

By Graham Flashner

On paper, they would appear unlikely to share a writers' room. Jack Burditt, Meredith Averill and Julian Fellowes are, respectively, a Primetime Emmy-winning veteran sitcom writer, an episodic drama newbie and an Oscar-winning British renaissance man fluent in TV, film and theater. While their genres are disparate, they are bonded by a love of the craft, a rigorous sense of discipline and a boundless enthusiasm for making quality TV.

JACK BURDITT
THE FUNNY GUY

It's no accident that Jack Burditt has written comedy for some of the strongest women in television. He's been fascinated with the fairer sex ever since he was a teenager growing up in Los Angeles. "My goal became to figure out what women want," he says with a laugh. "I figured if I could do that, everything would be good."

While no man in the history of Western civilization has fulfilled that ambition, Burditt, who has a wife, three daughters and five Primetime Emmy Awards, has come closer than most — at least on television, where he's written for an all-star list that includes Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Wendie Malick, Helen Hunt and Tina Fey.

"Men are very basic," he says. "Women are more fun to write to." Burditt started out as a journalist, but after a trying experience covering the Los Angeles riots of 1992, and with a family to feed, he decided to switch career gears. He wrote a *Seinfeld* spec, got an agent, and after some rewrite jobs on Disney Channel movies, landed his first staff writing gig, on *Mad About You*. From there, Burditt was off and running, writing for the cream of sitcom comedy, for shows like *Frasier*, *Just Shoot Me* and *The New Adventures of Old Christine*.

"The best thing about writing for these women," Burditt notes, "is it makes my wife happy that the women come off much better than the guys do."

For the past six years, Burditt has been a coexecutive producer of

the critical and popular NBC hit *30 Rock*, starring Tina Fey as the lovable Liz Lemon, head writer of an SNL-type sketch show.

"To this day, I don't know quite why she picked me," Burditt deadpans, then goes on to say that, as much as he enjoys writing women, his favorite character might be Jack Donaghy. He's the arrogant network boss played by Alec Baldwin, whom Burditt helped shape after Fey slipped him the autobiography of former GE chairman Jack Welch.

Upcoming is a pilot (untitled at press time) that Burditt created for ABC, starring Tim Allen in the *Home Improvement* star's return to television. "He wanted to do a show about trying to remain a guy in a world surrounded by formidable women — and everyone thought I was the right guy to do it," Burditt says.

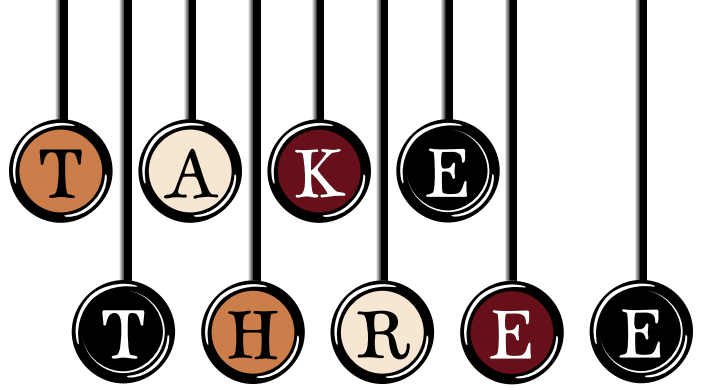
Allen plays an old-fashioned man's man trying to navigate a feminine minefield, from his new (female) boss to his wife and three daughters. With Burditt stepping out of the writer's shadow and into the showrunner's chair, he knows that all eyes will be on him.

"I'll never be able to say I didn't have the right guy in the role," he says. "If this thing doesn't do well, it's my fault."

Like a great hitter who can't explain why he can crush a baseball, Burditt prefers not to look too closely at what makes him funny. But he's more definitive about the opposite sex. "Women," he says, "are still a wonderful mystery. I haven't figured them out."







MEREDITH AVERILL THE YOUNG TURK

Forgive Meredith Averill for not struggling for years before getting her big break as a TV writer. Forgive her for not even watching much television until after she graduated college in 2004.

Using a potent Hollywood combo of youth, luck and talent, Averill has been on a roll since breaking into television. Her latest gig is executive story editor on the CBS legal procedural *The Good Wife*. Sitting in the sunny, quiet bungalow in Culver City where the production team is housed, Averill has the perfect, pastoral place to practice her craft. Forgive her for that as well.

It wasn't how Averill planned it. Born in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, she attended NYU with dreams of writing movies. But the TV-on-DVD revolution had just taken off, and once Averill caught up with multiple episodes of series like *Alias*, *The West Wing* and *Twin Peaks*, she became obsessed.

"I thought, 'Why doesn't everyone want to do this?'" she says. A self-described nerd with a keen appreciation of sci-fi and quirky drama, Averill was lured by the "instant gratification of having to write an episode a week, and have it produced immediately after. It was obvious to me the best storytelling was being done in television."

She made the inevitable move from New York to Los Angeles in 2006. Her career path was dramatically set when she took an assistant's job with two executive producers, Josh Applebaum and André Nemec, showrunners for the ABC drama *October Road*. "It was the best decision I could've made," she recalls. "I learned how a writing room functions and how a production is put together."

