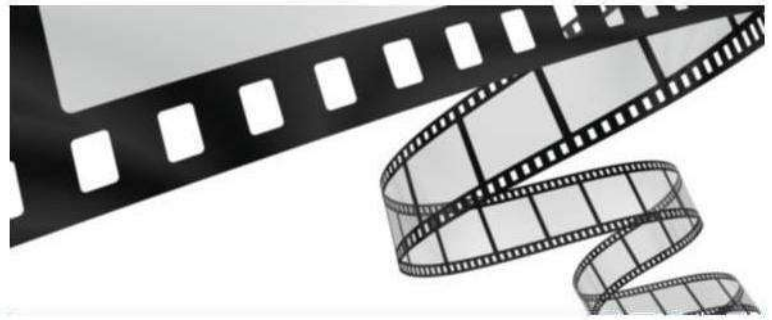


# CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

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## The Beguiled (2017)

USA 94 mins

**Director:** Sofia Coppola

**Screenplay:** Sofia Coppola, based on the novel by Thomas Cullinan

**Cast:** Nicole Kidman, Colin Farrell, Kirsten Dunst, Elle Fanning, Oona Laurence, Angourie Rice, Addison Riecke and Emma Howard.

The unexpected arrival of a wounded Union soldier at a girls school in Virginia during the American Civil War leads to jealousy and betrayal.

### **The Beguiled – Sofia Coppola piles on the passion in the deep south. Review by Peter Bradshaw.**

Sofia Coppola won the director's prize at Cannes for this hugely enjoyable melodrama that more or less allows bodices to remain unripped until an uproarious third act, when passions are declared, animals killed and acts of mutilation carried out. A handsome, badly wounded Union soldier is stranded alone in enemy terrain during the American civil war and throws himself on the mercy of a ladies' seminary. These southern belles, until now starved of male company, collectively experience a sexual nervous breakdown. The movie has delirious hints of Black Narcissus and the Diet Coke ad about office workers admiring a sweaty worker slaking his thirst.

As screenwriter, Coppola worked from the original novel by Thomas P Cullinan and the 1971 Don Siegel movie version starring Clint Eastwood. Yet Coppola tells her own version with gusto and wit, coolly leaving it to us to understand how the title applies to different characters as the tale wears on. And she takes a very different line from Siegel's film, more female-centric yet also more sympathetic to the male lead.

In 1971, Siegel fashioned something more like exploitation horror with Eastwood presented as an explicitly dangerous, sexually threatening figure, in line with roles such as Dirty Harry. Siegel's film had think-bubble voiceovers reminiscent of Airplane!, creepy flashbacks indicating that the male lead is lying about his war service, some very gamey material about incest, three-way sex fantasies and paedophilia. Coppola gives all that a swerve. Her own raciness is mostly below the surface – but close to it.

Colin Farrell plays Cpl John McBurney, and his performance is rather more interesting than Eastwood's: more human, more vulnerable. He is no angel, an Irish soldier of fortune who joined the Union ranks for cash; now a deserter, he is terrified of being caught and shot by either side. He has, therefore, been stripped of the tribal or ideological baggage that might lead an audience to take his side against the tense ladies who take him in. And the movie is at pains to stress that their slaves have already "fled", so they themselves do not appear tainted. Siegel had a slave in his account; the story Coppola tells is different, but not necessarily whitewashed. It's an approach that avoids the earlier film's extravagant, unironic N-word abuse and fetishisation.

McBurney is discovered in a neighbouring woodland by 11-year-old Miss Amy (a smart performance from Oona Laurence), and he persuades her to take him to the school. There, the principal Martha (Nicole Kidman) and her subordinate Edwina (Kirsten Dunst) are dismayed but also moved by his plight, by the opportunity fate has offered to demonstrate Christian charity, and by the realistic conviction that the war is all but over anyway.

Coppola's female leads are driven much more by rational compassion than in Siegel's racy nightmare. They are not simply the playthings of repressed and contorted desire.

And, of course, the conventional danger of wartime is elided with the intimate danger of a young man in his prime among women, but fascinatingly and almost romantically wounded and at their mercy, where in any other situation they might suppose themselves to be at his. They are not used to menfolk. (The pronoun *il* is primly excluded from their lessons in conjugating French verbs.) Certainly, McBurney seems to attract the poutingly precocious 18-year-old Alicia, played by Elle Fanning.

So with the pupils' bewildered and yet excited approval, Martha resolves not to turn McBurney over to the Confederate troops, but nurse him back to health, allowing him to work in the garden, where he digs the flowerbeds, prunes the roses, works up a sweat and slyly catches the eye of many of his new admirers. Caddish and cunning, McBurney inevitably starts trifling with the attentions of different young women. It is a recipe for disaster. There is tremendous entertainment value in the dinners and musical evenings that the women lay on for their wolfish guest. Kidman's delivery of the line, "Would you cay-uh for a digestif, corporal?" is very entertaining.

We get a glorious staircase scene, with someone actually falling down two separate flights. We get a necklace wrenched from a female neck, so that the beads roll calamitously all over the floor. We even have a gunshot that brings a chandelier crashing to the floor, an event that doesn't need any metaphorical interpretation to make it sensational. *The Beguiled* is a tremendously watchable movie, with its teasing flecks of noir and black comedy.

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### **Our previous presentation:**

Based on the feedback slips returned on the night, you rated **L'Amant Double**, screened on January 29, with an overall score of 51.4%. Please visit the current season page at <http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk> to read all the feedback comments.

You can still provide feedback on this, or any other film, by visiting the Discussions page (<http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk/discussion/>).

### **Our next presentation:**

**Loveless** will be shown on Tuesday, 26 February, starting at 8:00pm.