

WRITING

Seven Stories About Fictional Writers That Need a Reality Check

Randee Dawn

Tue Apr 25, 2023 10:00am | [Post a comment](#) | [Favorite This](#)



Screenshot: Columbia Pictures

Somebody's got to write movies and TV shows—Hollywood's dream factory doesn't spontaneously create scripts (though, with AI coming, who knows what the future will bring...). And when the scribes of L.A. go on strike, as the Writers Guild of America may do very soon, the whole industry quakes.

So why is it so dang difficult to get actual writers to write about other writers in a realistic way?

As any author knows, the writing game takes years of trying, rewriting, editing, criticism, and maybe some drinking (lots of caffeinated beverages, if not something stronger). Except

in the case of a few precious unicorns, success is usually far from instantaneous. And while it's true that some depictions seem to acknowledge the challenges of being a writer, for the most part even well-made shows seem to side with fantasy over reality when it comes to portraying literary success. Below, I've taken a look at some fictional scribes from various TV and movie, and rated their writer-reality on a scale measuring relatively realistic (10) to unbelievably terrible (1) ...and everything in between.

You (2018-)

The Story: In the show's first season, Guinevere Beck (Elizabeth Lail) follows her dream of being a writer while being stalked/romanced by bookstore owner Joe (Penn Badgley).

Word Crimes: Beck (as she's known) simply *yearns* to be a writer. She spends more time complaining about needing to find the time to write than actually writing. Also, she manages to produce single, perfect drafts and graduates from essays and a poem or two to cranking out an entire novel that scores her an agent, editor, and publishing deal all in a matter of *months*—plus, she earns the admiration of the New York press (so much for those long lead times!). Yet she still complains about not having time to write because now she's invited to so many darn parties...

Reality Check: 3

The Son (2022)

The Story: A troubled high schooler (Zen McGrath) spirals into depression following the divorce of his parents and asks to live with his father (Hugh Jackman).

Word Crimes: Toward the end of the film, Dad is elated when his son, now thriving, shows up with a surprise: his newly published first book, *Death Can Wait*. The young man has kept this a complete secret from his family—until he hands the beautifully-designed hardback book over and his dad beams. Spoiler alert: This is all a dream—a fantasy conjured up in dad’s head. Without spoiling too much, this scene of (imagined) paternal pride is intended to drive home the central tragedy of the film—but actual writers will likely sigh with relief that they’re not being expected to swallow this nonsense. Of course there might be a few first-time young authors who come out of nowhere and are able to get a book published on their first go-round and also tell *no one this is happening*, but ... nah. This was either going to be truly awful Hollywood writing or a dream, and for better or worse, it turns out to be the latter.

Reality Check: 4

***Up Here* (2023–)**

The Story: Lindsay (Mae Whitman) leaves her fiancé on a whim to move to New York and falls for Miguel (Carlos Valdes), as the voices of people from her past regularly break into song in her head. (Well, it is a musical.)

Word Crimes: Lindsay writes *one story* and wins a prize for it. This then prompts her to ditch the guy she was going to marry and relocate because New York is “where all the writers are” and he knows nothing about the writing world. Once she gets to the big city, she learns that her prize amounts to \$15 in store credit at an indie bookshop. This is pretty amusing (and again, it’s a musical comedy, so the premise is allowed to be a little wacky), but the idea of a writer operating in a complete bubble who shoots off a single story and gets *any* recognition—yet doesn’t possess the wherewithal to call ahead or find out anything about the prize itself ahead of time is ...well, it’s not a great start.

Reality Check: 5

***Younger* (2015–2021)**

The Story: A fortysomething single mom (Sutton Foster) pretends to be in her 20s and gets hired at Empirical Press to assist the marketing chief (Miriam Shor).

Word Crimes: There are pluses and minuses with *Younger* which, in a bit of departure from my other examples, focuses more on the publishing industry instead of an individual writer. Thus, the show is able to go a bit deeper and be more realistic when it comes to the timelines and actual facts of book publishing. But it's also created by Darren Star, who gave us Carrie Bradshaw's oh-so-not-very-realistic magazine writer in *Sex and the City*, so brace yourself. There's a lot to recommend the show's portrayal in terms of the vibe of the industry (doomy, gloomy), the notion that bad books can easily make the bestseller lists, the real passion for the written word that drives the best parts of the business. But then there's that business meeting that takes place in the pool atop a New York City hotel, a book reading/signing where women pant over the author like he's a lost Beatle, the suspiciously low number of editors at the press (and apparently only one agent who represents everybody), and the idea that a twenty-something editor would be running her own *imprint* is enough to make you wonder if this is alternate universe...

