

Michael Infante
PCH 201
2/7/09

Film Review of *Stranger Than Fiction*

Stranger than Fiction is a dark comedy revolving around the life of a socially awkward and obsessively inclined IRS auditor Harold Crick (played by Will Ferrell) whose manic obsession with personal time keeping and innate attentiveness to detail find him ideally suited to requirements of his profession yet restrained and unfulfilled in his personal life. Once described as, “a man of infinite numbers, endless calculations and incredibly few words”, Crick’s existence is by anyone’s measure an intolerably dull and predictable loop of self-imposed monotony and isolationism and yet Crick (a man who takes pride in meticulously counting brushstrokes over the sink each morning and identifies his favorite word as “integer”) is at least outwardly content with his chosen lifestyle.

Comfortable though Crick may be in his carefully constructed routines and immersion in tax law, he is in for a dramatic turn of events when one day while adjusting his watch at a bus stop he is informed (by means of a disembodied and omniscient narrator) that this “seemingly innocuous act will lead to his imminent demise.” Understandably rattled by both the grim content of this interjection and its supernatural mode of delivery (a voice emanating from the sky, unheard by anyone else, narrating his life in a British accent and as Crick puts it, “accurately and with a better vocabulary [than himself]” Crick decides to enlist professional help. After rejecting the (seemingly reasonable) diagnoses of schizophrenia, Crick seeks out some non-traditional counsel in the form of literary scholar Jules Hilbert (played by Dustin Hoffman), figuring ostensibly

that if it's a narrator he is up against, his best course of action would be to understand the book in which he is now quite literally the "first person". Hilbert though unable at first to identify the author who is guiding the ever dwindling life of Crick, does offer some hope when he explains that all novels are essentially comedies or tragedies, and that if Crick's particular story is a comedy he has little to fear. Crick is therefore is charged with determining the genre of his own life with fingers crossed that he can come to a conclusion before his own untimely epilogue.

Amidst racing the clock that represents his extinction and grappling with his own pathological discomfort with novelty and uncertainty, Crick is, like all of us, compelled to keep up with his nine to five and in the course of his duties is assigned to audit a Ms. Ana Pascal (played by Maggie Gyllenhaal), a conscientious objector to unchecked government spending, an outspoken critic of the tax system, and a free-spirited, edgy and impulsive owner of a small bakery engaged in intentional and felonious tax evasion. Given the comic polarity of their personalities, the awkward circumstance of their meeting, the fact that Pascal is unapologetically flaunting the rules of an institution that represents the order and purpose in Crick's life and the cataclysmic distraction that is Crick's looming literary assassination it would seem unlikely that two could even co-exist let alone fall in love (amongst Pascal's first words to Crick are "get bent tax man"). Yet fall in love they do and Crick, happy perhaps for the first time in his life is convinced his book may be a comedy after all. As Crick and Pascal's courtship continues, Crick is liberated from the shell that was the doldrums of his old personality, invigorated by a new love interest and perhaps emboldened by the ubiquitous reminders of his mortality he chases after life with unprecedented fervor, taking up the guitar (a long suppressed

dream) and spending more time with the dangerous and exciting Pascal. In what may very well be the final stanza of his story Harold Crick is at an all time high.

Crick is unaware however that his story is not in fact a comedy but a tragedy, his narrator (Kay Eiffel played by Emma Thompson) is not only omniscient and omnipresent, but a writer of darkest prose, a serial murderer of her protagonists and the recent stay of execution he has been enjoying is not an act of mercy or compassion but a simple case of writer's block. Things take a turn for the worse when after refusing a gift from Pascal for fear that it could be interpreted as a bribe (fairly unlikely given that its only a tray of cookies and that Pascal for all intents and purposes his girlfriend) Crick inadvertently insults her and they have a falling out. When Crick returns to his apartment to lick his wounds he is offered some compelling evidence that his story is a tragic one when a wrecking crew begins to raze his home as he sits in it (thinking that it was a vacant building awaiting demolition) and because this is certainly an ominous sign Crick (on the advice of Hilbert) continues to live each day with the expectation that it would be his last. Reconciled with Pascal and inexplicably happy in the face of his grim reality, Crick's positive outlook is truly tested when he identifies the voice of his narrator as belonging to Eiffel, who Hilbert informs him is a "killer" [of characters]. Always the pragmatist, Crick sees this not necessarily as the end of days but rather an opportunity to contact and appeal to the sympathies of Eiffel, because surely she wouldn't kill a character if it was someone she knew. After tracking down Eiffel through (what else?) her tax records, Crick discovers that he has been for sometime hanging by a thread while she was unable to devise a fitting death for her character. Unable to bring himself to read the manuscript of his life Crick offers it to Hilbert who is so impressed by the unfinished

“masterpiece” that he informs Crick that he has to die saying with unflinching sincerity that it’s, “the only way.” Alarmed by Hilbert’s reaction Crick reads the manuscript himself and actually agrees! Resigned to his fate Crick wakes up the following day and walks to the bus stop where he first encountered the voice of his narrator, knowing full well that by acting in accordance with the books instructions that he is walking towards his death.

