One of the most common phrases I hear when talking to people about their script is the following:

"Yeah, but that's how it really happened."

I hate to tell you this people, but no one gives a shit. I know, it sounds harsh, but...ironically...that's reality.

When we are writing a script we are writing one thing: fiction.

Even in the best biopics, things are still fictionalized.

The most recent story of this occurrence that has happened is Arron Sorkin's The Social Network.

The Social Network was based on a book. A book that hadn't even been written yet. A proposal was presented to Sorkin and he loved the idea so much he signed up to pen the script. In an interview, Sorkin stated that the book hadn't even been written yet and that both the script and the book were written at the same time.

He was pumping out pages of the script while the author, Ben Mezrich, was pumping out pages of the book.

In that process, facts were blurred. They only met a few times to compare notes, but for the most part, Sorkin took"liberties" with the story.

Why?

Because there's a huge difference between movies and reality.

Sure, you hear a story and it's like "Holy shit! Really? That's amazing!" But it doesn't make it a script. Real life, for the most part consists of instances...not a through-line arc.

In real life events take place over YEARS. In a script you have 2 hours to wrap it up. Sometimes you have 2 hours to sum up 10, 20, 50 years.

You don't have time to fuck around.

Newbie writers often run into this. They follow the sage old advice to "write what they know" and the only thing they know ids what's happened to them.

Brief tangent on the topic of "write what you know."

I'm 33. I've never been married. I don't have kids. And I've never murdered anyone.

Does that mean that I can't write a story about a serial killing husband of 10 years with two kids?

No.

BUT, I've been around parents. I've been around kids. I've seen enough legal shows, read enough non-fiction and seen a decent amount of movies that deal with the subject of murder that I'm pretty sure I can tackle the subject with an air of confidence.

For those of you that can't "learn from the movies keep this in mind....no movie is written without a shit ton of research.

I.E. you don't need to kill or know a killer to write a movie about a killer.

Okay, back to point...

Real life is fucked up. The basic truism is that you can never THINK of half the shit that happens in real life.

How many times have you though to yourself, "holy shit, I could never write that?"

I promise you that every time you've had that thought, it's been honestly true. But here's the reality when it comes to screenwriting...

It doesn't mean it translates into a script.

When I was writing my thesis script for grad school, I was attempting to write "my Annie Hall."

Much like Annie Hall, I had a scene with the younger character of my main character in school. In this scene I used a real life story that happened to me.

In 6th grade we had to do the whole "what do I want to be when I grow up" thing. While everyone in my class had lofty goals of becoming a fire fighter or policeman, I did my report on the fact that I wanted to be grow up and be the lead singer of Motley Crue.

Not a rock star.

Literally the lead singer of Motley Crue.

In my fantasy, Vince Neil would be kicked out of the band and I would be asked to join all Sammy Hagar style.

So I put this in the script because it was cute and somewhat poignant to the character.

When my thesis advisor, who had quite the name in Hollywood as a screenwriter, read this she chastised me and said to take it out because it had been done many times before.

To which I replied...

"Yeah, but that's really what happened."

Her response: "This isn't real life. It's a movie."

And she was right.

Movies are movies. They can act portray a segment of real life, but they're not real life. No matter how bad you want them to be. No matter how accurate it is.

When I read the Ben Mezrich book I found out that half the shit that appeared in the Sorkin script of The Social Network wasn't true.

Well, it was sorta true, but the facts were blurred for dramatic purposes.

Two characters were molded into one.

Things were slightly exaggerated.

Things were told out of sequence.

Why?

The compelling story about the nerd who invented FaceBook, should have been compelling enough to well...be compelling. Right?

Nope.

Not how it works.

Here's an example:

In the movie, Zuckerburg crashed the school's network in a manner of hours after creating his version of hot or not. He then, viscously knew he did it and celebrated.

In reality, according to the book, this took almost a week to happen. And in one moment, he left the machine running while he jetted to class. It was then that the network crashed. He freaked the fuck out that he might have caused it and rushed back to his apartment to shut it down.

He did, but it was too late.

In the movie he walked into his disciplinary hearing like a cocky motherfucker.

In reality, according to the book, he was nervous as hell of getting kicked out of school.

Which makes for a better film?

Which character seems more interesting?

Sure, we could have had a week long montage, but it would have been him sitting at the computer off and on for a week.

Who the fuck wants to watch that?

So we compress it into a night and WHAM...

Oscar gold.

Okay, maybe not that simple, but you get my point.

Although real life is sometimes fantastical, you have to cater to the movie, the audience and what will serve the story best.

I know you all want to believe that the wacky shit that happens to you on a daily basis will engage the mass population...but it won't.

Sorry. It's the truth.

Even though real life usually ends in the exclamation, "holy shit I could never writer this."

It doesn't translate into "Holy shit people will watch this!"

I know. It sucks. But trust me, when you take dramatic license, you'll learn to tell a story better.

It's called embellishment people. Learn to use it!

'Nuff on that. Remember, if you're going to attend The Great American Pitchfest in a few weeks, find me. I'd like to talk to you.

Till next week...