

Hollywood, Etc.: Caught in the act

by David L. Coddon

The early relationship between Hollywood and the Federal Bureau of Investigation was anything but untraceable - the title of the new Diane Lane/FBI vehicle film that opened recently.

NOT-SO SECRET AGENTS - Suzanne Turner, left, and Debra Evans Smith are FBI agents in San Diego. Hollywood's depiction of the job has a few holes in it, real-life agents say. CNS Photo by Charlie Neuman. J. Edgar Hoover acted as unofficial co-producer of the 1959 movie "The FBI Story," starring Jimmy Stewart, reportedly insisting on script changes that cast the bureau in a favorable light. (He also appeared briefly in the film.) "The FBI Story" inspired TV producer Quinn Martin to create the ABC series "The FBI" in 1965. It was a show endorsed by and made with the cooperation of Hoover, who had final script approval before each episode was aired.

The stalwart Stewart and the firm-jawed Efrem Zimbalist Jr. were the first prototypical heroes of Hollywood's FBI. But today, Stewart's "Chip" Hardesty and Zimbalist's Lew Erskine are footnotes. Moviegoers and TV viewers have come to expect more complex, multidimensional FBI agents who operate in a highly complicated and higher-tech world.

Many of them - in fact, some of the best remembered - are heroines: Jodie Foster's Clarice Starling in "The Silence of the Lambs." Gillian Anderson's Dana Scully in "The X Files." Sandra Bullock's Gracie Hart in the "Miss Congeniality" comedies.

Now comes Diane Lane, who portrays FBI agent and cybercrimes specialist Jennifer Marsh in the thriller "Untraceable."

J. Edgar is no longer around to give these depictions his stamp of approval. But like anyone whose profession is dramatized or glamorized in the movies or on television, today's FBI agents know what's real and what's pure Hollywood.

Assistant Special Agent in Charge Debra Evans Smith, Supervisory Special Agent Suzanne Turner and Public Affairs Specialist April Langwell sat down recently in the offices of the FBI's San Diego Division, and the subject was the Clarice Starlings, Gracie Harts and Jennifer Marshes from Make Believe FBI Land.

These authentic women of the FBI cut their fictionalized counterparts some slack. What agents do in the movies and on TV is, bottom line, designed to entertain audiences. Sometimes, it's reality be damned.

But they do lay down the law about a couple of misconceptions:

"They depict us as having all the technology that anybody would ever want," says Smith, who was closely involved in the investigation of Robert Hanssen, the FBI agent who doubled as a spy for the Soviet Union and whose story was made into the 2007 feature film "Breach," starring Chris Cooper and Ryan Philippe. (Laura Linney played Special Agent Kate Burroughs.)

"It's the 'CSI' effect," adds Langwell, referencing the long-running TV series. "The people responding to the evidence are the same ones working in the lab and they get their results back in an hour."

As for Turner, it irks her that often when the FBI is depicted in a case where the local cops - usually the heroes of the story - are in charge, "they sometimes portray us as not the most intelligent."

They also get portrayed as pushy and territorial.

Says Langwell: "I have never once heard an FBI agent display her credentials and say, 'I'm in charge!'"

Smith leaps in: "People really believe that we come in and take over."

And "that's not realistic," fellow agent Turner declares. "We cooperate very well with the different agencies."

Now, as to all the gunplay that FBI agents, male or female, engage in on the screen, Smith and Turner acknowledge that they carry firearms and that they are required to requalify with them four times a year. But shooting?

"It may never be a part of your job," says Smith, a 20-year veteran of the bureau.

Using your gun depends on your duties, points out Turner, a police officer for more than four years before she joined the FBI. When responding to a violent crime - armed robbery, for example - an agent may have to react with force.

Langwell holds up a color photograph of Jodie Foster as FBI agent Clarice Starling. It's a promotional shot for "The Silence of the Lambs," and it's autographed. But this photo isn't in the office just because Foster's is arguably the most famous film or TV portrayal to date of a female FBI agent. There's some added intrigue here.

The signature on the photograph is not Foster's. It's a forgery, and the picture itself was seized during the FBI's Operation Bullpen in the '90s, which targeted thousands of falsified or bogus sports and entertainment-related memorabilia.

As far as Clarice Starling is concerned, Smith and Turner agree that Foster's depiction of an FBI agent is a good one. Turner cites the actress' believable "toughness in portraying a female agent." Both cite as unrealistic, however, the "Silence" plot device that finds FBI Academy student Starling plucked from training at Quantico, Va., to join the Hannibal Lecter case.

But there's unrealistic and there's UNREALISTIC.

"'Miss Congeniality' would be a bad depiction (of a female FBI agent)," Turner says of the 2000 film that featured Sandra Bullock's Gracie Hart going undercover as a beauty-pageant contestant. "I'm sure they asked for no consulting (from the FBI)."

What if Smith or Turner were asked to consult on whatever the next movie or TV series about a female FBI agent might be? What would they want the heroine to be like?

"She'd be smart, first of all," Smith says.

Turner would "try to make as little difference as possible that she's a female," stressing that gender does not play a part in how agents are assigned and employed.

These two speak from experience.

"I have not found it to be harder (to be a woman in the FBI)," Smith says. (About 11 percent of the bureau's agents are female.) "I feel that I'm just as capable as anyone around me."

"I don't think I've had any hard times based on being a female," Turner says. "If you have a good work ethic, you're going to do well."

You might even be the inspiration for that next Hollywood thriller.

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