Averill didn't know just how fortuitous her decision was. Once Applebaum and Nemec read her spec scripts, they became her mentors and, for the next three years, they were her employers. They hired her for her first staff writing job, on the ABC Family series *Samurai Girl* ("Alias for a young generation," she says), and took her along to the short-lived ABC period cop drama, *Life on Mars*. There she learned how to create a procedural and benefited from the hands-on experience you can't get in film school.

"We got to fly out to New York for episodes," Averill says. "I remember being on set with Harvey Keitel, and him asking me how should he read this line, and I'm like, 'You're the Bad Lieutenant!'"

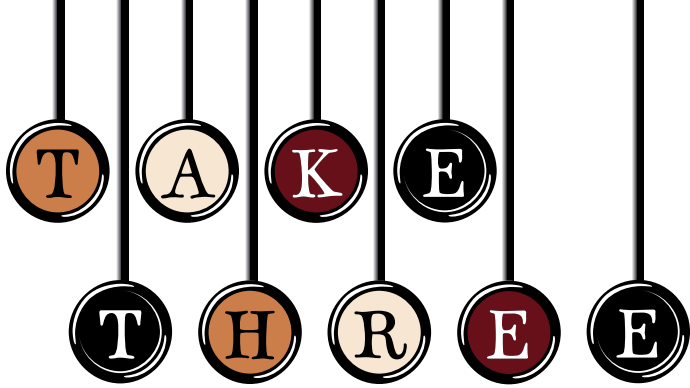
Averill was living a charmed life, but she couldn't get on a show with legs. *Life on Mars* lasted only one season; her next gig, ABC's *Happy Town*, was done after just eight episodes. In October 2009 she found herself out of a job. "I was in a bit of a panic — I'm not qualified to do anything else."

A friend at *The Good Wife* recommended her to showrunners Robert and Michelle King, and her bout with unemployment was over. The CBS show stars Julianna Margulies as a mother who returns to work as a junior associate in a law firm, trying to save her marriage while raising two children.

"It's the first law show I ever watched, and it always keeps me guessing," she says. "They don't always catch the bad guy." Best of all, she worked through a full second-season order, and at press time prospects for a third looked very promising.

"I feel insanely lucky to get to do what I do at my age," Averill admits. "I didn't have to struggle for twenty years, but I did work very hard."

Photograph by JC Dhien



JULIAN FELLOWS

THE MASTER CRAFTSMAN

He's an actor, playwright, novelist and children's book author. And, oh yes — Julian Fellowes has found time to do a bit of film and TV writing as well. He made the leap onto the Hollywood A-list with his first produced film, *Gosford Park*, which won him an Oscar in 2002 and proved him a master of the stately British period drama that audiences on both sides of the Atlantic revere.

Why this continued fascination with the British class system?

"So many of the old rules were torn up in the '60s and '70s," Fellowes says. "One isn't always quite sure what is required. Period dramas allow you to enjoy the rules, but you don't have to live by those rules. You can enjoy the security of the past without its limitations. You can love the clothes, but you don't have to wear the corsets."

It was only a matter of time before Fellowes would revisit *Gosford* territory, and though it took almost a decade, he did not disappoint: *Downton Abbey*, a lavish, four-episode miniseries that Fellowes created for Britain's ITV Studios, continues a long tradition of impeccably made ensemble pieces like *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Brideshead Revisited*.

While *Gosford Park* took place in 1932, *Downton Abbey* is set in 1912, with the sinking of the *Titanic* providing a pivotal plot point. "The whole point of *Gosford* was, coming up to WWII, it was the end of that way of life. So we knew if we wanted to do a series that had legs, we had to go back. We wanted viewers to understand that this is just before the modern world."

The mini, which aired in the U.S. on PBS's *Masterpiece*, spans three years in the lives of the wealthy Crawley family and its servants, and stars Maggie Smith, Hugh Bonneville and Elizabeth

McGovern. Fellowes has already penned *Abbey's* second season, which will air on PBS in January 2012.

Before Fellowes became an accomplished writer, he studied to be an actor. Educated at Ampleforth College in Yorkshire and Magdalene College, Cambridge, he appeared in plays, BBC series and Hollywood films. "The greatest help being an actor does for a writer is, you get a good instinct for what's sayable," Fellowes notes.

He began writing for TV in the 1990s, winning an Emmy for his adaptation of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. His film credits include the Angelina Jolie–Johnny Depp starrer *The Tourist*; *The Young Victoria* and *Vanity Fair*. He's also directed two films, *Separate Lies* and the British ghost story *From Time to Time*; wrote the book for the Tony-nominated stage production of *Mary Poppins*; and is the author of two novels and a critically acclaimed children's book, *The Curious Adventures of the Abandoned Toys*.

Next year ITV will air *Titanic*, a four-hour miniseries Fellowes created to commemorate the centennial of the doomed vessel. "We try to give an account of life on the ship as it really was," he says. Each episode tells stories from a different point of view, from first-class passengers to stewards. "Essentially, we sink the *Titanic* every week. It's only in the last episode that you find out who lives and who dies."

While Fellowes would like to explore other genres in more contemporary settings, he concedes that there will be more period dramas in his future. "Lots of people out there would love to be the go-to guy for anything," he says. "You've got to be known for something in order for them to pick up the phone. I've been incredibly lucky."

Photograph by Carole Latimer

