



# INDIE | SALES

## MARIE'S STORY

a film by Jean-Pierre Améris

## Press Reviews

# Film Review: 'Marie's Story'

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AUGUST 14, 2014 | 03:06PM PT

*In the tradition of 'The Miracle Worker,' this compelling French drama depicts a nun's efforts to communicate with a deaf and blind 14-year-old.*

**Peter Debruge**

Chief International Film Critic

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Born five years after Helen Keller in Vertou, France, [Marie Heurtin](#) faced many of the same challenges, growing up deaf and blind in a society whose instinct was to institutionalize such girls. "Marie's Story," therefore, is not so different from Keller's, amounting to a French "Miracle Worker" with the bonus miracle that it was a nun who accomplished the inspirational breakthrough. **Acquired by Film Movement in advance of its Locarno Film Festival premiere, this compelling 19th-century drama offers slight but satisfying variations on one of American**



**sleepers potential Stateside.**

Whereas every American child knows how Keller learned to communicate, thanks to her autobiography and the 1962 film, Heurtin's story isn't widely known in France — nor is the unfortunate meme of off-color jokes schoolchildren make concerning Keller's twin handicaps. That should make for a relatively pure viewing experience abroad, where this traditionally plotted tearjerker won't seem so familiar to audiences of all ages. In the U.S., meanwhile, there's still the question of what word will inspire Heurtin's breakthrough, the way "water" did for Keller.

The more immediate reference for Gallic viewers will be Francois Truffaut's "The Wild Child," which deals with the taming of a feral kid found living alone in the woods. Played by convincingly brutish newcomer Ariana Rivoire, Marie is 14 years old when she arrives at the nun-run Larnay Institute, a convent in Poitiers where deaf girls — and those with various other ailments — are routinely left by their parents to learn sign language and become sisters. Filthy, disheveled and understandably terrified, Marie runs from these strangers and climbs the nearest tree, from which mild-mannered Sister Marguerite (Isabelle Carre) is chosen to bring her down.

Though not deaf herself, Marguerite has a vision of how she might be able to help Marie, hypothesizing that if she can adapt sign language in such a way that Marie can feel the words, the girl will be able to understand their significance. In practice, Marguerite's plan proves harder than she expected, since Marie thrashes violently around anyone other than her parents and clutches a potentially dangerous pocket knife (her favorite possession) more tightly than most girls would their dolls. Add to this the convent's stereotypically stern Mother Superior character (Brigitte Catillon, in stiff-spined Maggie Smith mode), who skeptically yields to Marguerite's obstinacy, but worries that the challenge will threaten her already delicate health.

Though Marguerite's mortality becomes a major focus of the film's last act, director Jean-Pierre Ameris spares audiences the Hollywood approach of telegraphing a terminal illness by a gradually worsening

cough as so brilliantly parodied by Alec Baldwin in the "Mastering the



Art of Foreshadowing Your Character's Death" sketch on "Saturday Night Live." Instead, the script remains resolutely focused on Marie's slow transformation, including such feel-good milestones as brushing her [hair](#), giving herself a bath and trading her soiled dress for a cleanly pressed school uniform. Only after the point that Marie grasps the concept of language does the story return to Marguerite's condition, skipping over most of the reading, writing and signing lessons to depict the key moment when the terminally ill nun tries to explain such abstract concepts as death, heaven and God.

At the risk of sounding crass, Marguerite takes a taxingly long time to succumb, while Ameris and co-writer Philippe Blasband try to engineer the most wrenching climax possible. Still, some of the pic's best moments occur in this final stretch, including an unexpectedly frank exchange with the Mother Superior in which she admits no amount of faith makes dying easy, and a second breakthrough with Marie, where she comes to understand the concept of music by pressing herself up against a piano. Until this moment, the pic's low-key score has been kept to an absolute minimum — part of an intuitively conceptual sound design that grows gradually more robust as Marie's sensory awareness expands. Early on, she experiences the world by touch, absorbing the sun on her skin and feeling the faces of strangers with her hands. By the end, music has become part of her world, giving the film license to reinforce the sentiment with stirring strings.

