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Defending the Young and the Innocent

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Rags to Riches With Pickford

When [Mary Pickford](#) donated her personal collection of films to the Library of Congress in 1946, she did so with the provision that they not be screened publicly. “America’s Sweetheart,” as an exhibitor proclaimed her early in her extraordinary career, had been out of the spotlight for over a decade, and she was afraid that postwar America, whose taste in sweethearts ran more toward sex bombs like Lana Turner and Rita Hayworth, would laugh at the work that once made her the best-known woman on the planet.

She had reason to feel self-protective. A few years later Billy Wilder approached her about playing a grotesquely aged, sexually predatory former silent film star in “Sunset Blvd.” (all of 50 years old, in Wilder’s cruel screenplay). When she turned him down, the role of Norma Desmond went to one of Pickford’s few rivals for popularity in the 1920s, Gloria Swanson (while Norma herself was a gothic caricature of a third box office queen of the ’20s, Norma Talmadge). It had taken only 20 years for the acting styles of the silent screen to turn into camp, while the sweetness and optimism of the quintessential Pickford character had come to seem as quaint as corsets and shirtwaists.

Fortunately the executors of the Pickford estate have not enforced those restrictions, and thanks to the efforts of the [Mary Pickford Foundation](#), the Library of Congress, the Academy Film Archive and other archives and private donors, a substantial proportion of Pickford’s work has been preserved. [Milestone Film and Video](#) has released several Pickford features on DVD, and with “Rags and Riches: The Mary Pickford Collection,” the company has brought Little Mary to Blu-ray.

The new three-disc set features new high-resolution transfers of three of Pickford’s most popular features, “[The Poor Little Rich Girl](#)” (1917), “[The Hoodlum](#)” (1919) and “[Sparrows](#)” (1926), all with orchestral accompaniment. There’s also extensive supplementary material that includes the 1910 “[Ramona](#),” an excellent example of the 129 short films that she made with D. W. Griffith, who had hired her as a 16-year-old out-of-work Broadway actress.

As Griffith led screen acting away from the broad theatrical standards of the era and toward a more intimate, naturalistic and nuanced style suited to the close perspective of the camera, Pickford

developed a warmth and limpidity of her own. In the process she became, by some definitions, the first genuine movie star, with a following so large and enthusiastic (before film actors were even identified by name) that, when she left Griffith in 1913, she was able to dictate her own terms to the studios that employed her. By 1916 she had started her own production company, the first star to do so, and by 1919 she joined Griffith, Charles Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks (her future husband) to form her own studio, United Artists.

Pickford's uncanny business acumen stood in stark opposition to her screen image. With her cascading rolls of golden curls, expressive blue eyes and tiny frame (five feet and 105 pounds, or so the fan magazines said), she projected a childlike innocence and frailty (though with a strong mischievous streak), and as soon as she achieved her artistic independence she came to specialize in playing little girls and young teenagers. In "The Poor Little Rich Girl," directed with his usual rich atmospherics by the pioneer filmmaker Maurice Tourneur, a 24-year-old Pickford plays the 11-year-old daughter of a neglectful Wall Street financier; in Sidney A. Franklin's social drama "The Hoodlum" she's a spoiled teenager who moves with her social reformer father from Fifth Avenue to a multiethnic Lower East Side; in William Beaudine's "Sparrows," the latest film in this collection and the last in which she played an adolescent, Pickford is ineffably moving as Molly, the oldest girl (and self-appointed protector) of a group of orphans being held as slaves in a "child farm" deep in a Southern swamp.

Arguably Pickford's masterpiece, "Sparrows" is a radiant example of the timelessness and clarity of feeling that silent film could achieve. Made with an awareness of the formal developments of the contemporary German cinema (it was Pickford who brought Ernst Lubitsch to Hollywood, to direct her in the 1923 "Rosita"), the film seems like a lost tale from the Brothers Grimm, immersed in primal fears.

As Molly leads the children away from the ogrelike overseer (Gustav von Seyffertitz), across the quicksand and through the Expressionist swamp (a sequence beautifully detailed by Beaudine, and lighted by cinematographers — Charles Rosher and Karl Struss — who would shoot Murnau's "Sunrise" one year later), the film seems to burrow into the viewer's subconscious.

I feel sure that it did for Charles Laughton, whose singular masterwork "The Night of the Hunter" (1955) echoes much of the atmosphere and emotion of "Sparrows." Laughton's film features its own protector of lost children in the person of Miss Cooper, a feisty spinster who memorably describes herself as a "strong tree with branches for many birds." In effect Miss Cooper is Molly, grown older and shrewder but no less pure of heart and purpose. To play her, Laughton turned to Lillian Gish, Pickford's close friend and colleague from the Griffith days. Gish, of course, is

sublime, but what a climax to Pickford's career the part would have been, if only she'd been less afraid of those laughing audiences. (*Milestone Film and Video*, \$34.95, not rated).

