



# The Chicago International Film Festival

Cinema/Chicago and the Chicago International Film Festival

Education Outreach Program Screening: *Marie's Story*

Director: Jean-Pierre Améris

94 minutes

Please use this study guide to lead your students in preparation and post-screening discussion. Following the film, students are required to respond to the screening with a one-page essay. Essays must be sent to Cinema/Chicago in order to be invited to subsequent film screenings.

## **Synopsis**

*Marie's Story* tells the true tale of Marie Heurtins, born deaf and blind, who, with the help of compassionate nun Marguerite, shows the world what she is capable of learning. Marie Heurtins was born in France at the turn of the 19th Century. At the age of 14, Marie's parents sent her to a school for deaf girls. At first, the nuns who manage the school refused Marie, not knowing how to help someone who is both deaf and blind. But Sister Marguerite, who is terminally ill, connects with Marie. Moved by her understanding of the confinement Marie's disability forces her to live in, Marguerite convinces the other nuns to allow Marie to come to the school, and embarks on the courageous journey of teaching her.

## **Deaf-Blindness**

The commonly-accepted term for Marie's condition is deaf-blindness. This term describes someone who, like Marie, is both deaf and blind. Deaf-blindness removes one's ability to both hear and see, consequently making it potentially difficult to communicate, learn, and even understand the world around them unless they have the proper support system and help. The only senses deaf-blind people have to perceive their surroundings are their sense of taste, smell, and touch.

## **Disability Rights**

Because deaf-blindness is considered a sensory impairment, Marie and others like her would have been affected by laws and acts targeting all disabled people. Like Marie's father suggests in the film, the only place thought to be acceptable for a disabled person was an asylum. They were often subjected to experimental medical treatments intended to cure them of their naturally born disabilities. When they were able to escape institutionalization they were ostracized by society; excluded from professional fields, denied an education, and even disallowed from immigrating to the US. Laws were even passed in the US to prevent disabled people from marrying and having children.

It wasn't until after World War I that disabled individuals received legal protections and rights. Many soldiers fighting in the war were injured and returned home with physical and mental disabilities. This

group of disabled individuals caused several laws to be passed granting rights to the handicapped for the first time. First, disabled veterans of war were granted the right to be rehabilitated for the work force. In the 1920's, these rights were extended to all disabled citizens, not just those returning from war. Despite the leap for disabled individuals, discrimination was still rampant. In 1927, twenty-seven states in the US had sterilization programs for disabled people. World War II would again stir up controversy for disability rights, as the Nazi Party mercilessly included disabled German citizens in the Holocaust. It wasn't until the 1940's that disability legislation really began to advance. In 1946 federal grants were offered to states to construct rehabilitation centers and health facilities for the disabled. Not long after, the horrific treatment of disabled individuals at mental institutions was revealed and a process of deinstitutionalization of the disabled began. Advances in legal protections and rights would continue throughout the decades to come.

Marie likely passed away long before any of these advances took place. The world she lived in, already limited by her sensory impairment, would have been even bleaker because of the treatment of disabled individuals in the 19th and 20th centuries.

### **Study Ideas/Questions**

1. What was your impression of Marie in the beginning of the film? How did your opinion of her change throughout the course of the film?
2. When Sister Marguerite first decides to try to teach Marie, what did you think? Do you see this mission as honorable? Useless? Impossible?
3. Given the senses Marie relies on for interpreting the world around her, why do you think she preferred the knife to any other object? What about the knife makes it different from other toys?
4. Think about how Marie communicates without her sense of sight and hearing. Why does she touch the faces of people she meets? How else does she utilize her other senses to communicate?
5. Marguerite writes in her journal about Marie living in total darkness and silence, and being isolated from the rest of the world. How is Marie's isolation changed by her learning how to communicate, and about the world around her?
6. After Marie learns how to sign her first word and what it means, she begins quickly learning other words and what they are. Why is the first word so challenging for Marie, and all of the following words easier?
7. Marie's disability creates many challenges she must learn to overcome. What other personal challenges do people face? What challenges do you see in your own life, and how do you plan to overcome them?
8. Many disadvantaged groups have had to fight for their rights throughout the course of history. Some examples include the African American Civil Rights Movement, Women's Rights Movement, and the more recent Gay Rights Movement, to name a few. Think about other rights movements

and choose the movement that is most important/interesting to you. Write an essay on what makes that movement stand out. What were its biggest challenges? What were the groundbreaking moments or events? Was there a certain activist that stands out to you, or that you identify with? Why do you think it is important for that particular group to have rights?

**Useful links/resources**

[\*\*Civil Rights Movement\*\*](#)

[\*\*Women's Rights Movement\*\*](#)

[\*\*Disability Rights Movement\*\*](#)

[\*\*Labor Movement\*\*](#)

[\*\*Gay Rights Movement\*\*](#)

[\*\*Child Labor Movement\*\*](#)

[\*\*Abolitionist Movement\*\*](#)

[\*\*Disability Rights\*\*](#)

[\*\*Deaf-Blindness\*\*](#)

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**Adobe Youth Voices** helps students/teachers get a film club started at their school to encourage students to foster their creativity, practice their storytelling techniques, and even influence change through experimenting with society's most powerful medium. Find out more: [youthvoices.adobe.com](http://youthvoices.adobe.com)