

**By:** Alix Berman

**HED:** You're Never Going To Marry Your Fictional Crush

**DEK:** Women are falling for men written by women, and who can blame them? Modern-day men don't stand a chance compared with Conrad Fisher

Ava Raptis has never had a boyfriend, but she's deeply in love— with someone who doesn't actually exist. "I want somebody to look at me and yearn for me like Conrad does for Belly," the 21-year-old Fordham student admits. Raptis spent her late summer and early fall nights eager for Wednesdays because that meant she could stream the next episode of Amazon Prime's hit TV show, *The Summer I Turned Pretty*. As she pressed play on her computer once a week, the screen reflected a tanned, brown-eyed doctor, also known as her fictional boyfriend: Conrad Fisher.

Raptis isn't alone in her fantasies regarding the brooding older Fisher brother. What was once seen as harmless fangirling has evolved into a cultural phenomenon through social media apps, specifically TikTok. While crushing on fictional characters is no new sensation for young women, the constant access to lustful edits is. One edit to The Scripts' "The Man Who Can't Be Moved" on TikTok features numerous clips of Fisher patiently awaiting the female protagonist while the video romanticizes an unrealistically toxic relationship. This edit has 9.1 million views. It's also no surprise that Fisher is accompanied by characters such as Derek Sheppard and Damon Salvatore in a stream of thirstful edits. These characters, written by women, portray a very specific balance of mystery vs affection, and have warped real-life dating expectations.

But who can blame women for retreating into the arms of fictional men when modern dating feels like a marathon of unmet expectations? In a society ruled by hookup culture and whichever new app promises "intentional dating," the online scene has become merely transactional. This detached form of dating drives fantasy and escapism to feel like self-preservation.

65% of adults ages 18 to 29 have used a dating app or site— yet many describe the process as exhausting, confusing, or even demoralizing— found an [SSRS](#) opinion panel from March 2025. So of course women are turning to fiction, when reality often disappoints.

It's not a coincidence that all of these men women daydream about—Conrad Fisher, Derek Sheppard, Damon Salvatore—were written by female writers. Every single one of their flaws is purposeful, often used to portray a kind of vulnerability men in real life rarely possess. Women create these characters to appeal to the female gaze by being emotionally unavailable enough to chase, but still capable of growth once they find their perfect girl. They are complicated, safe, thoughtful, and, well, hot. But sorry to break it to all of you, it's

never gonna happen. There's a reason we meet these men only in the realm of fiction—and that's because they don't exist so we've had to invent them ourselves.

Raptis knows how it sounds when she says she wants a man like Conrad Fisher, and as her long jet black hair drapes over her shoulder, she promises she is *not* delusional. Call it having standards, or high expectations, but she believes the reason she hasn't been in a relationship before is because she is looking for the qualities projected on her TV screen in real life. Knowing this is unlikely, Raptis laughs at herself. "Conrad is very attractive. He is obsessed with Belly. He would go to the ends of the earth for her," she says. Who wouldn't want their hypothetical boyfriend to possess these qualities?

In Raptis' dream world, her romantic life would look like a Netflix Original. Think emotionally chaotic but polished to perfection, utterly a mess yet comforting. The men in her fantasies cry, yearn, and brood—but unlike in the real world, they would never ghost a girl the morning after spending the night. "I just feel like I'm never gonna find that on Hinge, so I don't really waste my time," Raptis said.

Matchmaker Kami Hockfield Verne has watched the implications of online dating and women's expectations unwind in the real world. In her five years of pairing clients, she's seen a similar frustration consume adults. This has enhanced the desire for people to meet organically. Her clients vent about matching with people online who never ask them out, feeling ghosted before the first date even exists, and "being on these stupid apps for a decade," said Verne. She sees younger women walk into her office with a mountain of expectations shaped by what they've consumed online. The edits, the characters, the tension, the emotional theatrics, the appearances.

