

BIOPICS

Literary Lives: Nine Movies About Real-Life Writers

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A working writer's life doesn't seem like it would make for compelling cinema. All that typing! Editing! Staring out a window blankly, trying to get the gears to turn! How can those moments of mundanity compete with superheroes and spies and sweeping romance? But that hasn't stopped Hollywood from lionizing the more, shall we say, *colorful* scribes among us—and when those authors' lives haven't been cinematic enough, they've just added a bit of fiction here and there. After all, who among us lives a life that couldn't do with a little... revision?

Since there are a plethora of movies about real-life authors, I've decided to focus on slightly older films—all of the examples on this list were made over 20 years ago, during the period between the 1980s to the early 2000s when there seemed to be an artsy literary biopic released every couple of years. (Brace yourself: the most recent film below, *The Hours*, is now old enough to vote, if a movie could go to the polls.)

Without further ado, here are some film about writers from *before* 2003 that you simply

must see—with the understanding, of course, that truth is always stranger than fiction...

***Hammett* (1982)**

If you're a hard-boiled detective novel/mystery fan, Dashiell Hammett is your man—he's the writer behind such classics as *The Maltese Falcon* (which gave us Sam Spade), *The Thin Man* (which gave us Nick and Nora Charles) and many other excellent books and stories. This movie, however, is more about putting a fictionalized Hammett (Frederic Forrest) into a story he himself might have written—it's based on a novel by Joe Gores—in which the author investigates a cabaret actress' disappearance in San Francisco in the 1920s. Other portrayals of Hammett can be seen in *Dash and Lilly* (played by Sam Shepard) and *Julia* (played by Jason Robards).

***My Left Foot* (1989)**



It's true that writer and painter Christy Brown, who was born with cerebral palsy, is probably best known for the movie version of his autobiography and its account of his experiences learning to create art and live exuberantly, but he also published books of poetry and novels, including the international bestseller *Down All the Days* (1970)

Daniel Day-Lewis portrays him in all his contrasting colors and rightly won an Oscar for the role in 1990, as did Brenda Fricker for playing Brown's mother.

***Henry & June* (1990)**



Here's a movie that gives us two authors for the price of one, plus plenty of relationship drama and a sexy ménage à trois! Henry Miller (Fred Ward) is on the way to writing one of his most important novels, *Tropic of Cancer*. But things change quickly after he meets fellow married writer Anaïs Nin (Maria de Medeiros)—who soon finds herself in the middle of Miller's tumultuous relationship with his wife June (Uma Thurman). Nin, known for her novels and short stories, as well as her famous diaries, has an affair with Henry and also chases June—all the while helping him finish his book.

Other portrayals of Miller include *Tropic of Cancer* (played by Rip Torn) and *Quiet Days in Clichy* (played by Andrew McCarthy)

***The Dreamer of Oz: The L. Frank Baum Story* (1990, made for TV)**



Baum's best known for creating the many fabulous stories that took place in the invented land of Oz—but most fans of his work don't generally know much about Baum himself. Turns out there's a movie for that, in which we learn how Baum became the Oz-man, with some scenes from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* interspersed. But that's not all—the creators and cast are pretty wonderful, too: John Ritter stars in the lead role, and *Golden Girls* star Rue McClanahan plays his mother-in-law!

Plus, the script was co-written by David Kirschner and author Richard Matheson. “I was at Kirschner's house, and he was talking to me about making a film out of a play I have written—a suspense horror play—when I saw all this stuff lying around, all these drawings and plans for the Oz film,” Matheson said [in an interview](#). “I said, ‘Why didn't you ask me to do this?’ He always thought of me as a horror writer. That's the way they categorize out [in Hollywood]. But once I mentioned it, he thought it was a good idea. It was a labor of love for all of us.”

