

From Atwood's assault to Pynchon's paper bag: the best author cameos

The Handmaid's Tale author's appearance in the TV version of her novel is only the latest in a surprisingly illustrious roll call of bookish bit parts

Thursday 27 April 2017 13.00 BST Last modified on Thursday 27 April 2017 13.01 BST

Atwood in her cameo in The Handmaid's Tale Margaret

Be honest: at some point in our lives, most of us have dreamed about being slapped across the face by Margaret Atwood. But we literary masochists must settle for living vicariously through actor Elizabeth Moss, who receives a smart smack to the face from the author, when Atwood appears as a guard at the centre where Moss's character Offred is indoctrinated in the ways of America's new theocracy.

Seeing the author turn villain to her heroine is a delightful little detail in Hulu's new TV adaptation of The Handmaid's Tale. Here are some of the best surprise appearances by an author in an adaptation of their own work – omitting cameos by Marvel's Stan Lee (too ubiquitous), as well as author cameos in film and TV they didn't write. Points on that front go to Jonathan Franzen and Michael Chabon exchanging fisticuffs in an episode of the Simpsons ("That's it Franzen! I think your nose needs some Corrections!"); Truman Capote appearing as a "Truman Capote lookalike" in Annie Hall; and Salman Rushdie, for some excellent eyebrow acting when Bridget Jones asks where the loos are.

Stephen King as a minister in Pet Sematary

It might be easier to name a film or show that King hasn't been in; he has developed a healthy career as a bus driver. But the king of horror is at his best when gleefully – and creepily – delivering a graveside prayer in Pet Sematary, the quite good adaptation of his 1983 novel. This cameo is just a shade better than King's appearance in the film Maximum Overdrive, which he wrote and directed (then spent years rightly rubbishing), as man who is repeatedly called an arsehole by a rogue ATM.

Gillian Flynn as axe lady in Dark Places

Who knew that a book about America's satanic panic during the 1980s could be made into such a dull film? But it can be done, as Dark Places – which took £600 in its opening weekend – proves. But fans of author Gillian Flynn can see the Gone Girl novelist in a scene where Charlize Theron visits a true crime club – spot Flynn looking oddly benign as she cradles an axe in her lap.

Hunter S Thompson as himself in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

Mid-acid trip in San Francisco, Johnny Depp as gonzo journalist and drug aficionado Hunter S Thompson stumbles across a rave and his gaze lands on the elderly real-life Thompson, sitting at the bar. "There I was ... mother of God, there I am!" cries Depp. Meta and trippy.

John le Carré as a lunching pensioner in The Night Manager

Le Carré may be a master of the spy novel, but he's also the master of acting like a cranky old man, delivering a wonderful telling-off to the charming Tom Hiddleston in The Night Manager, after his lunch is spoiled by an altercation. "I must apologise for my friend's misbehaviour," says charming Hiddleston, charmingly. "I think you bloody well should," snaps Le Carré, who also plays a guest at the MI6 Christmas party in the 2011 film of Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy, taking part in a festive singalong next to a man dressed like Lenin.

Thomas Pynchon in Inherent Vice

Did the reclusive author appear in Paul Thomas Anderson's 2014 adaptation of Inherent Vice? We may never know: Pynchon hasn't been confirmed in a photograph since 1955, so what the 79-year-old actually looks like today is a mystery.

Anderson refused to acknowledge if Pynchon was in the film at all, but actor Josh Brolin told the New York Times that the "mercurial iconoclast" had filmed a cameo, but "stayed in the corner". Since then, hordes of internet sleuths have tried to determine which old man in the background is Pynchon. The leading theory – a doctor sitting at a table in a clinic – was dismissed when bit-part actor Charley Morgan revealed in 2015 that he was the doctor (and not also secretly Pynchon).

If you can find him, you will put the minds of many a fevered Redditor to rest. It has been confirmed, however, that Pynchon did play himself – wearing a paper bag on his head – in the Simpsons.