

# Ferrell flick takes a serious look at literature

## Stranger Than Fiction

Directed by Marc Forster  
 Starring Will Ferrell, Emma Thompson  
 and Dustin Hoffman  
 Empire Theatres  
 Now Playing

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 Arts & Entertainment Staff



Every author aims to make their characters come alive. To this end, a writer will imbue his or her cast with history, with family, with authenticity, and tie them down with tics and flaws and human pettiness. Some even jokingly admit that, sometimes, their characters can get carried away with themselves. Well, what if one actually did?

Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) is, by all accounts, an exceedingly boring character. A senior agent for the IRS, he measures his entire life with numbers (how many toothbrush strokes per tooth, how many steps per staircase, how many seconds it takes to knot a tie), which add up and make for an unexceptional and lonely life—that is, until he starts hearing the voice of a woman narrating his life, down to the last minute detail and errant thought.

The narrator comes and goes, often speaking out at embarrassing moments and articulating Harold's private longings and fantasies. Even more disturbing, he eventually overhears the narrator reveal his impending death. Frantic, he consults a professor of literature (a wry Dustin Hoffman) in hopes of discovering who this supposed author of his life is and in what

type of story he's become entangled.

Meanwhile, reclusive writer Karen Eiffel (Emma Thompson, smoking like a chimney) is weathering a massive case of writer's block. Pressured by her publishers, her assistant Penny (Queen Latifa) and the success of her previous novels, she burns through packs of cigarettes and reams of paper, fantasizing about the various ways a person can die (falling off a building, crashing a car off a bridge, pneumonia), but all for nothing. Her next novel's overdue, and she has yet to find the perfect way to kill off her main character, one Harold Crick.

The exact reason for the whole phenomena is never explained, which is to the benefit of this delightfully weird and surprisingly literate film. The best aspects of this movie are the questions brought up by the fact that Ms Eiffel's supposedly fictional creation is very real. What are the bounds of literary ethics in this instance? Is her narration simply the observer of events, or their unwitting instigator? Has this happened before, with her previous eight novels and their main characters?

Will Ferrell's physically bland features served him well in *Elf*—where they and his height made

his man-child elfin upbringing a hilarious contrast—and in *Talladega Nights*—where they reinforced Ricky Bobby's parody of All-American-Man charm—and they're used to excellent effect. Under-acting with an almost complete lack of verbal humour, his performance is subtle, genuine and endearing. Emma Thompson, marvellous as a red-eyed, unkempt, greasy-haired author who spends most of the film in a housecoat, conclusively puts that tired cat-eyeglasses-and-apple-martini cliché of female writers to rest. As an anarchist baker who's audited and then wooed

by Harold, Maggie Gyllenhaal is also a pleasure to watch, a fiery and sensual woman who ignites Harold's imagination.

*Stranger Than Fiction* wrestles with a number of common Hollywood themes (living life to the fullest, freedom of thought, narrative stereotypes), all of them connected by the creative central conceit of an ordinary life in narration. But without spoiling the ending—which is a bit doozy—it suffices to say that *Stranger Than Fiction* is significantly stranger, funnier and smarter than most of the cinematic fiction out there right now.

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