman** and **Audrey Hepburn** to **Susan Sarandon** and **Meryl Streep**, call attention to desires that the veil concealed and the habit was thought to stifle. In a theologically and psychoanalytically informed argument, Sabine responds to the critics who have pigeonholed the film nun as the obedient daughter and religious handmaiden of a patriarchal church, and the respectful audience who revered her as an icon of spiritual perfection. She provides a framework for **a more complex and holistic picture of nuns on screen by showing how the films dramatize these women's Christian call to serve, sacrifice, and dedicate themselves to God**, and their erotic desire for intimacy, agency, achievement, and fulfillment.

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