To Verne, the apps aren't just inefficient; they're corrosive. "Everyone's pictures stink, and it's toxic to be on them all the time," Verne explains. In her daily life she aids women who approach her with a list of standards fueled by fantasy, which requires her to manage their expectations. Eventually, after she walks them through values and goals, each client learns that what they are truly looking for is emotional stability. "People who have unrealistic expectations stay single," said Verne. "People who focus on real things that make a solid relationship end up meeting someone."

If women like Raptis are the viewers that Verne focuses on, then Ana Cecilia Manueco is the creator. The 20-year-old runs the popular TikTok account @vevuedits, known for amorous, cinematic edits of *The Summer I Turned Pretty*

To Manueco, editing isn't about finding the sexiest shirtless scene; it's about conveying a character's depth through visuals and analysis. In her video to Tyler The Creator's "Like

Him,” the viewer can watch as the teenage heartthrob scrunches his eyebrows in disgust and voice rises octaves. It’s only a minute and 30 seconds long, but cinematically depicts Conrad’s emotional turmoil throughout the series.

Manueco admits that the line between watching the show through a lens of creative admiration versus obsession is definitely thin. “Of course, I have a hyper fixation on these characters,” she says. “When the show aired, I was like, I need to find a man like him. But when time passes by, it’s like, okay, I’m back to reality.”

While reality conquers the ideal world of fiction for Manueco, that’s not the case for everyone. Manueco believes some of her followers who are fascinated by Conrad Fisher have had negative experiences in their personal dating lives. This forces them to romanticize the men they see on their screens.

Danielle Ofir, a senior at Syracuse University studying Human Development and Family Science, understands the appeal of forgoing the modern man for the one on her television. She starts laughing hysterically as she recounts her Hinge horror stories. And her worst experience? When they simply don’t understand boundaries. “I told this guy I don’t just hook up, and if he wants to meet up, he needs to take me on a date,” she says. “So we get there and then he sits next to me instead of in front of me, and we’re there talking for maybe five minutes and already puts his hand on my thigh. I then go to the bathroom and come back and sit in front of him.”

Ofir persevered throughout the date and began to enjoy it. A glass of white wine and a plate of sushi can fix almost any situation. So when her date asked to continue their rendezvous outside an ice cream shop, she agreed. But on their way he stopped at a park and asked if she wanted to go toward the back where nobody could spot the pair. Although Ofir originally said no, they ended up kissing. “Within two minutes he’s sucking on my lip so hard that it starts to hurt, so I pull away and he gave me a hickey on my lip,” Ofir says. “I met this guy on Hinge, by the way.”

This isn’t just one poor encounter for Ofir. Her inboxes are flooded with egotistical men who believe they’re entitled to suck a woman’s lip off because they paid for a salmon skin roll. “It’s happened so many times when they text me saying ‘Let’s fuck’ or ‘Let’s get married’ with nothing before,” Ofir says. In her experience, nobody wants a valued connection, to go on genuine dates simply because they like you, or engage in deep and meaningful conversation without expecting something in return. “I just want a guy to treat me like he likes me and not just use me for sex and an ego booster,” Ofir whispers.

This kind of emotional disillusionment makes fictional yearning look like a logical choice. All Ofir wants is a man who values her beyond physical attributions. She admits to being a

hopeless romantic who's discouraged by those who surround her, so she understands the appeal of turning to the TV screen in hopes of seeing a man who possesses the qualities she seeks.

If Ofir's dating life sounds bleak, Syracuse University's pop culture professor, Bob Thompson, will be the first to tell you the negative impacts of social media on modern day dating. He talks about how women have been idealizing fictional men for centuries, going all the way back to Jane Austen. The difference today, he says, is the sheer volume of accessible content. "It used to be you watched a show once a week. Now you can see a character 24/7, and you can remake them, re-edit them, send them across the world," Thompson said.

Thompson sees a structural shift from young women watching romance on TV, to now interacting with it. The amount of material available online is almost infinite, which wasn't true 10 years ago. Viewers can easily fall into the consumption of edits on TikTok made from creators such as Manueco. "If you give curious people a device that has all of human knowledge jammed into it, it's going to pull them in," explains Thompson.

