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Jessica Pressler on What's Real and Not About *Inventing Anna*

By Jackson McHenry



Anna Chlumsky as Vivian; Jessica Pressler. Photo-Illustration: Vulture; Photos by Netflix and Getty Images

In the Netflix series *Inventing Anna*, a journalist tries to untangle a web of lies spun by a socialite who claims to be a German heiress. It's all very close to the truth of the article on which the show is based, reported here in [New York Magazine](#) by Jessica Pressler, of the real-life Anna Sorokin, who got many wealthy New Yorkers to foot the bill for her lavish lifestyle. On the show, the journalist's name is Vivian, and the magazine goes by *Manhattan*, though its offices bear a close resemblance to our own. Anna Chlumsky, who plays Vivian, didn't base her performance on Pressler in specific, but there are similarities in their histories and in some of the details of her reporting process. With *Inventing Anna* out on Netflix, Pressler, who is also a producer on the series, spoke with us about the adaptation process, why she was surprised Shonda Rhimes and her team decided to make a reporter a central character, and how the show ended up capturing the truth of her experience.

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How soon after the story was published did you start initial talks with [Netflix and Shondaland](#)?

It was about a month or so later. I remember they reached out pretty soon after I had gotten home from the hospital, or maybe even while I was still in the hospital, in June 2018, and I said something like, "I'm sorry, I'm behind on emails, I got caught up having a baby," to which Shonda sent me this absolutely iconic reply, which I still have on my wall and which includes the lines, "Don't EVER apologize for the work of being a woman and a mother. If you were a man, people would be putting you on the cover of *Time* magazine for taking care of kids and doing ANY work at all at the same time." And I was instantly smitten.



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Were they already pitching that a journalist like you would be the main character?

It was definitely not a part of the initial pitch. It all happened really fast, and the conversations were just like me asking, “Are you going to talk to the real people?” and that they loved the Neff character and all of that. I think that decision happened a year into it.

What was your reaction when they said you, or someone like you, would be a character on the show?

As they were developing it, they would have questions, and I would tell them what happened. Shonda wanted to know the process of going to Rikers Island, so I wrote a long email about that. I had dumped a lot of stuff on them, and I would tell them funny things that happened or that people told me because we were still in contact during the trial. That was when they decided to make Vivian a character. It was not a thing I wanted, but I understand the impulse of why they wanted to do it, because Anna is this unknowable person and she was in jail, and it's a world people aren't familiar with. You wanted a tour guide into this world. It's useful to have somebody there to take you through it and experience what I experienced. They called me with the idea, and it was one of those “are you sitting down?” phone calls. A lot of people were on the phone and they were like, “So ... we want to make the reporter a character.”

I didn't really believe it because it had happened before with *Hustlers* [a movie based on another *New York* story by Pressler, in which Julia Stiles plays a version of her]. The character in *Hustlers* got pared back a lot from the original vision, so I assumed they would cut the reporter character in *Inventing Anna*. Nobody wants to see a reporter's shitty apartment.

Did they ask if they could call the character by your name?

I think it was always going to be not me. The show is fictionalized, and the character is a guide to this universe. When I met Anna Chlumsky, she was like, “I'm not doing you,” and I was like,

“Great!” Vivian is like an all-caps angry email of me, but there are things that are very real mixed into it.

The show gives Vivian a backstory based on your life: She was lied to by a high-school student who claimed to have made millions in the stock market for a “Reasons to Love New York” story. How did that become part of the show?

I didn't bring up the “Reasons to Love” thing to Shonda and the others, it was just something they found since it was easily Googleable. The weird thing is that had happened before with *Hustlers*, and that story was a part of that character before it got cut out. I understood why it made it in. I get that there's this parallel in that you're writing about a con artist and then appear to have been conned.

Were you involved in the process of casting Anna Chlumsky?

Oh, no, not at all.

What was your reaction to her and Julia Garner's casting?

She's wonderful. It's funny because Julia Garner is also wonderful, but I didn't think she looked like Anna. Then I went to set, which is an imitation of our *New York Magazine* office, and they had Vivian's research wall up, and they had Julia recreating Anna's Instagram photos, and it looked so freakishly like her that I thought it was Anna.

Did you talk with Julia about playing Anna?

I went with Julia and another producer to see Anna at Albion Correctional Facility. I got to witness Julia Garner speaking to Anna in the Anna accent, which is a moment I regret not having on tape, but we were in jail and couldn't have recorders, because that's a whole process. Julia had really mastered the voice. Anna's voice is so distinctive — whenever I interviewed anybody about her, they would drop into the voice at some point. Julia was very observant. She noticed stuff about Anna that I did not, like the way she pushes her hair behind her ears and adjusts her glasses.

When was the last you were in touch with Anna?

It's been a few months. She's still in custody.

The Vivian character is pregnant on the show, and you were pregnant while working on the story. Was that something they brought up to you?

I was super pregnant while reporting that story and finished two weeks or so before I had a baby. It was not a thing where there was a towel on the floor of the office, but they did tell me

she was going to be pregnant. I think Shonda liked the idea of a woman being pregnant, and it was an interesting thing to show that you can live your life while being pregnant.

On the show, it feels like a bit of a TV construct to have the editors keep telling Vivian that the Anna Delvey story isn't worth pursuing. What was your experience reporting the story?

Obviously those are not our actual bosses at *New York*. Our bosses are quite the opposite. I think the show bosses are a stand-in for patriarchal offices in general. But this is a thing where fact is braided with fiction. It was not a no-brainer to do an 8,000-word story about a non-famous person. It might be now. They did want me to write a *Wall Street* Me Too story, and I did react in pretty much exactly that way — though not as articulately. I did have to sell the story, but it was definitely not exactly the way it was on the show. She has to pitch it in person because you can't just have people being on Slack and email on TV.

