



STELLA MARIS

Content warning: discussion of trauma, abuse, alcoholism and suicide.

2018 marks the 123rd year that the public has been able to enjoy motion pictures. It's also the 100th anniversary of a film that passed the Bechdel test in 1918: *Stella Maris*, starring Toronto's Mary Pickford. It was a frank depiction of trauma associated with abuse, well before the formal acknowledgement of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Pickford herself was a formidable Hollywood figure who actively fought for control over her work. She released *Stella Maris* under her own production company. Her chosen screenwriter was Frances Marion, a well-respected writer who had served as a war correspondent during World War I.

In *Stella Maris*, Pickford plays the eponymous Stella. She is unable to walk, and her family lavishes gifts on her and aggressively shields her from the outside world. Pickford also portrays Unity Blake, an orphan who has never been shown any compassion and is visibly neglected. Stella is Pickford as cinema audiences preferred her: sweetness and light. Unity is Pickford as a gifted actress, tackling a challenging role.

The sole male character, John (Conway Tearle), is Stella's frequent visitor. He has recently separated from his violent, alcoholic wife, Louisa (Marcia Manon). Unity has also been abused, and almost beaten to death, by Louisa.

Both John and Unity have deep trauma from the abuse they

have experienced. It is not treated as a convenient plot device, but as something that deeply affects the way the characters interact. In one instance, Unity panics and expects to be hit when she breaks a vase. All three of the major characters consider suicide. The film does not just allude to it; it is said outright. Unity eventually faces Louisa, shoots her and then kills herself.

Pickford never drew a parallel between *Stella Maris* and her own experiences. However, in 1917 and 1918, she was trying to escape from her first marriage. In her autobiography, she noted that she would have rather died than return to her husband, who was an alcoholic, resented her success and was reportedly abusive, much like the character of Louisa.

Stella Maris is not above criticism. Unity's murder of Louisa is interpreted as revenge against her abuser by the authorities and as a sacrifice by Stella and John, but the film could have further explored the complex implications of the act. There also isn't a single person of colour in the cast. In addition, Stella's disability is seen as something to be pitied. She is literally hidden and deprived of all agency until she is cured. *Stella Maris* is problematic and groundbreaking at the same time.

The public in 1918 received *Stella Maris* well, despite the film's shooting scene, which was censored in some markets. It is still considered one of Pickford's strongest works, and is available in the public domain for viewing. Even after a century, and drastic advances in filmmaking, its frank and open depictions of the effects of trauma endure. **DENISE REICH**