Perry Mason x 6

Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason whodunits were a publishing phenomenon in the early 1930s, and Warner Brothers lost no time acquiring the movie rights, releasing "[The Case of the Howling Dog](#)" only a few months after the novel was published in 1934. The problem with the Mason books, however, is the crushing blandness of the central character, and the story hidden in "Perry Mason: The Original Warner Bros. Movies Collection," a box set of six features newly released in the Warner Archive collection, is of a studio struggling desperately to fill in the blanks.

The series began as A-level productions, with prestigious directors, large supporting casts and one of the studio's stars, Warren William, as the crime-solving lawyer. But casting William, Warner Brothers' specialist in cynical con men and sleazy professionals, as a straight-arrow champion of law and order, seemed like a waste of natural resources. In the second and best film in the series, "[The Case of the Curious Bride](#)" (1935), the director Michael Curtiz gets lots of stage business and much-needed laughs out of making Mason an ahead-of-his-time metrosexual, with a passion for gourmet cooking and fine wines. But by "[The Case of the Lucky Legs](#)" (1935), Williams's star had started to slip at Warners and so did Perry — the character inexplicably became a womanizing alcoholic.

With "[Velvet Claws](#)" the series moved to Warner's B-unit, and even an attempt to add some Nick-and-Nora sexual byplay by having Perry marry his long-suffering secretary, Della Street (the gorgeous, funny and eternally underutilized Claire Dodd), did nothing to hide an incoherent script. The series picked up a bit with "[The Case of the Black Cat](#)" (1936), in which William was replaced by another fading star of the early '30s, the slick, fast-talking Ricardo Cortez (Sam Spade in the 1931 version of "[The Maltese Falcon](#)"). But when Cortez's contract was not renewed, in the same housecleaning that swept William away, the role in "[The Case of the Stuttering Bishop](#)" (1937) passed to the perennial second lead Donald Woods — a performer who at least matched Gardner's Mason for sheer lack of color.

Warner threw in the towel then, but the films are still fun for their madly complex plots and the parade of Warner Brothers contract players passing through them — including Errol Flynn, making his inauspicious Hollywood debut in "Curious Bride" as a corpse. (*Warner Archive Collection*, \$35.98, not rated)

ALSO OUT THIS WEEK

THE DARK KNIGHT RISES The latest iteration of Batman, played by Christian Bale under the direction of Christopher Nolan, comes to the end of its three-movie life cycle. “After seven years and two films that have pushed Batman ever deeper into the dark, the director [Christopher Nolan](#) has completed his postmodern, post-Sept. 11 epic of ambivalent good versus multidimensional evil with a burst of light,” Manohla Dargis wrote in *The New York Times* [in July](#). (*Warner Home Video, Blu-ray/DVD combo \$35.99, DVD \$29.98; “The Dark Knight Trilogy,” including “Batman Begins,” “The Dark Knight” and “The Dark Knight Rises,” Blu-ray \$52.99, DVD \$38.99, PG-13*)

THE BOURNE LEGACY The 10-year-old franchise gets a fresh start in Tony Gilroy’s film, with Jeremy Renner as a new undercover operative on the run from his sinister state employers. “One of the pleasures of this series is how well its ever more kinetic visual style has served its stories,” Ms. Dargis wrote in *The Times* [in August](#). (*Universal, Blu-ray/DVD combo \$34.98, DVD \$29.98, PG-13*)

TED A 35-year-old man (Mark Wahlberg) lives with his best friend from childhood — a toy bear come to foulmouthed life. Seth MacFarlane of “Family Guy” directed. “[Mila Kunis](#) is also in the movie, but she can’t be funny because she’s a girl, and her job is to be amused, tolerant and pretty,” A. O. Scott wrote in *The Times* [in June](#). (*Universal, Blu-ray/DVD combo \$34.98, DVD \$29.98, R*)

TROUBLE WITH THE CURVE Robert Lorenz directs Clint Eastwood as an aging baseball scout who turns to his estranged daughter (Amy Adams) when his career is threatened. “The pat and occasionally preposterous story is really just a pretext, a serviceable scaffolding for a handful of expert, satisfying performances,” Mr. Scott wrote in *The Times* [in September](#). (*Warner Home Video, Blu-ray/DVD combo \$35.99, DVD \$29.98, PG-13*)

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 16, 2012

An earlier version of this article misstated the timing of the DVD release of “Total Recall.” It is scheduled to come out on Dec. 18, not this week.

