



# Nuns: A History of Convent Life

*Silvia Evangelisti*

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## **Nuns: A History of Convent Life** 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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