

# Study Guide

## The Invention of Lying



*The Invention of Lying* Study Guide Feature movies are a medium, an art and a business. Each of these elements plays a role. As a medium, movies represent ideas through the codes and conventions of sound and moving image. As art, they make personal and cultural statements to their audiences. As businesses, they create work for their creators and profits for their investors and distributors.

This guide, which extends the ideas presented in *The Invention of Lying* episode of *Beyond the Screen*, may be used by teachers as they support their students, by parents who want to discuss the movie with their children, or by serious viewers who want to think beyond the screen.

**Plot Synopsis:** Mark Bellison, a self-confessed loser, lives in a world that is honest—painfully so. No one lies, ever. There is no word for lying. Mark is told that he is unattractive, untalented, unemployed and evicted. Out of desperation, he tells the world's first lies. Then life gets interesting.

### A. Truth

*The Invention of Lying* presents a world where the words 'truth' and 'lie' do not exist. Everyone is completely honest, not because they want to be, but because they know no other way. Their speech, clothing, advertising, and names all reflect their absolute honesty.

#### 1. Truth in Speech

Anna tells Mark that she is pessimistic about their date because of his looks. The waiter tells Mark that Anna is out of his league. The tour guide tells the tourists that Mark will probably be fired today. Shelley tells Mark that she is more qualified for his job than he is. Brad tells Mark that he hates him. Greg tells the cop that he had a lot to drink before driving. The doctor tells Mark's mother that she will die tonight.

These people are not being unkind in this alternate reality: they are being honest.

Might these encounters make viewers think that our world would be better if people were more honest, or might the encounters help viewers see some good reasons for lying?

#### 2. Truth in Clothing

The clothing in *The Invention of Lying* may seem unremarkable, but it might be remarkably important.

Whose clothing do you remember?

What does Mark Bellison wear on his first date with Anna?

What does Anna wear?

What does Anthony wear when he fires Mark?

What does Mark wear when Anna brings him her wedding invitation?

What does Nathan Goldfrappe wear when he lectures?

What does Mark wear when he attends the premiere of *The Black Plague*?

How are these costume designs honest?

If the characters' clothing is honest, what does it tell viewers?

Were any of the characters' clothing dishonest?

### 3. Truth in Advertising

Mark watches a Coke commercial on TV that presents a spokesperson, a glass and a can of Coke. The spokesperson speaks directly to the camera and informs the audience that drinking Coke can lead to obesity, they haven't changed Coke for a long time, but redesigned the can so it would appeal to children.

Do you think this commercial format is truthful?

How well does the Coke commercial fit with the other truthful media texts, e.g., the history movies that Mark writes and the newscasts?

### 4. Truth in Names

Mark visits his elderly mother in A SAD PLACE FOR HOPELESS OLD PEOPLE. He plans to have casual sex at A PLACE FOR INTERCOURSE WITH A NEAR STRANGER. He attends Anna's wedding at A PLACE TO THINK ABOUT THE MAN IN THE SKY. These names are part of the alternate universe in *The Invention of Lying*.

Are these names honest, or more honest than the names we currently use?

What might be the names of some other dishonestly-named places, e.g, funeral homes, cemeteries, beauty parlours, massage parlours, banks, fast-food restaurants, fine dining restaurants, lobbyists' offices, insurance companies, cheque-cashing services?

### 5. Truth in Acting

"Often in acting, when you say a line you really mean something else. There's subtext. But because of the way this world is, subtext doesn't exist. You say exactly what you mean all the time. So it was just a matter of stripping away the normal actor tricks and trying to be as honest and clean and uncomplicated in the delivery as possible." Jennifer Garner (Anna)

Audiences have seen many of these actors before. In *The Invention of Lying*, as Ms. Garner suggests, they had to act without appearing to act. They had to appear honest, unaffected and understated. This task may be very different than their previous acting challenges. We know, for example, that Ricky Gervais' *The Office* character, David Brent, was constantly acting like a competent office manager when he was totally incompetent. In *The Invention of Lying*, Mr. Gervais has to be a barely-competent writer for Lecture Films and an aging bachelor desperately seeking Anna's love. Consider Ricky Gervais' performance and the performances of those *The Invention of Lying* actors whom you have seen previously in other movies.

How did they act differently from their other efforts?

How did their acting seem honest in *The Invention of Lying*?

## B. Casting for Meaning

*The Invention of Lying* has a very strong subtext. People who know Ricky Gervais' work through his creation and starring in *The Office* (UK) will know that his David Brent character was a compulsive liar. This prior knowledge

connection between *The Office* and *The Invention of Lying* will encourage those viewers to find the movie very funny. People with prior knowledge of other cast members will find the movie even funnier. In fact, much of the entertainment in *The Invention of Lying* could result from recognizing actors, recalling their past work, then considering the connections between their past work and *The Invention of Lying*. Consider the following actors, the characters they play, and their past credits in comedies. How might viewers' prior knowledge of these people add to the humour in *The Invention of Lying*?

