

HOAX MOVIE, SLEEPERS, DEFAMES CATHOLIC SCHOOL AND PRIEST

The movie *Sleepers*, based on the book by Lorenzo Carcaterra, opened on October 18 to a protest by the Catholic League. The Propaganda Films movie (a Warner Brothers company) purports to be a true story about a New York Catholic school, Sacred Heart. However, virtually every independent person who has investigated the story has determined that the book and the movie are fictitious. The movie stars Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman, Kevin Bacon and Brad Pitt.

The Catholic League is incensed because the movie defames a Catholic school and a Catholic priest. *Sleepers* alleges that four youths from Sacred Heart, an elementary school in New York's Hell's Kitchen, were sent to a reformatory school in the 1960s after a street prank injured an old man. It was in an upstate New York reform school that the boys were sexually assaulted by guards.

In the 1980s, two of the boys, now hit men, kill one of the guards in an act of revenge. One of the other two boys is an Assistant District Attorney who arranges to take the case so he can sabotage it, and the other is author Carcaterra who works at the *New York Daily News*. Carcaterra supposedly gets a priest from Sacred Heart to perjure himself before a jury by claiming that the two killers were with him at a basketball game the night of the murder.

The problem with this is that none of it is true. Attorneys William Callahan and Thomas Harvey have thoroughly investigated this matter and have found it baseless. Father Kevin J. Nelan, the pastor of Sacred Heart, and Father John P. Duffell, who worked at Sacred Heart at the time of the alleged crime, have both said it isn't true.

The truth is that the crime never happened, Carcaterra and the others were never sent to a reform school, and no priest ever perjured himself. School records show that Carcaterra missed no more than 20 days of school in all his years at Sacred Heart, making preposterous the claim that he spent time in reform school. It is also interesting that in Carcaterra's earlier book about his life, *A Safe Place*, he never mentions this alleged "true story."

Moreover, the Manhattan DA's office insists that no such incident ever took place and the New York Division for Youth denies that such a brutal reformatory ever existed. And no one from the neighborhood who still lives there ever recalls such a story.

Did Carcaterra make up his story from whole cloth? No, it appears that the book and movie are a composite drawn from many sources, among which is the book *The Westies*, a story about a notorious Irish gang from Hell's Kitchen. By cutting and splicing, Carcaterra mended his tale together, selling it as though it were the real thing.

On October 16, 1995, Catholic League president William Donohue wrote to Peter Gethers, the editor of *Sleepers* at Ballantine Books (a division of Random House), stating that "this matter can be resolved rather quickly, providing you give a sworn affidavit stating that your account is true, and providing you are willing to make public the names of the priest and the Assistant District Attorney." No reply was forthcoming and Gethers never responded to Donohue's later request for a meeting to discuss the authenticity of the book.

The official position of the movie studio is that the names and locations of the true story have been altered. Nonetheless, the movie opens with the statement, "This is a true story." Screenwriter and director Barry Levinson has said that "Any one of the major elements could have happened. What is the need to know its exact authenticity?" But when a

Catholic school and a Catholic priest are negatively portrayed—and then passed on as though it were true—the public has a right to know the “exact authenticity” of the claims.

Donohue and Callahan met in 1995 with a lawyer from the New York State Attorney General’s office to discuss *Sleepers*. Though sympathetic, the lawyer did not believe that there was much that could be done legally.

Had the book been published as a novel, there would be no controversy. Even the *New York Times* has been suspicious, placing the book on its best-seller list by adding “The true story, the narrator **claims**, of four boys in a reformatory and the revenge they later take” (emphasis added). News reports by the *Times* also express suspicion about the book.

Crime authors have been particularly angry with author Carcaterra. Jack Olsen, the “Dean of True Crime,” has said that the book is a fraud and should be republished as a novel. Olsen was one of seven crime authors who signed a letter denouncing *Sleepers* as “fictitious.”

Book reviewers have also been wary. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of the *New York Times* described portions of the book as “inauthentic,” “disturbingly inconsistent,” “indistinct,” and “impossibly imprecise.” *Time* said “Not since Joe McGinnis began dreaming up things that Senator Kennedy might have thought...has there been such an elastic and accommodating definition of nonfiction as Carcaterra’s.” He labeled the book “preposterous” and riddled with “internal contradictions.”

The *Washington Post* charged that Carcaterra is “trying to have it both ways—the urgency of reality plus the freedom of fiction.” Cox News Service headlined its review, “*Sleepers*’ So Phony It Ought To Be A Crime.” *Newsday* offered the following: “This is the stuff of countless entertaining Hollywood movies and paperback novels. Unfortunately, Carcaterra convinced himself he could get away with the ruse.”

By the time this edition of *Catalyst* is printed, the Catholic League will have held a press conference to discuss the movie. We will report on subsequent events in the December *Catalyst*. In the meantime, please send Warner Brothers the enclosed postcard.