



# Possessed

*By Thomas Allen, Thomas B. Allen*

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"The Exorcist", a 1973 movie about a twelve-year-old girl possessed by the Devil, frightened people more than any horror film ever did. Many moviegoers sought therapy to rid themselves of fears they could not explain. Psychiatrists coined the term "cinematic neurosis" for patients who left the movie feeling a terrifying presence of demons. At the Washington premiere, a young woman stood outside the theater, trembling. "I come out here in the sunlight," she said, "and I see people's eyes, and they frighten me." Among the few moviegoers unmoved by the horror were two priests, Father William S. Bowdern and Father Walter Halloran, members of the Jesuit community at St. Louis University. "Billy came out shaking his head about the little girl bouncing on the bed and urinating on the crucifix," Halloran remembers. "He was kind of angry. 'There is a good message that can be given by this thing,' he said. The message was the fact that evil spirits operate in our world." Bowdern and Halloran knew that the movie was fictional veneer masking a terrible reality. Night after night in March and April 1949, Bowdern had been an exorcist, with Halloran assisting. Bowdern fervently believed that he had driven a demon from a tormented soul. The victim had been a thirteen-year-old boy strangely lured to St. Louis from a Maryland suburb of Washington. Bowdern's exorcism had been the inspiration for the movie. The true story of this possession, told in *Possessed*, is based on a diary kept by a Jesuit priest assisting Father Bowdern. The diary, the most complete account of an exorcism since the Middle Ages, is published for the first time in this revised edition of *Possessed*.

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## Editorial Review

### From Library Journal

In 1949, a teenaged boy in suburban Washington, D.C., exhibited signs of demonic possession. His desperate family moved him to a relative's home in St. Louis, where they persuaded a team of Jesuit priests to perform an exorcism (a practice unheard of at the time). William Peter Blatty noticed a news article concerning the incident, which provided him with the inspiration for his novel and screenplay *The Exorcist*. Allen, coauthor with Norman Polmar of several American histories, based his work on a secret diary of one member of the exorcism team and personal interviews with another. His account is horrific, and he will succeed in forcing even highly skeptical, worldly readers into doubting their preconceived ideas about the "medieval" notion of demonic possession. Recommended for most collections. Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 3/15/93.

- *Richard S. Watts, San Bernardino Cty. Lib., Cal.*

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### From Kirkus Reviews

The 1949 exorcism that inspired William Blatty to write *The Exorcist*, recounted in admirably restrained and documented fashion by an unlikely source: military-expert Allen (*Merchants of Treason*, 1988, etc.). Unlike Blatty's possessed teenage girl, 14-year-old Robbie Mannheim (a pseudonym) of Mt. Ranier, Maryland, doesn't swivel his head like a top or levitate. But when fruit and then a vase fly through the air in his presence, his middle-class parents call on an M.D., a psychologist, and finally a minister for help. The minister suspects a poltergeist, but when bloody scratches appear on Robbie's body, the reverend tells the family, "You have to see a Catholic priest. The Catholics know about things like this" - advice that leads the Mannheims to a local priest whose exorcism of Robbie aborts when the boy slashes him with a mattress spring. The distraught parents take their son to St. Louis, where they meet Fr. William S. Bowdern, a 52-year-old Jesuit attached to St. Louis University. It's Bowdern who conducts the successful weeks-long exorcism, involving nightly incantations by the priest and several assistants as Robbie--who claims to be possessed--spits, urinates, writhes, cackles, and manifests words in blood ("HELL"; "CHRIST") on his body until the "demon" departs shortly after Easter. To his credit, Allen reports the more sensational aspects of Robbie's ordeal with a poker face, focusing instead on the spiritual and emotional issues involved, providing brief histories of the Jesuits, poltergeists, and possession. In an afterword, he weighs--without judging--the likelihood of Robbie having been possessed, and he discusses his sources, including one eyewitness and, crucially, a hitherto unrevealed daily journal of the exorcism kept by one of Bowdern's assistants. One can't blame Blatty for sleazing up Robbie's plight, but it's good to have Allen's levelheaded account, which allows the apparent facts of this influential case to speak for their own--and compelling--selves. -- *Copyright* ©1993, *Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

### About the Author

THOMAS B. ALLEN is author or co-author of 18 books, including *Spy Book*, which was co-authored with Norman Polmar. Formerly Associate Chief of the National Geographic Society's Book Service, he is a frequent contributor to *National Geographic Magazine*. His writings range from military subjects to natural history, including *Vanishing Wildlife of North America*, published by the National Geographic Society. He is the author of *The Blue and the Gray*, a history of the Civil War published by the Geographic, and the co-author, with Norman Polmar, of *Spy Book: The Encyclopedia of Espionage and World War II: America at War 1941-1945*.

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