

Spellbound by Beauty: Alfred Hitchcock and His Leading Ladies

By Donald Spoto

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“The trouble today is that we don’t torture women enough.”
—Alfred Hitchcock

It is remarkable how infrequently, over a period of more than fifty years, Alfred Hitchcock spoke about the beautiful, legendary and talented actresses he directed. And when he did, his remarks were mostly indifferent and often hostile. But his leading ladies greatly enriched his films, even as many of them achieved international stardom precisely because of their work for Hitchcock—among the dozens of women were Madeleine Carroll, Joan Fontaine, Grace Kelly and Tippi Hedren. Yet he maintained a stony, insistent silence about the quality of their performances and their contributions to his art.

Spellbound by Beauty—the final volume in master biographer Donald Spoto’s Hitchcock trilogy that began with *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock* and continued with *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock*—is the fascinating, complex and finally tragic story of the great moviemaker and his female stars, the unusual ideas of sex and romance that inform his films and the Hollywood dreams that often became nightmares.

Rich with fresh revelations based on previously undisclosed tapes, new interviews, private correspondence and personal papers made available only to the author, this thoughtful, compassionate yet explosive portrait details Hitchcock’s outbursts of cruelty, the shocking humor and the odd amalgam of adoration and contempt that time and again characterized Hitchcock’s obsessive relationships with women—and that also, paradoxically, fed his genius.


He insisted, for example, that Madeleine Carroll submit herself to painful physical demands during the making of *The 39 Steps*. He harbored a poignantly unrequited love for Ingrid Bergman. He meticulously and deliberately constructed Grace Kelly’s image. Finally, he stalked, harassed and abused Tippi Hedren. His treatment of his daughter, Pat, was certainly unusual, while his strange marriage to his sometime collaborator Alma Reville was a union that (according to Hitchcock himself) was forever chaste after one incident.

Spellbound by Beauty offers important insights into the life of a brilliant,

powerful, eccentric and tortured artist, and it corrects a major gap in movie history by paying tribute at last to those extraordinarily talented actresses who gave so much to his films.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Spellbound by Beauty: Alfred Hitchcock and His Leading Ladies By Donald Spoto Bibliography

- Rank: #854609 in eBooks
- Published on: 2008-10-23
- Released on: 2008-10-28

- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. In this enthralling third installment of his Hitchcock trilogy (after *The Dark Side of Genius* and *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock*), Spoto paints a portrait of a man as talented as he was troubled. Spoto examines each film in terms of its leading lady, but focuses especially on the three cool blondes with whom Hitchcock was famously obsessed: Ingrid Bergman (*Spellbound*, *Notorious* and *Under Capricorn*), Grace Kelly (*Dial M for Murder*, *Rear Window* and *To Catch a Thief*) and Tippi Hedren (*The Birds* and *Marnie*). While Bergman never returned Hitchcock's romantic advances, the pair struck up a lasting friendship. With Kelly, Hitchcock felt he had molded the young actress into his ideal woman with just the right mix of elegance and sexuality. When Kelly left Hollywood, Hitchcock sought a replacement and found newcomer Tippi Hedren, whom he both fawned over and humiliated during their two films together. Relying on hours of personal interviews with both Hitchcock and his various players, Spoto shines an admiring yet unflinching light on one of the most celebrated directors in history. (Nov.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Spoto's third book about Hitchcock includes material he "felt obliged to withhold" from his widely praised biography, *The Dark Side of Genius* (1983), in deference to sources who told stories they didn't want repeated while they were alive. It focuses on Hitchcock's sometimes troubled, sometimes perverse, always manipulative relationships with his leading ladies. Some of its revelations are well-known among cinephiles, including Hitch's fetish for blonds—so strong that even blond actresses had to have their hair lightened to fit the director's ideal—and his attempts to play Svengali to young, beautiful blonds, especially Grace Kelly and Tippi Hedren, and subsequent frustration when they incompletely submitted to him. But Spoto also brings to light aspects of Hitchcock's life and personality unsuspected and, some of it, unprintable in his lifetime, including overt and subtle sexual harassment dating as far back as Hitchcock's earliest films, during the production of which he told dirty jokes and pretended to expose himself to actresses to provoke (and film) their shocked reactions. According to Spoto, Hitchcock's perversity increased as he grew older, culminating in his twisted, tragicomic relationship with Hedren. The chapters on his behavior during the filming of *The Birds* and *Marnie* are riveting and deeply troubling, revealing an artist at once losing his touch and losing touch with reality. --Jack Helbig

Review

"Mr. Spoto has enjoyed extraordinary access to Hitchcock's players over a long period of time, and he has assembled a cavalcade of chatty firsthand impressions."

—*The New York Times*

"What was behind [Hitchcock's] talent for turning perverse thematic elements such as voyeurism, bondage and murder fantasies into mainstream entertainment? According to *Spellbound by Beauty*...it was partly derived from a sexually repressed outcast's Svengali-like compulsion to manipulate and mistreat a long line of unattainable icy blondes."

—*USA Today*

"Fascinating . . . probes an even darker side of Hitchcock."

—*Newsday*

"[Spoto] informs *Spellbound by Beauty* with his profound knowledge of his subject, years of sound reporting, highly polished prose, and sensible analysis."

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

"Expert insights into Hitchcock's films."

—*Oregonian* (Portland)

"You will never look at a Hitchcock movie the same."

—*Tampa Tribune*

"[F]ocuses on Hitchcock's sometimes troubled, sometimes perverse, always manipulative relationships with his leading ladies....The chapters on his behavior during the filming of *The Birds* and *Marnie* are riveting and deeply troubling, revealing an artist at once losing his touch and losing touch with reality."

—*Booklist*, starred review

Praise for Donald Spoto

THE ART OF ALFRED HITCHCOCK

"I am gratified by what Donald Spoto says about my work, and I am impressed by the wit and grace of his writing."

—Alfred Hitchcock

"Exceptionally thoughtful. Spoto's total familiarity with the films is manifest throughout. He ably demonstrates that Hitchcock was not only a master of suspense but an artist of the first rank as ...

Users Review

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Dan Williams:

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