

Movie review on review: stranger than fiction

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The 2006 film *Stranger Than Fiction*, directed by Marc Forster and starring Will Ferrell, tells the tale of a humdrum IRS agent (Will Ferrell) who finds himself learning that he is actually a fictional construct, a character in a story being written by Kay Eiffel (Emma Thompson). As he deals with the constant meddling of an authorial force in his life, and making sure he is not insane with the help of a professor (Dustin Hoffman), he soon learns that Eiffel plans to kill him off in her own story, in order to make her writing interesting and cure her writer's block. The film is very much unlike Ferrell's previous fare, taking a subtle and sometimes dramatic turn as the film both provides substantial fodder for comedy while also exploring issues of identity, the presence of a higher force in our lives, and our ability to control our fates. Ferrell is superb in the film, anchoring the film with the kind of saccharine sweetness and earnest buffoonery that he's displayed in films like *Elf*; he plays naïveté very well, and his distress at the omnipresent voice that seems to narrate his life makes for a lot of fantastic bits of comedy. His interactions with Gyllenhaal and Hoffman are assured, as well, showing that he has wonderful dramatic chops. In the scenes where he must contemplate his life and the impending death he has been told about, his work is reminiscent of other comedians turned dramatic actor, like Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show* and Adam Sandler in *Punch-Drunk Love*, downplaying their wacky tendencies for maximum pathos. The film utilizes and restrains Ferrell well, leading to one of the best performances of his career.

The real meat of the content in *Stranger Than Fiction* deals with its high-concept premise - what if you found out you weren't real, and your life was controlled by an author with an eye for narrative? How would you react to

this lack of agency in your life? What if God had writer's block? All of these questions are wrapped into the premise of the film, as Ferrell's realization that he is meant to die leads him to consult Hoffman to find out whether or not his life is a comedy or tragedy. With this investigation of stories and how we view them, the film provides a lot of thematic material to chew on, including ideas of how genre and interpretation can change a story. Ferrell's feelings of helplessness to stop the inevitable also touches on sobering notions of death and a perceived lack of free will; his reactions to the certainty that he will die are as arresting as they are humorous.

The film itself plays with the expectations that people have when they view a comedy, particularly one starring Will Ferrell. Today, comedy can tend to be very broad, with a great deal of slapstick, raunchiness and randomness to delight audiences; many comedies appeal to the lowest common denominator, who may not have the highest attention span. This leads to many filmmakers simply throwing a series of gags up on the screen to see what sticks. While there are the typical Ferrell shticks in *Stranger Than Fiction*, to be sure - Ferrell makes a great everyman simpleton who is constantly upset and distressed at the world around him - it is all framed in a narrative that allows Ferrell's characterization to become a character itself. In this way, the emphasis on story as a vehicle for the comedy (rather than framing gags around a story after the fact) is what subverts many expectations for a comedy film, and is present in spades in *Stranger Than Fiction*.

The film's status as a "comedy with dramatic and fantasy elements" is certainly an accurate one; the film has serious and dramatic discussions of

the nature of reality, the importance of creativity, and the obligation a creator has to his or her works. While the film isn't an outright unrealistic fantasy, it does have fantasy elements to it - the film takes place in a world in which an author can actually bring a fictional creation to life in her own world, and control his actions and environment through an omniscient voice. In conclusion, *Stranger Than Fiction* is a fine film which notes the transition of Will Ferrell from a straight comedian to an actor capable of inserting drama into his performances. Dealing with such rich thematic content as this, audiences can think about the subtextual elements of the film while appreciating the central character that is at the heart of the story. Furthermore, while the dramatic elements are there, they don't overwhelm the film, and still present a relatively light-hearted film on the whole - therefore, it can be argued that it is a comedy first and foremost.

Works Cited

Forster, Marc (dir). *Stranger Than Fiction*. Perf. Will Ferrell, Emma Thompson, Maggie Gyllenhaal. Columbia Pictures, 2006. Film.