



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

By 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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Editorial Review

Review

"The 'nun film' has been a significant genre in Anglo-American cinema through most of the second half of the twentieth century. Maureen Sabine's is the most impressive treatment to date of a genre that has sadly been neglected in the literature of film studies. Ranging from serious art films such as *Black Narcissus* to the popular entertainment of *The Sound of Music*, Sabine combines Freudian psychology and Christian theology to offer a sensitive reading of films whose protagonists invariably struggle to fashion distinct personal identities while remaining faithful to received traditions."--Christopher S. Shannon, Christendom College

"*Veiled Desires* is a provocative, fascinating, and occasionally lyrical study of the narratives and imagery of Catholic women religious on the big screen. The book is impressively ambitious in scope, bringing together social theory, psychoanalysis, Catholic history, and media studies to interpret 40 years of film."--Amy L. Koehlinger, Florida State University

"*Veiled Desires* is a rich, compelling, and provocative appraisal of the cinematic nun. In her intricate analyses of both contemporary and historical films, Maureen Sabine masterfully recovers the Eros of a religious vocation. In so doing, she challenges the way that popular culture defines women's desire and erotic selfhood, and reveals the complex dynamic between our spiritual and sexual lives."--Rebecca Sullivan, The University of Calgary

"Sabine examines postwar movies and their overwhelming portrayal of nuns as conflicted, even tortured by their choices or so openly self-delusional that the only way for them to survive is outside the nunnery." - Reference & Research Book News

"*Veiled Desires*' is a great read and the selection of films would make for an awesome retrospective film festival." -National Catholic Reporter

". . . its beauty exemplifies the benefits of interdisciplinary research in gender studies, church history, cinematic analysis, and American culture." -America, National Catholic Weekly

"Not every reader will find the Freudian analysis helpful and compelling. Nonetheless, *Veiled Desires*, which seeks to '[challenge] the view that Freud and his psychoanalytic disciples have nothing to tell us about faith' (301), has much to teach specialists (and especially graduate students) in Catholic Studies."--Debra

"An accessible and engaging read."-WATER: Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual

About the Author

Maureen Sabine is a professor of History at the University of Hong Kong. Her previous books include *Maxine Hong Kingston's Broken Book of Life* and *Feminine Engendered Faith: John Donne and Richard Crashaw*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Alice Black:

This *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film* book is not really ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you get by reading this book is usually information inside this publication incredible fresh, you will get info which is getting deeper anyone read a lot of information you will get. That *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film* without we understand teach the one who examining it become critical in considering and analyzing. Don't end up being worry *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film* can bring if you are and not make your tote space or bookshelves' come to be full because you can have it in the lovely laptop even phone. This *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film* having fine arrangement in word and layout, so you will not really feel uninterested in reading.

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David Reed:

Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film can be one of your nice books that are good idea. Most of us recommend that straight away because this book has good vocabulary that will increase your knowledge in terminology, easy to understand, bit entertaining but delivering the information. The article writer giving his/her effort to set every word into joy arrangement in writing *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film* although doesn't forget the main stage, giving the reader the hottest and also based confirm resource facts that maybe you can be one among it. This great

information can certainly draw you into completely new stage of crucial pondering.

Awilda Kell:

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