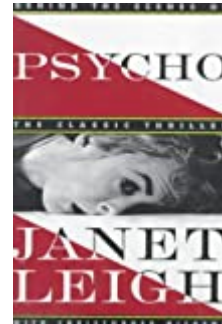


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Janet Leigh with Christopher Nickens. *Psycho: Behind the Scenes of the Classic Thriller*. New York: Harmony Books, 1995. 197 pp. \$22.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-517-70112-6.



Reviewed by Torey L. Lightcap (Oklahoma State University)

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The woman who brought Marion Crane to life—and to a brusque death—has penned the latest noteworthy installment about one of the film community's most prized possessions, *Psycho*. As a nascent author Leigh teams up with Christopher Nickens in much the same way John Madden might team up with Marv Albert: someone has got to tell what is actually happening and someone else gets to comment.

Leigh's pledge is to "set the record straight about *Psycho* by sharing unknown stories, incidents, and memories" while Nickens' concerns are on framing Leigh and the movie in historical and cultural context through separate chapters. Thus the reader is whisked from all background matter and Leigh's early career through filming, with pause for emphasis on the famous shower sequence, and on to studio release and the immeasurable effects the film had on a global scale (and that it continues to enjoy).

Chapters written by Nickens successfully assimilate a good overall picture of the movie's history and success and are generally well conceptualized. The circumstances of the past jump off the page: the Robert Bloch novel upon which *Psycho* was based was inspired, in part, by actual events in 1957; a mansion near the Kent State campus served as the prototype for Norman Bates' "house on the hill." Of course, Nickens also bills Leigh (who was in just under 40 percent of the picture) as the

best player in the production.

Most of Leigh's pre-defined efforts result in an honest, insightful work. Citations from in-depth interviews, for example, indicate her serious intentions for the project. Sometimes she even takes the position of a professor, instructing readers in the ways of the director's motifs and delivering bits of trivia that—to Hitchcock scholars, at least—seem important.

Her chatty, name-dropping tone, however, tends to both pull in and repel the reader, much as Mr. Hitchcock shot his scenes. While endlessly trying to synthesize all of her experiences, Leigh devotes a few paragraphs to the main topic, then strays off in italicized text that can be tangential at its best, wearisome at its worst. Broadly addressing her relationship to Hitchcock as professional and friendly, she never steps into feminists' readings of his films as misogynistic. He was at all times the perfect gentleman in her eyes, one whose pranks and bawdy stories must surely have been the byproduct of a hard-working genius. ("I was never sure what would be in my dressing room when I came back from lunch. It seemed to me he was experimenting with Mother's appearance, using me as the guinea pig. Some hair-raising screams emanated from behind my door when I walked in on these hideous, shriveled monstrosities sitting in my makeup chair.")

Psycho: Behind the Scenes of the Classic Thriller caters more to film historians, less to aesthetes. But serious Hitchcock scholars will not shrug off the book, geared though it is for popular consumption. Its author alone obliges a look.

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