True to form it was that very innocuous act previously mentioned (setting his watch at the bus stop) that would lead to grave misfortune for Mr. Crick. Having gotten the time from a stranger less meticulously accurate than himself, Crick had all the while been operating on timeline that was three minutes slow, and though this insignificant detail had not mattered much in the weeks since his introduction to the voice of Kay Eiffel, on this day it was made all the difference in the world. When Harold Crick leapt into the street to save a child on a bicycle he arrived, courtesy of his watch, exactly on time to be struck by that very bus. Far from dead however (he was hospitalized though in stable condition, with only a few broken bones) Crick is more alive than ever. In an ironic twist of fate and a last minute addition to the new manuscript, it is only Crick’s watch (the embodiment of his obsessive compulsive behaviors) that “dies” and in shattering casts off a shard of metal into Cricks artery which prevents him from bleeding out. Spared from death, with a fresh outlook on life and with Pascal at his bedside Harold Crick has inadvertently corrected the deviant path of his life, become the first survivor of a Kay Eiffel story and after so much talk about the end of his life, Harold Crick it seems is just beginning it.

In addition to its comedic genius and entertainment value, the film *Stranger Than Fiction* touches on a couple of important health and wellness topics. Mental health certainly is at the center of this film's theme as the pre-narration life of Harold Crick demonstrates how one can be medically healthy and yet fall short of being truly "well." Harold Crick is portrayed as having solidly addressed the most basic of Maslow's proposed human needs (he has stable employment, a steady income, comfortable housing, has evidently acquired rudimentary life skills, and at least until he "meets" the voice of Eiffel, has no significant threats to his physical well-being) yet as a result of his affliction with what appears to be an obsessive compulsive disorder is a veritable case study of an adult yet to achieve self-actualization. Without significant social relationships, wholly invested in his work and the comfort he derives from order and a highly regular and insulated environment Crick is a textbook (specifically DSM-IV-TR) case of an untreated obsessive-compulsive sufferer. Crick's counting of steps, brush strokes and other inane details of his daily life and rote behaviors is an accurate depiction of this troublesome mental disorder and fits the diagnostic criteria of "repetitive behaviors or mental acts that the person feels driven to perform in response to an obsession, or according to rules that must be applied rigidly" (DSM-IV-TR) and the early parts of the film are particularly successful in capturing the every day difficulties of those affected by this and other anxiety driven disorders.

It is exactly this suffering I think, as well as the genuinely relatable nature of Crick's character that makes him the most sympathetic figure in this story. We root for him because he is a nice guy, we root for him because in his awkwardness we find a little bit of ourselves, and we root for him because like many sympathetic protagonists he is an

ordinary man facing extraordinary obstacles to happiness. There may or may not however, be an unsympathetic character in this story. An obvious suggestion could be Kay Eiffel as she is roughly fills the role of antagonist for most of the book, yet she is not actually an opponent of Harold Crick (she does not even believe him to exist) and there is certainly no malice intended in the destruction of a fictional character. Though she undoubtedly is the origin of the film's central conflict, she ultimately spares Crick upon finding him to be a real man rather than ink on a page and it would be a really tough sell to paint a the murderer of fictional characters as a figure that is in anyway despicable or unsympathetic. This lack of a true human antagonist I think is part of the brilliance of this film, that there is no simple conflict of man versus man, but man in conflict with himself. A character thrown into a predicament where salvation can be found not through the conquering of another individual or a checklist like series of tasks but through mastery of his own demons. In a very real sense, Harold Crick is like all of us in that his single greatest enemy is ultimately himself.

The film, "Stranger than Fiction" offers its viewers very explicit, clinical health and wellness advice, yet through the example of the life of Harold Crick demonstrates one of the most important life lessons of all. Life is a gift, and random chance, divinity or disembodied narrators can intervene at any time. You may be most likely to be killed by cancer or heart disease, but an early bus can do the trick too and that it's not only chain smokers or 80 year olds who die. There is health value, of course, in brushing one's teeth but in the counting of strokes it's important not to forget that rouge wrecking balls hold the power to alter our circumstances in ways we have no control over. The film teaches us that we are all living a comedy up until the moment it is tragic, and since all living

things have a mortality rate of 100%, this moment is sure to come. We may not control when and where we run into our own epilogue but do have control over our own stories and that by playing guitar, dating a dangerous baker or by going to space camp we can be our own narrators, and it is for these reasons that I have no doubt that this film is thoroughly worth watching again and again.

9.0/10