Reality Check: 5

Authors Anonymous (2014)

The Story: Hannah (Kaley Cuoco) joins a writers group full of unpublished, dysfunctional authors—and experiences overnight success.

Word Crimes: An aspiring author who really doesn't even read, much yet write—who lands an agent, gets a book deal, and then is hired to turn that very first manuscript into a movie? By now, we know that's fairly par for the course when it comes to Hollywood movies. But what saves this movie from being a complete crime against reality is that the protagonist is surrounded by the less-successful authors in her group: One gets a ton of rejection letters; one constantly records story ideas but never tries to develop his notes into anything more; one seems talented but suffers from writer's block; one confidently self-publishes what he's sure is the world's next Tom Clancy-esque blockbuster. Those characters' issues feel at least slightly more true to the experience of most working writers than stumbling into overnight superstardom, and we can totally empathize with them for resenting the hell out of Hannah's surprise success.

Reality Check: 7

Wonder Boys (2000)

The Story: Grady Tripp (Michael Douglas) is a novelist and professor teaching creative writing at a university. His first novel was a huge success, but in the intervening years, he hasn't gotten his act together to finish a second book.

Word Crimes: Leave it to an actual author to tell a somewhat more realistic story about... being an author. Michael Chabon wrote the novel the film is based on, and it's easy to sympathize with the blocked one-time-success story who's disappeared into his own head, self-soothing with pot while having an affair with his married boss. Overwriting (2,500 pages!) is almost as bad as writer's block for an author, and when most of his long-labored-over manuscript blows out of an open car door and is lost ... well, we've all had *those* moments when the world eats our magnum opus, one way or the other. It's horrifying to imagine writing anything that long in the present day without using a computer to save your work (or at least keeping a back-up copy)—but at least by the end of the movie we're reassured that Grady, working on a new book, has at last gone digital.

Reality Check: 8

***Misery* (1990)**

The Story: Romance author Paul Sheldon (James Caan) is rescued from a horrible accident by his “number one fan,” Annie Wilkes (Kathy Bates), who holds him hostage until he writes a new book that resurrects her favorite character.

Word Crimes: There’s no mistaking the fact that this is a horror story from Stephen King (with a screenplay by the great William Goldman, no less). And it’s hardly the first time King’s used the writing process to fuel our nightmares—see both the book and film versions of *The Shining* for the tale of a less successful writer. But the car accident, imprisonment, violence and leg-hobbling aside, *Misery* also delivers a kind of twisted adrenaline kick/wish-fulfillment scenario for writers. After all, fans as deeply devoted as Annie buy books! Multiple versions! Paul’s has nothing to do but write—no distractions, and no writer’s block here—in a cozy, secluded mountain home in Colorado, with someone attending to his every need. Turns out fear is a great motivator, at least in Paul’s case—and when he finishes the book, Annie’s even got champagne chilling for the celebration. Writers will both understand and inwardly cringe when Paul lights his newly completed manuscript on fire—and of course this was the movie that showed us that a typewriter can be more effective as a weapon than as a composition tool.

Reality Check: 9

These few prime examples aside, what are *your* favorite (or least favorite) examples of Hollywood's attempts to tell the story of writers' journeys? Let me know in the comments!

Randee Dawn is a Brooklyn-based entertainment journalist who scribbles about the glam world of entertainment by day, then spends her nights crafting wild worlds of fiction. Her debut novel, *[Tune in Tomorrow](#)*, about a fantastical TV reality show, published in 2022 (Solaris). She's the co-editor of the anthology *Across the Universe: Tales of Alternative Beatles*, and has published numerous short stories and novellas of speculative fiction. She writes about the wacky world of show business for *Variety*, The Los Angeles *Times* and Today.co, is the co-author of *The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion*, and curates/hosts Brooklyn's Rooftop Reading series. Find out more at RandeeDawn.com.