

# 10 movies every writer MUST SEE

They'll not only entertain you, but just might motivate and inspire, too

By Darren Miller

**P**HILIP SEYMOUR Hoffman won an Academy Award in 2006 for his performance in the critically acclaimed *Capote*. Several years earlier he excelled in his role

as Lester Bangs, the late, great rock critic, in *Almost Famous*. While these films—one about murder and execution, the other about rock and roll—couldn't seem much more different in terms of subject matter, they have this in common: Both movies are about writers and writing.

My list of the 10 best movies for writers is not necessarily “the 10 best works of cinema ever created.” But all 10 are enjoyable and entertaining, and each has its own benefits for writers of varying stripes—those who have ever suffered from some form of “writer’s block,” for example, as well as those who’ve had the pleasure of an extended stay in the creative zone.

So whether you’re on a quest for inspiration, searching for new ideas, or even seeking out a bit of practical advice, the following list might just have you pounding the keys as soon as the credits begin to roll.

## **Adaptation (2002)**

Get inside the mind of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (portrayed by Nicolas Cage) as he attempts to adapt Susan Orlean’s *The Orchid Thief* for the big screen. If you write, you’ll likely identify with his character, especially his struggles

and insecurity. Kaufman’s thoughts—through hilarious voice-overs—will ring true for most writers. He eventually allows the story to lead him where it will. *Adaptation* is a reaffirmation that writing is indeed heavy lifting. But the hard work has its rewards. A little confidence—in self and in story—goes a long way in the writing process.

## **All the President’s Men (1976)**

A film that presents on-screen one of the most famous works of journalism in American history, *All the President’s Men* is about more than just journalism. The plot is simple and true: Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) pursue a monumental story for *The Washington Post* that began as mere police-blotter material. While the detective story makes for an entertaining movie, the heart and soul of *All the President’s Men*—the dogged pursuit of truth and the power of the printed word—makes it required viewing for anyone who toils in the word trade.

## **Almost Famous (2000)**

A thoroughly enjoyable coming-of-age story, *Almost Famous* reveals some of the bumps a freelance writer might have to navigate during the life of an assignment—from convincing necessary sources to allow you into their lives to working with editors to shifting gears as a story changes. Through the main character William Miller (played by Patrick Fugit and based on the director/screenwriter Cameron Crowe, who was a teenage *Rolling Stone* correspondent),

the film explores the fine line between befriending sources and maintaining a safe detachment. Lester Bangs—who had never before been portrayed in a major film—advises the young writer on this matter: “Be honest and unmerciful.”

## **Capote (2005)**

*In Cold Blood* forever altered our expectations of nonfiction, raising the writing of reality to true literary status. The film *Capote* depicts how Truman Capote came to write his masterpiece. The first lesson for writers emerges in an early scene, as the New York City-based author clips a newspaper report about the slaying of a Kansas family, finding his next work simply by keeping his antenna up. And, though best known at the time for his fictional work, Capote was willing to take a more journalistic approach. Without that leap, one of the best works of nonfiction might never have been penned.

## **Factotum (2005)**

Matt Dillon inhabits the role of Hank Chinaski, the alter ego of the oft-neglected poet and novelist Charles Bukowski. *Factotum* serves up an intoxicating brew of lessons for people who call themselves writers: A rejection letter is simply a reminder to drop another package in the mail; don’t write simply to please the critics; don’t let a paycheck or passing pleasure get in the way of the real work. The writing itself is the reward, he reminds us. Most importantly, *Factotum* teaches us that a writer is nothing if not persistent. As Bukowski wrote, “If you’re going to try, go all the way.”

## **Finding Neverland (2004)**

The story of how playwright J.M. Barrie (played by Johnny Depp) found the inspiration to create the now classic *Peter Pan*, this film provides writers a necessary reminder that the gift of imagination—should we choose to embrace it—is limitless in its transcendent power. This movie reaffirms the reasons we picked up a pen in the first place and why we continue to put words on paper. Not for fame or money, but because we wanted to create interesting characters and tell worthwhile stories. Barrie’s story also offers us this: We don’t need to look far and wide for inspiration; it is all around us.

## **Frida (2002)**

At first, a movie about Mexican painter Frida Kahlo might strike many writers as an odd selection for my list, but *Frida* delivers a rousing message for all creative artists. The passion that exudes from Frida’s being—her unflagging desire (need, really) to create

despite a life of unending physical pain and relational strife—stirs a passion within the viewer. In one poignant scene, Frida, portrayed convincingly by Salma Hayek, is bedridden in a full-body cast after an accident, yet she finds a way to paint—not on a canvas, but on the cast itself. That kind of spirit is infectious, and you’ll likely catch the creative bug.

## **The Hours (2002)**

*The Hours* spans three generations, beginning with a look at Virginia Woolf, (played by Nicole Kidman) as she battles her own demons and continues to craft what would become her best-known and heavily autobiographical novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Unable to make the people in her life understand her emotional and mental struggles, Woolf did so through her writing. We also see the impact Woolf’s work has on two very different later generations. The film offers a powerful commentary on the ability of the written word to live forever, unlike its

author. If immortality does not inspire you to write well, nothing will.

## **Stone Reader (2002)**

*Stone Reader*, Mark Moskowitz’s documentary film about his journey to find the vanished author of a long-out-of-print novel, is essentially a love song to books and their captivating magic. Moskowitz tries to get through Dow Mossman’s *The Stones of Summer* in 1972 after reading a rave review in *The New York Times*. He attempts again 25 years later and falls in love. But he can’t find any other works by the author; he can’t even find the author. His search leads him to conversations with other book lovers, literary agents and book publishers. The movie makes you want to read something as soon as possible. More importantly, it makes you want to write something immediately.

## **Stranger Than Fiction (2006)**

*Stranger Than Fiction* is a bizarre tale of an author (played by Emma Thompson) struggling to finish her novel while its main character (Will Ferrell) begins to hear a voice narrate his life as it unfolds. Fictional characters can occupy an important place in our lives: We celebrate their triumphs and grieve their deaths. The line between fiction and reality, especially in great novels, is often blurred. And for their authors to succeed, they must allow their characters to speak to them, and they must listen. Writers must give their characters, and stories, room to breathe, grow and change.

## **Darren Miller**

Darren Miller, a former award-winning newspaper reporter and editor, is the co-author of *Consider the Source: A Critical Guide to 100 Prominent News and Information Sites on the Web* and the forthcoming *Web of Conspiracy: A Guide to Conspiracy Theory Sites on the Internet*.



The writing itself is the reward, *Factotum* reminds us. Matt Dillon (above) plays Hank Chinaski, the alter ego of American poet and novelist Charles Bukowski (1920-1994).