A quarter-century ago, such an assured, emotionally satisfying French offering as this could have done significant business in the States, the way films like "Jean de Florette" once did. These days, foreign films tend to require either esoteric critical support or an edgy genre hook, and yet, "Marie's Story" embodies many of the qualities that Hollywood still strives to deliver in native projects, especially as concerns leading lady Carre, who may not reach Anne Bancroft's heights, but plays her determined character with moving obstinacy and grace.



# 'Marie's Story' ('Marie Heurtin'): Locarno Review

3:35 PM PDT 8/21/2014 by Boyd van Hoeij

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Courtesy of Festival del film Locarno

## The Bottom Line

*This biopic of the "French Helen Keller" is inspirational but also contains lighter touches*

## Venue

*Locarno Film Festival (Piazza Grande)*

## Cast

*Isabelle Carre, Ariana Rivoire, Brigitte Catillon*

## Director

*Jean-Pierre Ameris*

French actress Isabelle Carre plays a nun who is determined to teach a deaf and blind girl sign language in this biopic set in rural France at the turn of the century.

A French nun with the lovely if determined countenance of actress **Isabelle Carre** takes an uncontrollable deaf and blind country girl under her wing in *Marie's Story* (*Marie Heurtin*), a pastoral biopic set during the fin-de-siecle that portrays the saintly patience needed to teach sign language to someone who can't see. **Based on a true story that's perhaps less famous than some others but just as intriguing, this serious-minded — no Helen Keller jokes, please — period film is nonetheless quite entertaining and, finally, moving, which suggests there could be some crossover potential beyond the usual Francophile suspects.** It premiered in Locarno as a Piazza Grande title.

Carre earlier starred as a contemporary chocolate maker with social anxiety disorder who wants to fall in love in

*Ameris' Romantics Anonymous*, and though the films' story details couldn't be more different, the two narratives are similar in that Carre's character again has to fight all odds to arrive at a fulfilling ending.



Moreover, the tone of both films toggles between a kind of polished realism and occasionally light, even whimsical touches, ensuring a more mainstream sensibility than one would expect from films about anxiety disorders or the education of deaf and blind people.

Carre here plays Sister Marguerite, one of the religious women running the Larnay Institute near Poitiers in west-central France, where they look after deaf girls. But they've never had a deaf and blind girl before the arrival of 14-year-old Marie Heurtin (**Ariana Rivoire**) in 1885, and initially the unsurprisingly strict Mother Superior (**Brigitte Catillon**) refuses to take her in, though the determined Marguerite finally manages to have her way.

The devoted nun's first months with Marie, who is so constantly violent around everyone that she can't even be dressed, have her hair combed by others or eat at a table in the refectory, are described by Marguerite, heard in voiceover reading from her diary, as a "Calvary." (Marguerite's diary, if she had one, was never published but Marie's case became famous after **Louis Arnould** published his 1910 case study of her called *Ames en prison*, which translates as "Imprisoned Souls.")

Ameris presents the sister's efforts to get through to Marie in serio-comic mode, respectful of Marie's disabilities and personality but not afraid of the many humorous ways in which trying to teach someone who can neither hear nor see can go wrong. The classical score follows suit, underlining the comedy in the constant repetition of everyday tasks. As is appropriate for these scenes, there's not a lot of dialog.

Like Helen Keller's famous water-pump breakthrough — as seen in *The Miracle Worker*, with **Anne Bancroft** playing the teacher — there are a few pivotal moments in Heurtin's education, such as when she first grasps the concept of sign language and when she finally realizes Marguerite really just wants to help her. Refreshingly, Ameris, who co-wrote the film with his regular collaborator, Belgian screenwriter **Philippe Blasband**, avoid a big triumphant scene in which the cleanly scrubbed former wild girl is presented to the other nuns at the refectory. Instead, they opt for a wonderfully intimate scene with Marie, in her freshly pressed, powder-blue uniform, as she's led outside, where it's snowing. Though she can't see, she can clearly feel the descending snowflakes on her skin, and their slow and silent falling offer a perfect metaphor for the beauty of logic and order that has started to replace Marie's hysterical and uncontrollable behavior. A potentially maudlin scene in which Marie's parents come to visit their girl is likewise handled beautifully, as Ameris avoids facile sentiments without eschewing a sense of accomplishment and even catharsis.