It's ironic, truly. The men who've set an impossible bar for romance are the ones who never existed to begin with. They are written by women who know exactly what it feels like to want more from a man who's left you on delivered for the past 48 hours, only for it to hit 12:00 a.m. on a Saturday and he texts you "u up?" Maybe that's why we fall for fictional characters over and over again. Because for a few hours on screen, every expectation is met, and then once the credits roll we get to relive the giggles and squeals while scrolling through social media in bed on our phones.

Why would somebody like Raptis put herself out there when she knows she is going to be disappointed? The truth is, there is no decent response. While men in today's society think it's okay to ask for nudes completely unprompted, as Ofir has experienced, the ones on screen set the bar far too high to compare to those who are decent in the real world.

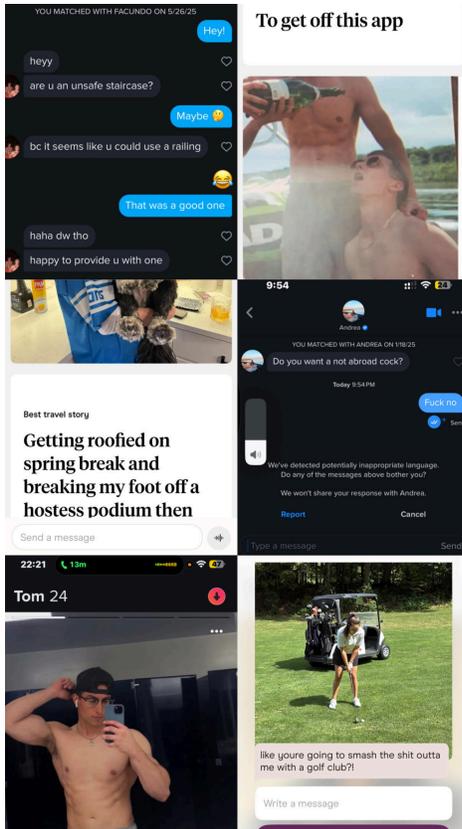
So, while you're never going to marry Conrad Fisher, that doesn't mean you have to settle for a boy who poses with a fish on his Hinge profile. In a dating atmosphere that is consumed by apps and hookup culture, it's okay to escape reality and indulge in a fictional man once in a while—just try to be a little realistic when doing so.

## **Side Bars:**

### **The Brooding Man Industrial Complex: 10 Fictional Favorites**

1. Conrad Fisher
2. Nathan Scott
3. Derek Sheppard
4. Damon Salvatore
5. Mr. Darcy
6. Jess Mariano
7. Tim Riggins
8. Mr. Big
9. JJ Maybank
10. Edward Cullen

### **The Men On Dating Apps Are Not Okay**



Annotated Source List:

1. Ava Raptis: (516) 254-3668
  - a. 21-year-old Senior at Fordham University
  - b. Met over Zoom
  - c. Met through mutual friends
  - d. 9/30/25
2. Robert Thompson: [rthomps@sy.edu](mailto:rthomps@sy.edu), (315) 443-4077
  - a. Pop-culture professor at Syracuse University
  - b. Discovered him through professor portal
  - c. Met over Zoom
  - d. 11/10/2025
3. Kami Hockfield Verne (215)694-9935
  - a. Professional Match Maker

- b. A mutual friend's mom
  - c. Met over zoom
  - d. 12/2/2025
- 4. @vevuedits/Ana Cecilia Manueco on tiktok
  - a. 20 year old Tiktok editor
  - b. Met over zoom
  - c. 10/25/25
  - d. Found her through Tiktok
- 5. Danielle Ofir (516) 474-9419
  - a. Senior at SU who has experience with relationships and dating apps
  - b. Met through mutual friends
  - c. Met over zoom
  - d. 11/1/25
- 6. Julie Koback (516) 776-2325
  - a. Senior at SU that likes fictional men. Had to cut the interview because there was nothing substantial
  - b. Mutual friends
  - c. Interviewed her in her apartment
  - d. 10/30/25