

DVD Select: A sensitive Will Ferrell is 'Stranger Than Fiction'

by Robert J. Hawkins

Producer Lindsay Doran is searching for the right words to describe the work of screenwriter Zach Helm, in particular his curious, quirky and enormously entertaining romantic-comedy "Stranger Than Fiction" (Sony, 3 1/2 stars).

Doreen stumbles mentally, then blurts, "He fires on all syllables."

Syllables. I think she's got something there. Helm fires on every page in his immensely clever script. And with enormous good fortune, he lands Marc Forster ("Monster's Ball," "Finding Neverland" and soon-to-be released "The Kite Runner") to direct.

'STRANGER THAN FICTION' - Will Ferrell and Dustin Hoffman star in the comedy 'Stranger Than Fiction.' CNS Photo courtesy of Ralph Nelson.
I've yet to see "Stranger Than Fiction" adequately described in a review, but here goes:

Harold Crick (a subdued and - hang on - sensitive Will Ferrell) is an Internal Revenue Service auditor who lives a tightly regulated and solitary life. He counts his toothbrush strokes precisely. He can manipulate vast sums off the top of his pointy head. He knows how many steps it is to his bus stop. His best friend is the watch on his wrist, which rules his every waking hour. He is obsessive-compulsive, and I mean that in the most endearing sort of way.

Into his life come two vastly different women who will irrevocably change the course of his life.

One is Ana Pascal (Maggie Gyllenhaal), the tattooed and waifish and beguiling owner of a bakery/coffee shop. Ana is also a tax rebel who refuses to pay taxes.

She and Harold knock heads right off. It is a path that can only lead to love. It is a tender and beautiful story, were it not for the "other woman."

The other woman is not immediately seen but she is heard - inside the head of Harold. It seems that somewhere in the universe a woman - for it is a woman's voice - is writing a novel. It just happens to be the story of Harold's life.

Harold - and only Harold - hears this voice describe whatever it is that he has just done - "accurately and with a better vocabulary," says Harold.

Of course it is driving him crazy. The voice is in the third person omniscient, which means she knows more or less where Harold is headed in this narrative, before Harold does.

So, imagine Harold's shock when he deduces from his narrator that he is expected to die at the end of this novel. Yeah, you'd be bummed, too. Harold consults with a local professor of literature, Jules Hilbert (Dustin Hoffman), who blithely suggests that Harold just live out the story.

"You have to understand," shouts an exasperated Harold, "this isn't a philosophy, or a literary theory, or a story to me. This is my life!"

"Absolutely," retorts Hilbert. "So just go make it the one you've always wanted."

Which Harold does in amazing, sweet and really fun ways. But he also pursues the identity of his narrator because, now that he is living the life he's always wanted, he likes it. And would like it to last longer than the pages of a novel in progress.

With Hilbert's help, Harold tracks down the voice. It is none other than the popular fiction writer Kay Eiffel (Emma Thompson) a neurotic wreckage with a keyboard. Kay is having trouble finding the ending of this particular novel - but her signature style dictates that the hero must die in the end. They always have in her novels.

Can Harold persuade her to construct a happy ending? Can professor Hilbert, who has read the manuscript, convince her that in the service of her art Harold must die? Can her publisher-imposed administrative assistant Penny Escher (Queen Latifah) convince her to finish on time?

No, I won't tell you. You really need to see this one.

And you need to see the DVD extras, where you can learn all about the graphic user interfaces (GUIs) that pop up around Harold in the movie, serving as an interface between his mind and the world he encounters. These charts, arrows, graphs, numbers, broken lines and spreadsheets cleverly show how the mind of Harold Crick works.

Crick. Eiffel. Hilbert. You might notice that all of the characters in this movie are named after mathematicians. That's disclosed on the DVD extras, too. But the coolest extra has to be the extended "Book Channel" interviews conducted by Darlene Sunshine (Kristin Chenoweth) that appear only briefly in the film.

Darlene is a perky Texas ex-rodeo queen who doesn't feel it's important to actually read an author's book before interviewing the author. When she puts the reclusive and neurotic Kay Eiffel through one of her shallow tete-a-tetes, it is excruciatingly hilarious. Chenoweth and Thompson are a whole movie unto

themselves.

"Stranger Than Fiction" feels like the movie that got away last year. It got the odd Golden Globe and Writers Guild nomination but what it really deserves is strong audience appreciation. People who liked "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" would feel right at home with "Stranger Than Fiction."

ALSO THIS WEEK

"A Good Year" (Fox, 2 1/2 stars) A promising vintage that just doesn't quite hold together once the cork is off the bottle. Russell Crowe (Max) is an extremely aggressive and all-consuming investment specialist who runs the firm like a pirate on a rampage. When his uncle Henry (Albert Finney) passes away, Max inherits a boutique vineyard estate in Provençal where he spent his early summers. Being back at the chateau has a humanizing effect on Max. He even meets the alluring cafe owner Fanny Chenal (Marion Cotillard) and falls in love. There are stories started and left unexplored - the superb boutique wine that the estate's vintner seems to be bottling on the side, for example.

"Treacherous D in the Pick of Destiny" (New Line, 1 star) Jack Black is a loser who learns of a magical guitar pick hidden in plain sight at the Museum of Rock. Steal the pick, become a star. So simple. Black and his pal Kyle Gass (an even bigger loser, if you can imagine) steal the pick with the help of the mysterious stranger (Tim Robbins). I'd say, yeah, this is great stuff for Jack Black fans but I recently saw "The Holiday" in which Black actually acts. Kind of a revelation. I thought all he did was play the buffoon. That's what makes "Pick of Destiny" so dreary. It is beneath Black's talents and only mildly amusing.

Also this week: The fantastical "Tideland" from the always intriguing Terry Gilliam. (A possible match set with "Pan's Labyrinth"?) Stalking horror of "The Return" with Sarah Michelle Gellar. Kid-friendly animated sequel "The Land Before Time: The Great Day of the Flyers."

Documentaries: "The Heart of the Game" follows a seven-year span with the women's basketball coach of Seattle's Roosevelt High School. "McLuhan's Wake" looks into the thinking of global village philosopher

Marshall McLuhan. "Conversations With God" based on the rags-to-redemption story told by Neal Donald Walsch in the book of the same name.

IT CAME FROM TV

The first season of "The Girlfriends"; HBO political-thriller mini-series "The State Within"; compilation of finest episodes in "Reno 911!: Reno's Most Wanted Uncensored"; compilation of groundbreaking comic "The Best of the Flip Wilson Show."

Also: "Secret Agent AKA Danger Man: The Complete Collection"(1965) Remember the Johnny Rivers theme song, "Secret Agent Man"? Patrick McGoohan starred in the 86 episodes on 18 DVDs as the super smooth agent John Drake of M9 intelligence agency.

FROM THE VAULTS

"Bob Dylan: Don't Look Back" (Docurama, 1967) D.A. Pennebaker chronicled Dylan's 1965 tour for this documentary and caught the iconic rock poet on the cusp of greatness. This two-disc set holds a digital transfer of the original documentary, Pennebaker's new film "65 Revisited," and the original companion book to the 1967 film.

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

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