

Creative blend of cinema and literature

Written by Zach Helm

Directed by Marc Forster

Will Ferrell ... Harold Crick
Queen Latifah ... Penny Escher
Maggie Gyllenhaal ... Ana Pascal
Emma Thompson ... Karen Eiffel
Tom Hulce ... Dr. Cayly
Linda Hunt ... Dr. Mittag-Leffler
Dustin Hoffman ... Professor Jules Hilbert

Walking through the video store, my lady friend and I like to look for slightly offbeat movies that receive critical as well as popular raves. *Stranger than Fiction* gets the double whammy: Ebert and Roeper give it two thumbs way up toward the ceiling, then later we find out Rotten Tomatoes has given it like a 75% positive for both critics and ordinary civilians.

I learned my lesson about going only with the critics a few years ago. We were at the video store during the holidays with her sister and brother-in-law; I picked up *Wit*, also a movie with a big role for Emma Thomson. Ol' Roger had praised it to the rafters for being, well, witty; so I more or less sold everyone on taking it home. It was the most dreary and depressing movie any of us had ever seen, and my movie-selection privileges were henceforth revoked.

Stranger than Fiction rewards you from the very beginning; you hear the voice of a woman narrator recounting every repetitious step in the life of IRS agent Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) while you watch his tedious life unfold on the screen. He rises exactly at xx:yy a.m., brushes his teeth precisely zw times, walks across the street at the cross walk careful to step on the white markings, catches the bus at such and such a time, etc., etc.

His actions are determined by a very special wristwatch that serves as his alarm clock and, really, his identity. Aside from the regimentation of the watch, the special effects wizards attend Harold's various movements with little white numbers of time or money calculations. Like images on a blackboard, only there's no blackboard, then when the formula is completed, the numbers and geometry crumble into nothing.

This need for habit in everything would seem like death warmed over to most of us, but Harold is actually a kind soul, lonely and unambitious, quite happy to be given his little slice of life. At some point, he begins to hear the same narration we in the audience hear. It's quite troubling this voice—no one else in the movie hears it—that simply narrates what he's doing in real time. "Hey, he yells, who are you?"

He goes to his shrink (Linda Hunt) who prescribes the conventional drug regimen, but Harold feels this problem will require the most of his mentality. Instead, thinking the voice sounds almost as if she's writing a story of him, he seeks out an expert in literature, Professor Jules Herbert (Dustin Hoffman). Herbert runs him through various tests to determine likely literary sources—based on the type of story Harold's rather dismal life experiences suggest to the professor.

The odd thing is the Voice has opened Harold up a bit. He's given an audit case for a hot young 'counterculturesque' woman, Ana Pascal (Maggie Gyllenhaal), who initially seems to despise him for representing "The Man." Harold is a perfectly conscientious government employee, his awareness certainly not rising to the level of understanding, say, the Sacred Nonaggression Principle. In fact, you tend to feel bad for him as Ana runs him down.

In time she begins to realize—as Karl Hess once suggested about the cops when they booked him for an SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) protest—"everyone is people." Harold also sees something in her willingness to do things on principle; she refuses to pay the percentage of her tax bill that goes for the war machine. She arouses feelings in him he hasn't felt, like, ever. That plus the Voice elicit a new joie de vivre.

At this point I'm reminded of the movie *Pleasantville* when the kids and select adults (especially the Jeff Daniels and Joan Allen characters) begin to experience colors for the first time. The same basic theme resonates in great cinema and literature: "What happens if I cross that line?" Usually you begin to live life more fully yet the renewed preciousness of life creates new anxieties it may all be taken away.

After more soul searching and analysis, Harold and the professor home in on who the author (the Voice) must be, a literary giant named Karen Eiffel (Emma Thompson) who writes novels in which the main character always dies. Karen is struggling with her own demons and having trouble finishing Harold off. And Harold, acquiring a newfound appreciation of life, is in no hurry to go. He and Ana have fallen deeply in love.

There isn't a single false step in how the actors execute the characters and in how the director fulfills the artistic vision of the writer (Zach Helm). Indeed, the roles are perfectly cast, even Queen Latifah who carries herself professionally as the publisher's rep charged with breaking down Karen Eiffel's writer's block. But especially Ferrell. He's the perfect mixture of shyness, intelligence, and, yes, understated humor... like Peter Sellers in *Being There*, though certainly not on that scale.

It's a movie that will cause you to think... and possibly come up with ways to introduce IRS agents—the men anyway—to hot babes of principle.

2007 August 17

Copyright © Brian Wright | The Coffee Coaster™

Stranger than Fiction | Marc Forster | Zach Helm | Will Ferrell