

## From Titanic to American Sniper: the biggest lies in fact-based movies

### Level 3: Advanced

#### 1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.

1. Do you enjoy films based on actual events and people?
2. How much creative license do you think film directors should have when making fact-based films?
3. How accurate do you think most films that are based on true stories are?
4. Do you know of any supposedly fact-based films that contain inaccuracies?

#### 2 Key words

a. Find words from the text to fill in the gaps in the definitions. An example sentence and paragraph numbers have been provided.

1. To \_\_\_\_\_ is to show that something is less accurate than it was made to appear. (introduction)  
*In this episode, our team of scientists \_\_\_\_\_ five common nutrition myths.*
2. To be \_\_\_\_\_ means *being or believing that you are morally correct*. (paragraph 1)  
*The message of most religions is the same: how to remain on the \_\_\_\_\_ path.*
3. \_\_\_\_\_ means *nonsense or lies*. (paragraph 2)  
*The story about the mayor mistreating one of her employees was a bunch of \_\_\_\_\_.*
4. To \_\_\_\_\_ is to show or represent something in a story or film. (paragraph 3)  
*Queen Mary wasn't \_\_\_\_\_ very favourably in his latest novel.*
5. If something is \_\_\_\_\_, it is thought or stated to be wrong or illegal, but no proof has been provided yet. (paragraph 3)  
*This morning there was an \_\_\_\_\_ theft in the museum.*
6. To \_\_\_\_\_ is to say that something is true although other people might not believe it or you cannot prove it. (paragraph 5)  
*She \_\_\_\_\_ to have seen a ghost in the courtyard.*
7. \_\_\_\_\_ means *in a way that appears to be something when it is actually something else*. (paragraph 5)  
\_\_\_\_\_, *the series was made to have viewers empathise with this group of prisoners.*

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8. To \_\_\_\_\_ is to cause a problem by being present in large numbers.  
(paragraph 5)  
*The attic was \_\_\_\_\_ by a litter of raccoons.*
9. To \_\_\_\_\_ means to end a disagreement or reach a decision about something. (paragraph 5)  
*It took seven months to \_\_\_\_\_ the bus driver strike.*
10. \_\_\_\_\_ is a class of people who have a high social rank. (paragraph 6)  
*TV dramas about the European \_\_\_\_\_ have recently gained popularity.*
11. A \_\_\_\_\_ is the way someone or something is represented in a film, book, or other work. (paragraph 7)  
*The streaming service was heavily criticised for their \_\_\_\_\_ of the government during the pandemic.*
12. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a strong feeling or complaint that you have been mistreated.  
(paragraph 8)  
*Actors harbour a long list of \_\_\_\_\_ against the director.*
13. \_\_\_\_\_ is the use of public methods to try and make social and political changes. (paragraph 8)  
*There is a long history of public \_\_\_\_\_ to try and save old-growth forests.*
14. If something is \_\_\_\_\_, it hasn't been proven to be accurate or correct.  
(paragraph 9)  
*The author makes several \_\_\_\_\_ claims about gender equality in Japanese culture.*

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#### **Controversy over debunked elements of Oscar-winning drama *The Blind Side* won't be the first time a film based on a true story has taken liberties with the truth**

Stuart Heritage

17 August, 2023

- 1 Back in 2009, a Hollywood studio could make a film like *The Blind Side*, about the righteous bravery of a real-life wealthy white family who dared to adopt a troubled black teenager. And, back then, it was a sensation. *The Blind Side* made its money back ten times over. It won Sandra Bullock an Oscar, and people loved it.
- 2 And yet you're unlikely to find another film that has aged quite so badly. Not only does watching *The Blind Side* often feel like you've accidentally wandered into the National White Saviour Museum, but it now turns out that most of it might have been cobblers anyway.
- 3 In August 2023, Michael Oher, the former NFL star whose adolescence was depicted in *The Blind Side*, petitioned a Tennessee court to legally end his relationship with the family that adopted him. He alleged that Leigh Anne Tuohy and Sean Tuohy prevented him from receiving any money from *The Blind Side*, while they earned millions. He also alleged that the Tuohys had never formally adopted him, as they had claimed.
- 4 *The Blind Side* isn't the only film to have been debunked, despite its supposed adherence to historical fact. Plenty of films got it wrong, and many of them remain wildly popular. Here are some notable examples.
- 5 **Captain Phillips**  
Paul Greengrass's 2013 drama ostensibly tells the story of the 2009 Maersk Alabama hijacking, in which Somali pirates seized control of an American cargo ship. In the film, merchant mariner Richard Phillips saves the day with his quick thinking and steely nerves. The film was based on Phillips's memoir *A Captain's Duty*. But other Alabama crewmembers didn't see it the same way. In 2013, one went public, claiming that Phillips had ignored seven emails warning him of the presence of pirates and that he had no plan to deal with them when they boarded the ship.

