

Maggie Betts: The “Novitiate” Interview

By Kam Williams
For The Skanner News

Maggie Betts is a native New Yorker and graduate of Princeton University. In 2011, she completed her first documentary, “The Carrier,” chronicling the plight of an HIV+ pregnant woman in rural Zambia. After premiering at the Tribeca Film Festival, the film went on to play in numerous other locales on the festival circuit.

In 2014, Maggie finished her first short film, Engram, about the romantic nature of memory. Here, she talks about writing and directing “Novitiate,” which marks her feature-length narrative debut.

Kam Williams: Hi Maggie. I’m honored to have this opportunity to speak with you.

Maggie Betts: Oh, thank you so much for wanting to speak with me, Kam. Actually, it’s a pleasure.

KW: The movie’s amazing. And congratulations on winning the breakthrough director award at Sundance.

MB: Thank you. Thanks a lot.

KW: What inspired you to write “Novitiate”? After all, it takes place before you were even born, in the ‘60s, during a period of upheaval in Catholicism because of the modernizing changes in the church as a result of the Second Ecumenical Council, bet-

ter known as Vatican II.

MB: It was all sort of accidental. About six years ago, I picked up this biography of Mother Teresa in an airport, just because I was curious about her. The book was really just a collection of letters she had written over the course of her life. The book is beautiful.

KW: They made it into a movie called “The Letters.”

MB: I haven’t seen the movie yet, but I heard it’s great. All the letters were focused on her love relationship with God. It was intense, powerful and, at times, completely debilitating, and at other times, completely uplifting. The book was truly a love story. I had never really conceptualized the fact that someone could have an intense and complicated love relationship with God. And I hadn’t even known that nuns were married to God. So, just that one concept, which really moved me, inspired me to do lots and lots of research. I started reading memoirs by ex-nuns.

KW: I would guess they’re pretty rare.

MB: No, there are way more than you would ever imagine. Most of the more popular ones were coming-of-age memoirs written by women who left right around the time of Vatican II. Initially, I was just curious about the lives of nuns, so I bought all these books. But then Vatican II emerged as an



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inescapable element of that history and that story, sort of like the result of the domino effect of the research.

KW: Well, the film certainly feels very authentic, as it offers such a rich and revealing look into this Sister Cathleen’s life. It made me think it might be based on a real-life person.

MB: It took all the common elements out of 30 or 40 biographies. The nuns’ individual stories are very different, yet there are certain themes that run throughout. So, I kinda compiled all these memoirs and created my own story from their common experiences by exploring the common

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and none has managed to hold down a steady job.

Adam’s worried wife (Haley Bennett) starts pressuring him to get help because he not only dropped their newborn baby inexplicably, but he’s constantly looking for IEDs whenever they drive down the street, as if he’s still in Iraq. Trouble is, there’s a nine-month waiting list to see a shrink at the VA hospital, and he’s being discouraged from seeking treatment by a callous colonel (Jake Weber) suggesting that all he needs to do is toughen up a little.

Then, there’s Solo (Beulah Koale), a Samoan with amnesia whose fed up wife (Keisha Castle-Hughes) is thinking

of leaving him, despite being pregnant. Another buddy, Will (Joe Cole), was dumped by his fiancée (Erin Darke) before he even arrived home. And so forth.

The plot soon thickens, with things getting worse before they get better. But at least this loyal band of brothers can count on each other, if not the VA or their loved ones for support. A heartbreaking tale that’s difficult to swallow since its based purely on the hard, cold truth.

A sobering account of our wounded warriors’ tragic misfortunes.

Excellent ★★½

Rated R for sexuality, drug use, graphic violence, brief nudity and pervasive profanity
In English and Samoan with subtitles

Running time: 108 minutes

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