

WRITERS ON SCREEN

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Films about writers divide into three main categories. The biggest group recount real life stories, like *Henry and June*, telling of the love affair between Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin, or *Prick up your Ears*, dramatising the disastrous relationship between Joe Orton and his lover Kenneth Halliwell. After that come – wait for it – comedies about ‘writer’s block’ as in *Barton Fink*, on the torments of a ‘blocked’ Hollywood script writer, and the French *Turtle on its Back*. The third shows authors inventing characters which impinge on their day to day lives. A sinister example is *Misery*, in which a famous novelist is held prisoner by a psychopathic

irer, furious because he has killed off her favourite character. She refuses to release him, keeping him ruthlessly housebound, while he struggles to write a book to suit her. In every case what really interests the film makers is not, of course, the daily grind of creating words, but the author as a romantic or unusual character. Alas, unlike policemen or doctors, say, whose occupations can be made to brim with drama, composition has nothing to commend it. The image of a wordsmith sitting before a word-processor fiddling with a ‘mouse’ is the ultimate box-office turn off. The most that ever happens is that, as in *Communion*, the computer mysteriously refuses to work, a trick with which many readers will be only too familiar.

So is the writer ever fairly and clearly depicted on the silver screen – and if so, in what sort of films? Rather surprisingly, in view of the restrictions that one might imagine reality would impose, the winners are the ones that recount true life stories. The reasons are various but in every case well-structured scripts and convincing dialogue underpin sensitive direction. A good try is *Prick up your Ears* (1987). The story is set in 1980s London, and recounts how the unsuccessful writer, Kenneth Halliwell, becomes more and more jealous as his lover, Joe Orton, receives rapturous applause for his work as a playwright, first with *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* and then *Loot*. Eventually Halliwell’s angry frustration overflows, and he murders Orton.

The script, by Alan Bennett, was clearly not easy to write, even for such a master. In an interview Bennett told how he wrote several drafts. ‘The temptation was to write in a sub-Orton kind of language... Orton’s language was very theatrical, and it doesn’t really work on film... I could have done it as a gay film but that would have just worked on one level and been of rather limited interest. I don’t know how you dramatise the act of writing itself – it’s always a problem. I suppose you can show the paper in the typewriter, like they did in *Julia*, with Lillian Hellman endlessly screwing stuff up and throwing it away. In a way Orton fulfilled what people want in a writer. He has a great gift, then he’s punished for it.

I think that satisfies something in a lot of people’s minds.’

The scenes that do involve typing work well, because of the successful device whereby whenever Orton is at his desk, Halliwell is also in the room. The camera stays predominantly on him, while he chats and tries to distract Joe, whose frustration and irritation we share. These cameos gradually build up a head of steam until, when the couple are on holiday together in Tangier, Kenneth flings Orton’s typewriter over a balcony.

To experience the huge difference of style with which cinema can handle the difficulties of a writer, one should view the video of *An Angel at my Table* (1990), which recounts the life of the New Zealander Janet Frame. Misdiagnosed as schizophrenic, she spent years in mental hospitals, while gradually convincing both herself and others of her sanity through becoming a published author. The film is made up of delicate cameos, which are slow but never dull, and fascinating in their preoccupation with detail. The strength of this film lies in its sensitive script, excellent direction, remarkably good casting and the consistent way in which Janet is shown alone on the screen, much as she was in life.

Another film that deals boldly with the writer growing up shadowed by extreme disadvantages is *My Left Foot*, based on the life of the Irish writer Christy Brown, who became a bestselling author in spite of having acute cerebral palsy. Much of the credit must go to Daniel Day-Lewis, playing the mature Christy. However, although the script remains mostly up-beat it occasionally overplays its hand – for example in a pub brawl more reminiscent of a Wild West movie than Dublin at closing time, while shots of Christy romantically sharing champagne with his fiancée on a misty hill feel more like a scriptwriter’s fantasies than reality. Such overplayed dramatisations make one, perhaps unjustly, question the truth of the rest.

Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle (1994) depicts Dorothy Parker and the group of writers and critics, including Robert Benchley, who met daily in New York’s Algonquin Hotel in the 1920s and 1930s. Perhaps because the story concerns a group rather than an individual, and ignores important aspects of Parker’s life, the end result leaves a feeling of incompleteness. A rather oddly placed interview with her, running behind the final credits, suggests that the director, Oliver Stone, may have shared this sense of lacunae.

Among Dorothy Parker’s real-life achievements were 30 years of contributions to the *New Yorker*, a bestselling collection of poems, and left-wing views that got her exiled from Hollywood as a ‘communist’. By contrast, the character as portrayed is promiscuous, often in an alcoholic haze, and sometimes in bed with her dogs. However, the film does contain some of her wonderful asides, like ‘Don’t look at me in that tone of voice!’

Barton Fink deals, often hilariously, with writer’s block, and also belongs to a group of films where reality and fantasy overlap and intertwine. It is 1941 and the vaguely leftist Broadway playwright Barton Fink is invited by a Hollywood mogul to write a wrestling epic, for which he has neither the talent nor the interest. Left to work in his seedy hotel room, he is befriended by Charlie, an insurance salesman, who later turns out to be a murderous psychopath.