There's an emotional truth to it all, even though the details are different. I had a conversation with [Anna's lawyer] Todd Spodek's real wife recently. I told her there are things that are true, but there's a scene where we all go to dinner and talk about Anna the whole time, you and Vivian's husband are rolling your eyes, and obviously that never happened. And she's like, "Oh, but that did happen." But the restaurant was different!

How accurate was the depiction of Scriberia, a.k.a. the place where writers get banished?

Scriberia in the show and in real life is the land of longform writers, which at *New York* Magazine was a wonderful place to be. [Editor's note: When we moved to new offices in early 2020, we went from cubicles to an open floor plan, and Scriberia was subsumed into the general population. Also, the pandemic hit, so the office is generally empty.] As at *Manhattan* magazine, most of the inhabitants were older and the kind of old-school reporters who talked on the phone a lot, sometimes quite loudly, which was probably the real reason it was in the office hinterlands. But the fictional version feels similar in spirit in terms of the convivial atmosphere — the way the reporters help each other out and also complain a lot.

A fun thing that happened was that Jeff Perry, the wonderful actor who plays Lou in the show, wanted to come and see the real Scriberia. It was right before the magazine moved offices, and I was worried there wouldn't be much to see, so I asked some Scriberians past, including Bob Kolker and Vanessa Grigoriadis and Mark Jacobson, to come in and, you know, give the place some atmosphere. So they did, and when Jeff arrives, Mark Jacobson, who is a legend, looks at him and goes, "The great thing about being a journalist is that you aren't impressed by

anybody.” Then we got to have Mark Jacobson story hour, wherein he told us all these great tales about reporting for the magazine in the ’70s and writing the story that became the show *Taxi*. That was really very special, and fortunately Jeff Perry did not seem at all offended about not being the center of attention.



Jeff Perry visits ‘Scriberia’ in 2019 with, from left, Christopher Bonanos, Bob Kolker, Amy Larocca, Pressler, and Mark Jacobson. Photo: Jessica Pressler

Did you think of any of that set of characters as analogs to *New York* personages?

There are probably a lot of people who might *think* they’re the person who inspired the “I’m not writing another Melania story” line, but as far as I am aware, the Scriberians are fictional characters.

Toward the end of the series, Vivian goes on a reporting trip to Germany after the story’s published to find Anna’s parents. How much of that is real?

I definitely did not try to break into anyone’s home. I did go to Germany though. I was hearing so many different stories about Anna, and it kept growing, and there were a lot of conspiracy

theories going on, and I started to have so much material, I thought I would do a book of some kind. So I went, but it was not quite like that. There was a lot more laughing.

Was there anything the producers asked you about in making the show that you were surprised to see become a part of it?

It's so much more dramatic because it's a TV show, but the arc of the feelings that I had reporting the story, the feelings I had about journalism being complicated and whether this is an exploitative job — that is stuff I was thinking about. It definitely comes out in that last episode, which is hard for me to watch. It gets into my guilt and discomfort about having elevated this person: *Is Anna making decisions in real life because she is now very famous, and did I do that?* I think they did pull that out.

It was an interesting exercise for me, because as a reporter, that's the kind of thing you're asking people to do all the time. They tell you their story, and when they read it, it's not fictionalized, but it looks a little different from how they remember it happening. You can't get all the nuances of everything.

Did you lend Anna clothes for the trial in real life?

Yes, but it wasn't a fraught situation for me the way it was for Vivian. It was more like this kind of screwball sequence of ridiculousness. I wasn't reporting on the trial. I had written the story already, so I was just there out of curiosity. I'd stayed in touch with Todd, who is amazing, and he was like, "I think I'm going to open with Sinatra," so obviously I had to see that. And Neff and her stylist friend were doing their thing.

As you might imagine, getting clothes and designer accessories in and out of Rikers Island is not an easy process. There would be these hiccups with the clothing deliveries. The first week of the trial, there was some snafu and the clothes didn't get there, and it literally held up the trial. This wasn't all because of Anna's vanity — defendants *have* to wear civilian clothes at trial because if they wear a prison jumpsuit it might prejudice the jury. The court has clothes they can lend, but I think that first day they did not for some reason. So everyone was just waiting around. Like, the guy from City National Bank was in the hallway with his lawyer for hours because Anna didn't have any pants. Jury members who had taken time off of work. For *hours*. So when either Spodek or his paralegal was like, "Can you just go to H&M?" I was like yes, for God's sake, let's move this thing along. Otherwise everyone's time was going to be endlessly wasted with this wardrobe shit.

That sort of opened the door for me to fill the gap whenever there was a “wardrobe malfunction,” as the prosecutor put it. At some point, I bought the white dress, and I also bought the snake-print dress, which turned out to be an unfortunate choice, but I wasn’t thinking of these things as metaphors. It was like, *What is on the sale rack that doesn’t have something you can shiv someone with attached to it.* Because prisons have very strict rules about this stuff. I did throw in one of my dresses at one point, but it was black. I did not feel like it was a conflict at all. I felt like, *This will be a funny story someday.*

The other thing that must be surreal is having Anders Holm play Vivian’s husband. Isn’t that the best? Can you make a super cut for Valentine’s Day of his best moments for my husband? I thought it was nice that Shonda said she wanted to portray a happy marriage. You see a lot of working women on television with personal lives that are compromised, and I thought it was a cool thing that they wanted to show a different kind of dynamic.

The conflict is more, “Oh, you put up a whole murder wall of Anna Delvey theories, and we need to put together a nursery.”

Pressler on What’s Real and Not About Inventing Anna

To be clear, there wasn’t a murder wall. I had a spreadsheet. But that’s not very visual. That

would have been *Google Docs: The Show*.

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