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Portrayals of Jesuits in Popular Culture

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Portrayals of Jesuits in Popular Culture

Stories elsewhere in this issue of *Conversations* detail the political and cultural forces that led to the suppression of the Society of Jesus in the mid 1700s. These years generated a lot of stories that fed the popular imagination. In South America, the government agents who confiscated Jesuit property hoped to get their hands on the legendary hoards of Jesuit gold locked in the vaults of their houses. The fact that they found none simply confirmed how sneaky those Jesuits were, hiding their treasures beyond finding. Treasure maps came to be printed for the gullible: Buy this map and you will get rich. Then there was rumor of a Jesuit letter that disputed King Charles III's legitimacy, which infuriated the king and fueled his purpose against the Society. No such letter has ever been found.

Stories led to literature like Voltaire's *Candide*, which takes place partly in the Jesuit reductions of South America; *Candide*'s beloved Cunegonde has an unnamed brother who was a leading Jesuit there. In Eugène Sue's notorious *The Wandering Jew* from

1844, the Jesuits d'Aigrigny and Rodin scheme to take possession of a family's fortune while Gabriel, a family member who was a Jesuit for a while, shows "the fatal stamp of that enervating subjection, that moral emasculation with which the victims of the Company of Jesus are always branded, when they are not fortunately delivered in time from their homicidal influence." Two centuries later, Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov* presents its own unflattering Jesuit characters.

Jesuit characters still appear in print and film. A southern publisher still puts out anti-Jesuit works in books and comics. More positively, last summer Judith Rock's fourth novel appeared featuring Charles du Luc, a Jesuit scholastic solving crimes in Paris in the late 1600s. And the trend is far from over: coming soon to a theater near you, Laurie Ann Britt-Smith notes in the next article, are two new films with Jesuit characters, *The Jesuit* and *Silence*. And in the subsequent article, Ernest Fontana studies a prominent Jesuit character in Italian literature (*The Leopard*).

Jesuits in Film Pioneers, Musketeers, Exorcists

By Laurie Ann Britt-Smith

Afascination with the ideals and history of the Jesuit order has seeped into popular culture though all types of media, but particularly film. Type the word *Jesuit* into the search window of the Internet Movie Database and this coming attraction pops up: *The Jesuit* (2014) "A man nicknamed 'the Jesuit' is imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. When his wife is murdered and his son kidnapped to Mexico, he devises an elaborate and dangerous plan to rescue his son and avenge the murder." This kind of vigilante story is ubiquitous in the crime/thriller category,

but one has to wonder at this attempt to goose audience interest. Why create a character with that name or try to market a picture with that title? There is some kind of pop culture shorthand at work that connects the concept of *Jesuit* to the willingness to go to an extreme in the cause of correcting a serious injustice. Whatever the genre, this is not the only incident of this type of characterization. Movies, for better or worse, are primary texts in American culture and have tremendous influence in establishing definitions, prejudices, and personal values. For those unfamiliar