



## Nuns: A History of Convent Life

*By Silvia Evangelisti*

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### **Nuns: A History of Convent Life** By Silvia Evangelisti

*Nuns* tells the fascinating stories of the women who have lived in religious communities during some of the most tumultuous years in European history. Drawing particularly on the nuns' own words, Silvia Evangelisti reveals their ideals and achievements, frustrations and failures, and their attempts to reach out to the society around them. She explores how they came to the cloister, how they responded to monastic discipline, and how they pursued their spiritual, intellectual, and missionary activities.

Life in the Middle Ages and the centuries that followed offered few options for high-born women. Your choice was, as one Italian noblewoman put it, "between a marriage and a wall." If your family could not afford a dowry, or you did not wish to marry, you could join a convent to escape the shame of being unwed. Some extremely pious women, so abhorring the idea of marriage, went as far as to throw themselves into boiling water so that their scarred bodies and faces would be unappealing to their prospective husbands. For many that joined, the convent was a chance to achieve some measure of a career, working as valued manuscript copiers or cultivating talents in the visual and musical arts. Despite strict rules which kept many orders separated from the outside world, nuns often found a way to contribute to their communities by creating charities and schools, while a few exceptional women made names for themselves for their artistic talents or for establishing new convents. This book features the individual stories of some of these outstanding historical figures, including Teresa of Avila, who set up over seventeen new convents, despite opposition from powerful politicians. When Europeans began to extend their interest in the New World, it was often the establishment of convents that provided the easiest transfer of European ideals and culture into the new colonies.

Despite the restrictions that were placed on the lives of nuns, Evangelisti clearly shows how these women were able to overcome some of the restrictions placed on women in their societies at large. In doing so, she provides a fascinating and rarely seen glimpse into their intriguing world.

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Although limited in scope, this examination of convent life paints a detailed and in-depth portrait of the women who led mostly hidden lives of work and prayer between the late 15th and early 18th centuries. Evangelisti, a lecturer in early modern history at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, tells how nuns of this period engaged in such creative pursuits as writing, music, the visual arts and theater. Some even wrote spirited defenses of their gender, confronting the prevailing view of women as less than men (although at least one of these—Teresa of Ávila—had her words on the subject censored from the published version of *The Way of Perfection*). Evangelisti also deals with a darker side of convent life: that of women being forced by their families to become nuns because of the few opportunities available to women of that time. Yet she points out that, for others, becoming a nun was a suitable alternative to marriage. She shows as well how women inside the convent walls challenged church restrictions of that era requiring them to live in cloisters. Many sought to go outside to perform charitable and other acts of service, developing new models that would allow such work. Evangelisti's readable, meticulously researched account should be of special interest to feminists and students of church history. (May)

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## Review

[This] books provides a meticulously researched background to our contemporary interest. This is an elegantly argued, highly readable history of women whose lives have, until recently, remained shrouded beneath fears and prejudices. Julie Wheelwright, *The Independent* (Extra) Nuns is a serious book by a serious thinker...Evangelisti is a conscientious historian with a wonderful subject...[a] meticulously researched history. Mary Wakefield, *Daily Telegraph* (Review) A rich and direct insight into convent life. Judith Champ, *The Tablet* [An] important new book. Jonathan Wright, *New Statesman* [A] fascinating book...It is a powerful record and a fine contribution to the history of women. Joan Bakewell, *Sunday Times* This graphic, elegantly composed and often poignant study stands out in its attempt to weigh the positive and negative aspects of the convent experience. Olwen Hufton, *BBC History* A richly researched book... and one that constantly manages to surprise. *The Times* A radically different and intriguing picture. *The Economist* Nuns is a serious and readable study of convent life: it rescues from history the lives of women whom British and American feminists have tended to ignore because they have generally searched in secular places. Mary Kenny, *Literary Review* this is an elegantly argued, highly readable history of women whose lives have, until recently, remained shrouded beneath fears and prejudices. Julie Wainwright, *The Monday Book*, *The Independent* ...a highly readable text... S. Karly Kehoe, University of Guelph

## About the Author

**Silvia Evangelisti** is Lecturer in Early Modern History at the University of East Anglia. She has published widely on women and gender history in both English and Italian, looking especially at female religious life in the early modern period.

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