The film's second half contains several scenes that feel a bit repetitive and since the first major stumbling block has been overcome, the motor of the drama becomes more diffuse. One source of drama is sister Marguerite's health, which causes her absence at the convent — and drives Marie crazy, since no one has explained Marguerite's departure and the deaf-and-blind girl feels she can't cope without the presence of her teacher, who's also become her constant (if entirely platonic) companion.

This in turn leads to a discussion of mortality between Marie and the returned Marguerite that's touching and insightful for both the two women and for the audience, as it brings the until-then somewhat fuzzy characters further into focus. As usual, Carre fully inhabits her character, and newcomer Rivoire, who's actually deaf but not blind, impresses as the character of the title.

Costume design underlines the rigidity and egalitarian nature of the sisters and their charges, which strikingly contrasts with production design and cinematography that emphasizes the beauty and unruliness of nature.



# Marie's Story

10 August, 2014 | By Dan Fainaru



**Dir/scr: Jean-Pierre Ameris. France. 2014. 95mins**

Jean-Pierre Ameris' new film reads pretty much like a softer, religious version of *The Miracle Worker* and while never attempting to match Arthur Penn's tense dramatic punch, **he prefers a far more pastoral, less methodical approach, relying to a great extent on the performances of Isabelle Carré and young newcomer Ariana Rivoire, whom he found in an institute for the deaf, where she was still enrolled while shooting the film.**

***Bound to be tagged an inspirational tale of unfaltering faith and a serious candidate for every Ecumenical prize on sight***

*Marie's Story* (Marie Heurtin) is inspired as much by the story of Marie Heurtin, a 10 year-old deaf, mute and blind girl educated at the Larnay Institute near Poitiers, in France, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as by the similar, but far better



known case, of Helen Keller,

The Larnay Institute, at that time a religious convent run by "The Sisters of Wisdom" nuns, was dedicated to the education of deaf and mute children, but when Heurtin's parents brought their daughter Marie (Rivoire) in she was first turned down since her blindness prevented the classic use of sign language and there seemed to be no other apparent way for the nuns to communicate with her.

Thanks to the insistence of Sister Marguerite (Isabelle Carre), who volunteered to dedicate herself exclusively to the girl, and the faith she deployed despite the repeated failures of all her early efforts to break through the barriers separating them, Marie was not only accepted but, in the course of time and after many setbacks, became fully conversant in sign language, mastered the Braille alphabet, learned to use a typewriter, to play dominoes, to sew, knit and eventually grow into a self-sufficient young woman.

Though a graphic portrait of the method used by Sister Marguerite was published over a hundred years ago by Louis Arnould in a book entitled *Soul In Prison*, Ameris prefers to dwell in detail only on a single significant stage in the process, teaching her pupil to use sign language. For the rest, the script prefers to imply that it is only through painstaking patience, utter devotion and an enormous amount of faith, that Sister Marguerite, despite the declining state of her own health, finally broke through the wall of silence separating Marie from the rest of the world.

The first part looks almost irritatingly familiar in its account of miracles that remain a bit too intangible for comfort, but once these miracles are satisfactorily established, Ameris seems to be far more comfortable dealing with Marie's growing attachment for her tutor, the crisis erupting when Sister Marguerite is sent up for a cure in the mountains without Marie being told about it and in the later stages when the girl has to face and accept the concept of death.

Carre - who has acted for Ameris before - and Rivoire, who bravely holds her own against her experienced partner, finally get a chance to shine in the film's later stages after giving up their wrestling contests, which fill up many of the film's early scenes.

Bound to be tagged an inspirational tale of unfaltering faith and a serious candidate for every Ecumenical prize



on sight, there is only one serious question which remains unanswered after the final credits: what is the meaning of the Jewish folk music played at the end over a visit to a Catholic cemetery. Is this a mystic message that needs to be unraveled?