



Abstinence Cinema: Virginity and the Rhetoric of Sexual Purity in Contemporary Film

By Casey Ryan Kelly

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From the perspective of cultural conservatives, Hollywood movies are cesspools of vice, exposing impressionable viewers to pernicious sexually-permissive messages. Offering a groundbreaking study of Hollywood films produced since 2000, *Abstinence Cinema* comes to a very different conclusion, finding echoes of the evangelical movement's abstinence-only rhetoric in everything from *Easy A* to *Taken*.

Casey Ryan Kelly tracks the surprising sex-negative turn that Hollywood films have taken, associating premarital sex with shame and degradation, while romanticizing traditional nuclear families, courtship rituals, and gender roles. As he demonstrates, these movies are particularly disempowering for young women, concocting plots in which the decision to refrain from sex until marriage is the young woman's primary source of agency and arbiter of moral worth. Locating these regressive sexual politics not only in expected sites, like the *Twilight* films, but surprising ones, like the raunchy comedies of Judd Apatow, Kelly makes a compelling case that Hollywood films have taken a significant step backward in recent years.

Abstinence Cinema offers close readings of movies from a wide spectrum of genres, and it puts these films into conversation with rhetoric that has emerged in other arenas of American culture. Challenging assumptions that we are living in a more liberated era, the book sounds a warning bell about the powerful cultural forces that seek to demonize sexuality and curtail female sexual agency.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This is a groundbreaking, fearless book, one that takes on a hitherto relatively unexplored question of Hollywood cinema and makes one think anew about the social, political, and sexual politics of contemporary mainstream movies ... Highly recommended."

(*Choice*)

"[*Abstinence Cinema*] educates audiences, particularly younger readers, parents, and scholars, on the ideological turn of rewriting purity narratives into popular culture through contemporary film."

(*Southern Communication Journal*)

"A fascinating exposé ... Students and scholars of film, gender, sexuality, and cultural studies will learn much from Kelly's well-argued text."

(*H-SAWH*)

"Smart textual analysis and informed feminist critique make *Abstinence Cinema* a welcome addition to scholarship that takes popular culture seriously for its participation in the struggles of contemporary public life."

(Bonnie J. Dow *author of Watching Women's Liberation, 1970: Feminism's Pivotal Year on the Network News*)

"Popular entertainment is an unexplored front in the ongoing culture wars over sexuality. Casey Ryan Kelly's sophisticated and lively analysis of abstinence cinema is a timely reminder of the high stakes in these debates."

(Janice M. Irvine *University of Massachusetts*)

About the Author

CASEY RYAN KELLY is an associate professor of critical communication and media studies at Butler University, in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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