A number of crewmembers sued Maersk for \$50m following the hijacking, claiming that they had knowingly been sent into pirate-infested waters. Maersk subsequently settled out of court.

#### 6 **Braveheart**

*Braveheart* took liberties with the story of William Wallace. It showed him growing up in poverty (when he was actually a member of the aristocracy). It showed him in kilts (hundreds of years before kilts were invented). It depicted the Battle of Stirling Bridge (which took place on a bridge and not in a field in the middle of nowhere). Still, good for Scotland for playing along by commissioning a statue of William Wallace and making it just as inaccurate as the film by getting it to look exactly like Mel Gibson.

#### 7 **Titanic**

Obviously, the broad strokes of *Titanic* were historically accurate – there was a boat, and it sank – but that didn't stop James Cameron from running into trouble elsewhere. In the film, First Officer William Murdoch is the corrupt officer who panics near the lifeboats, shoots a passenger in the chest, and then kills himself. While some survivors claimed to have seen an officer kill himself, it has also been claimed that Murdoch was swept out to sea. After the film was released, Murdoch's family took issue with the film's portrayal of their relative, saying it negated his reputation as a hero who launched several lifeboats and threw deckchairs into the sea for people to cling to. As such, the Vice-President of Fox travelled to Murdoch's home town to apologise and donate £5,000 to a local school.

#### 8 **Patch Adams**

Meanwhile, the actual Patch Adams's list of grievances is long and not particularly specific. He told Roger Ebert: "I hate that movie." There's his depiction, which Adams says is oversimplified, reducing him to a gratingly funny figure while ignoring his medical work and activism. Adams now carries around business cards containing the titles of 50 books so that "when someone comes up and asks me for an autograph, I give them a little lecture on pop culture and how it's dummed our population and its consequences." So that's fun.

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#### 9 American Sniper

In this film, Bradley Cooper's Chris Kyle's arch enemy is an Iraqi sniper called Mustafa, but in reality, the pair barely encountered each other (if, indeed, he actually existed). But, then again, Kyle himself might not have been the most trustworthy storyteller. He made a number of unverified claims. He falsely reported the number of medals he won in service and said that he punched Jesse Ventura for besmirching the Iraq war. Ventura sued him for this last one, but no verdict was reached.

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#### 3 Comprehension check

a. Which of these statements are Inaccurate Claims made in films (IC), which statements are Facts (F), and which statements relate to information that is Not Given (NG)?

1. Michael Oher, depicted in *The Blind Side*, was formally adopted by the Tuohys.
2. Michael Oher asked to legally end his relationship with the Tuohys.
3. Richard Phillips was a hero who bravely dealt with an unexpected pirate attack.
4. Four crew members sued Maersk for his irresponsible behaviour.
5. William Wallace, portrayed in *Braveheart*, was a kilt-wearing, sword-wielding Scot.
6. William Wallace went from rags to riches.
7. First Officer William Murdoch on the Titanic was a coward who killed himself when the ship started sinking.
8. James Cameron issued a public apology for the inaccurate portrayal of First Officer William Murdoch.
9. Patch Adams was more than a comedian and contributed more with his medical work and activism.
10. Mustafa and Chris Kyle were longstanding enemies on Iraqi soil.

#### 4 Key language

a. Match the words to form phrases from the text.

- |                    |              |
|--------------------|--------------|
| 1. accidentally    | accurate     |
| 2. historical      | claims       |
| 3. wildly          | encountered  |
| 4. pirate-infested | fact         |
| 5. historically    | funny figure |
| 6. gratefully      | popular      |
| 7. barely          | reported     |
| 8. unverified      | wandered     |
| 9. falsely         | waters       |

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b. Complete the sentences with the words below. Change the form of the word to the correct form of speech.

1. I'm afraid that it would be impossible to check – the information is \_\_\_\_\_.  
(verify)
2. This is yet another film that is guilty of many \_\_\_\_\_ inaccuracies. (history)
3. The director was \_\_\_\_\_ accused of fabricating the evidence. (false)
4. This thriller is about a couple who are left behind in shark-\_\_\_\_\_ waters. (infest)
5. The Queen, who was responsible for most of the critical decisions at the time, was \_\_\_\_\_ mentioned. (bare)
6. The shipwreck was \_\_\_\_\_ discovered off the coast of Tahiti. (accident)

### 5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “The main purpose of films is to entertain, not to educate.”
- “A film can still say that it is ‘based on a true story’ even when its content is not 100% accurate.”
- “Hollywood has dummed down the population. Film directors should act more responsibly and try to depict the complexities of history.”

### 6 In your own words

a. Choose a film that you like that is based on facts. Research the actual events that the film is based on and investigate to see if any parts of the film are not historically accurate.

b. Report your findings to the class.

#### Useful language

In real life, the protagonist/events is/are portrayed ...

The film falsely depicts/shows ...

It is (not) quite true that ...

The film is (not) accurate when it shows ...

Another inaccuracy is ...

... might be cobblers.

... never ... as they claim.