Martin Starr *waiter* (*Superbad*, *Knocked Up*)

Jonah Hill *Frank* (*Superbad*, *Knocked Up*)

Jennifer Garner *Anna* (*Dude*, *Where's My Car?*)

Rob Lowe *Brad Kessler* (*Austin Powers*, *Wayne's World*)

Tina Fey *Shelley* (*30 Rock*, *Saturday Night Live*)

Christopher Guest *Nathan Goldfrappe* (*Spinal Tap*, *Mighty Wind*, *Best in Show*, *For Your Consideration*)

Jeffrey Tambor *Anthony* (*The Hangover*)

Louis C.K. *Greg* (*Saturday Night Live*, *Role Models*)

John Hodgman *Minister* (*Mac commercials "Hello, I'm a PC."*)

Stephen Merchant *Home Owner* (*The Office UK*)

Nathan Corrdry *TV news reporter* (*Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*)

Jason Bateman *doctor* (*Arrested Development*)

Philip Seymour Hoffman *bartender* (*Synecdoche, New York, State and Main*)

Edward Norton *cop* (*Death to Smoochie*)

## C. Metaphysics

1. On her deathbed, Mark's mother expresses her fear of an eternity of nothingness. Mark tells a lie—a big one—describing an afterlife that includes ice cream, a mansion and the company of those we love. His intention of easing his mother's fears explodes when others overhear him, and he becomes an international phenomenon.

His desperation and imagination help him create 10 rules that he presents simultaneously to a local group and— via TV news —an international audience.

Consider the 10 rules Mark presents, and more importantly, consider the reactions of his audience. For example, if there was no 'man in the sky' and no wonderful or horrible afterlives in this alternate world before Mark's lies, might *The Invention of Lying* suggest that religion is a lie? Mark changes his lie as he is pressed by the crowd's questions. Might *The Invention of Lying* suggest that religion was not only invented by men, but that these men revised their inventions in response to audience challenges?

Ricky Gervais has openly admitted to being an atheist. Knowing this, why might he include a liar's invention of religion in *The Invention of Lying*?

Why might viewers think he would include a liar's invention of religion in *The Invention of Lying*?

Could religion have been invented by men to ease people's fears and suffering, as happened when Mark described a wonderful afterlife to his dying mother?

Might *The Invention of Lying* upset some people, e.g., those who believe that afterlives and the rules that decide them are true and come from a higher being? Do you think *The Invention of Lying* might draw criticism, and maybe even a boycott, from some religious groups?

Do you think *The Invention of Lying* might be lauded by atheist groups?

2. After his TV appearance, Mark and Anna talk about people's outer and inner qualities while sitting on a park bench. Marks asks Anna, "What do you see?" Anna describes the people's looks, while Mark describes their behaviours. She sees two nerdy people laughing, he sees two people in love. Mark encourages Anna to look beyond appearances.

How is this conversation relevant to Anna's wedding and choice of husband?

How does this conversation relate to truth and lying?

If Brad is the most logical husband for Anna, is she lying when she rejects him?

3. Mark has two opportunities to tell lies that would successfully gain Anna's love. He declines both opportunities. Even though he has happily lied for money and fame and wants Anna's love more than anything, he refuses to lie to get it.

If Mark knows lying will work, and he lies previously without regret, why won't he lie for Anna's love?

What other scenes in *The Invention of Lying* might help viewers understand his actions?

## D. Whispered Lies

After his discovery of lying, Mark visits a homeless man, a stressed-out co-worker and patients in A SAD PLACE FOR HOPELESS OLD PEOPLE. He whispers to them and makes them happy. Viewers cannot hear what he says, and a song plays on the soundtrack.

Why might the directors have decided not to reveal Mark's whispers?

What might viewers think Mark said to the people?

Is it important to know what he said, or just that his whispers brought happiness?

For more information on *The Invention of Lying* visit <http://the-invention-of-lying.warnerbros.com/> and <http://www.rickygervais.com/thissideofthetruth.php>

### Study Guide written by Neil Andersen

Neil Andersen has taught film and/or media studies for over 30 years. He has been a computer resource teacher, a literacy consultant, and has given educational keynotes and workshops across Canada, in the US, Asia, Australia and Europe.

Andersen has taught at the University of Toronto, York University and at Mount Saint Vincent University. He is an executive member of the Association for Media Literacy (Ontario) and on the Education Committee of the Media-Awareness Network.

He has made movies and videos, authored student textbooks, teacher resource books, over 200 study guides, and designed posters, interactive CDs, websites, and programs.

His awards include the Jesse McCause Award (National Telemedia Council) and The Magic Lantern Award (The Association for Media and Technology in Education). His writing has also received numerous awards.

Neil can be contacted at [mediacy@sympatico.ca](mailto:mediacy@sympatico.ca)