Other portrayals of Baum include *Dorothy and the Witches of Oz* (played by Jeffrey Combs) and *Oz the Great and Powerful* (played by Zach Braff).



a (1991)

It's hard to imagine just how nightmarishly Kafkaesque Franz Kafka's life really was, but director Steven Soderbergh gave it a shot in a mystery/thriller that blurs the author's fiction (*The Castle* and *The Trial*) together with facts drawn from his actual life, and stars Jeremy Irons as the writer. *Kafka* failed to do well at the box office (particularly disappointing after the success of Soderbergh's acclaimed first movie, *Sex, Lies and Videotape*), but after the rights reverted to him years later he completely reworked the film. A new version, called *Mr. Kneff*, was released as part of a box set, and premiered at the 2021 Toronto International Film Festival.

Other Portrayals: *Franz Kafka's It's a Wonderful Life* (a short film written and directed by Peter Capaldi), where the author is played by Richard E. Grant.

***Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994)**



If you're looking for a movie about authors and their inner circles, you can positively gorge yourself on the tale of the sharp-witted writer Dorothy Parker (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) and her Algonquin Round Table salon of fellow wits and word-lovers. Along with Parker, we get Robert Benchley (played by Campbell Scott), Alexander Woollcott (Tom McGowan), Harpo Marx (J.M. Henry), Will Rogers (Keith Carradine), and F. Scott Fitzgerald (Malcolm Gets)—plus plenty more. Come for the quips and the largely-improvised script, stay for fun casting and real-life connections, such as seeing Wallace Shawn (son of legendary *New Yorker* editor William Shawn) and Peter Benchley (author of *Jaws* and the grandson of Robert Benchley) popping up in various scenes.

Other Portrayals: *F. Scott Fitzgerald in Hollywood* (played by Dolores Sutton); *Dash and Lilly* (played by Bebe Neuwirth).

***Before Night Falls* (2000)**



Javier Bardem broke big internationally with his searing portrayal of Cuban poet, playwright, and novelist Reinaldo Arenas, who lived a life almost more fascinating than the stories he told. The film winds through his experiences as a dissident in Cuba, hiding his sexuality from those who would persecute him, his repeated imprisonment and eventual escape during the 1980 Mariel boatlift, and ultimately his death by suicide while suffering from AIDS. Bardem received an Academy Award nomination for his performance in the film, which is based on Arenas' autobiography of the same name.

***Iris* (2001)**



Iris Murdoch may not have been a household name in America before this movie came out, but in Ireland (where she was born) and in England (where she was raised and had much of her success) she is considered a national treasure, having won both the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Booker Prize. The film features two actresses as Iris—Kate Winslet (as the youthful author) and Judi Dench (as her older self), and is based on *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch*, written by her husband John Bayley, who was also a novelist and a literary critic. While it begins with their meeting and early days at Oxford, much of the film focuses on her later years as Murdoch, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and Bayley struggle to come to terms with her mental and physical decline.

***The Hours* (2002)**



Talk about a powerhouse cast: Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore, and Nicole Kidman—with Ed Harris, John C. Reilly, Jeff Daniels, Claire Danes and other luminaries in supporting roles—all playing women affected one way or the other by Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. The movie (based on Michael Cunningham’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel) was awards season catnip, perhaps unsurprisingly: the film was nominated for nine awards, with Kidman winning Best Actress; Harris and Moore were both nominated in the supporting categories. In the film, which is broken into different time periods, Streep’s Clarissa organizes an award party for her poet friend (who refers to her as “Mrs. Dalloway”), Moore’s Laura is pregnant and unhappily married; and Kidman plays Woolf herself, who is struggling to write *Dalloway* while battling depression. There’s more than one traumatic death in this film, so be prepared if you’re watching it for the first time.

Other portrayals include *Life in Squares* (in which Woolf is played by Lydia Leonard and Catherine McCormack) and *Vita and Virginia* (played by Elizabeth Debicki).

What other films about authors and their lives would you recommend (or not)? Let me know in the comments below!

Randee Dawn is the author of the funny, fantastical pop culture novel *Tune in Tomorrow*, which was a finalist in the 2023 Next Generation Indie Awards. She's also the co-editor of *The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion* and co-edited the anthology *Across the Universe: Tales of Alternative Beatles*. An entertainment journalist who writes for *The Los Angeles Times*, *Variety*, *Today.com*, and many other publications, Randee is working on her follow-up to *Tune in Tomorrow* and lives in Brooklyn with her spouse and a fluffy, sleepy Westie.

