

# WELL DONE

**BOB'S BURGERS TAKES A RARE APPROACH TO FAMILY COMEDY.**

**Y**ou wanna see what real fandom looks like? Open up your laptop. Type *Tina Belcher* into Google's image search box. You'll find plenty: Fan art. Cosplay. Tattoos. Nail art. Last year, *Entertainment Weekly's* readership voted her the best character on television, blowing past *Walking Dead's* Daryl Dixon and *Big Bang's* Sheldon Cooper, not even pausing at Sherlock Holmes or Hannibal Lecter.



**Writer Steven Davis and his wife, Bob's Burgers voice actor Samantha Shelton.**

Television has been home to countless portrayals of adolescence, but there's a good chance Tina's equal obsessions with horses and butts, her hairy legs, her somehow adorable romantic inclinations toward zombies (sorry again, Daryl), her pride and her awkwardness, her very Tina-ness—these might make her the touchstone for a generation.

A millennial-era Maude. A Mary Richards for the Tumblr age.

Honors Tina would graciously decline. Think of the *Bob's Burgers* episode where she declares, "I'm no hero. I put my bra on one boob at a time—like everyone else."

Oh, and this touchstone is animated, as in cartoon. And while the quantity and intensity of her quirks might outstrip the rest of her TV family, it doesn't prevent them from loving her—and each other—as much as

those dedicated fans with their Tina tattoos.

Consider another Belcher, the title character's wife, Linda, who, in the third season of *Bob's Burgers*, quits a job at the titular burger restaurant, taking off her apron and slapping it on the lunch counter. Gene—the middle of Bob and Linda's three children—calls immediate dibs, snapping the apron up. "I get her apron," he shouts, "because it smells like her and I'm 11 and I still like Mom."

It's rare for an animated comedic moment to so firmly and unprepossessingly embrace the grabby, absurd intimacy of being a kid. Most animated children are voiced by adult actors (in Gene's case, 40-year-old standup comic Eugene Mirman) and written by adults. No wonder animated kids become handy mouthpieces for flesh-and-blood grownups.

But not at *Bob's*. Mining those awkward years for every vein and nugget of hindsight-borne silliness just might be what the writing team behind *Bob's*, led by co-creator Loren Bouchard, does best.



**Co-creators Loren Bouchard and Jim Dauterive**

"My job is to be a filter," Bouchard says, from a Burbank office littered with musical instruments and recording gear (more on this later). "And to try to remember that even if a joke gets huge laughs in the writers' room and is obviously a superlative, hilarious joke, you have to kill it if it doesn't feel right for the character. And it's not always that an 11-year-old boy wouldn't say it! It's that *our* take on an 11-year-old boy wouldn't say it."

Scents of teen spirit didn't waft spontaneously from the writers' room. Co-creator Jim Dauterive, a veteran of Fox's animated stalwart *King of the Hill*, recalls: "Loren and I realized when the



show started that he was in his early 40s and I was in my early 50s. So, two middle-aged-plus guys with that sensibility were interested in stories and scenes with [adult characters] sitting around talking. But the kids are where the gold is. All the characters are great, but the gold is in the kids.”

### Never Grow Up

So Bouchard and Dauterive have unique and honest takes on more than just 11-year-old boys. The show’s namesake, beef artisan Bob Belcher, runs his patty shack with Linda (don’t worry, she came back), Tina, Gene, and youngest daughter Louise. Ask a fan of the show who their favorite character is and then find a comfy chair as you watch them vacillate: Bob is the grounded straight man, but he’s also prone to flights of fancy and long conversations with garden vegetables. So he’s an easy choice.

But wait, there’s Gene—so endlessly hilarious! So brutally honest! Or Louise, with her big-wheel tricycle and diabolical plans! The bunny-eared savage beast inside each of us! And then Linda! So incredibly life-affirming! So very dance-like-no-one’s-watching! And Tina!

Well, okay. Tina might be the reigning champion. She’s the Platonic ideal of whatever it is that the *Bob’s* writers do to make their simply drawn characters so representative of the realities of being human.

To Bouchard, Tina’s not necessarily intended as a nonpareil feminist icon, though she’s certainly emblematic of the show’s emotional core. “Each character fits into a worldview that is just fundamentally tolerant and inclusive. Most shows try to be tolerant and inclusive,” Bouchard says. “But I guess, without necessarily meaning to, it’s a little more felt in our show.”

That tolerance is indeed what sets *Bob’s* apart from its peers. The show has a core of sweetness, but it’s not a saccharine sweetness; the writers aren’t splashing precociously through some kind of Rudy Huxtable Memorial Corn Syrup Fountain. Audiences don’t

look to kids on TV for *cute* anymore; that’s what BuzzFeed lists are for. And where other modern animated shows might find their humor in our collective discomfort at our differences, *Bob’s* finds its humor in the charm and grace with which we choose to accept those differences. The sweetness comes not from *aww* but from *awe*: *Good god, says the audience, these people are weirdos! Like me! And there’s no subtext telling me to point at them and laugh!*

For instance, when Tina reads her “erotic friend fiction” in front of her classmates (by the way, Tina writes erotic fiction about her classmates); or says, “My crotch is itchy” during a family meeting; or lingers behind the dairy case at a supermarket in hopes of meeting a boy, we’re not meant to snicker at her poor choices. In the end, Tina owns those choices with quiet pride.

“Shame and embarrassment didn’t seem funny to us as it pertained to that character, so we just left it out,” explains Bouchard. Likewise, Bob’s occasional discomfort at Tina’s choices never reads as shame. In the pilot, her itchy-crotch comment upends Bob a little, but he doesn’t recoil. “He wasn’t shaming her, but kind of like ‘That might just be more than I need to hear right now.’ Again, not withholding his love. It’s not like, *Oh, my weird daughter!* It’s more like: *This might be a private thought you don’t need to share with me.*”

In other words: *Okay, so maybe reporting on your crotch itch might not be the most appropriate thing. But the actual having of the itchy crotch? Nothing to*



Bob's Burgers writers embracing the creative spirit.

*be ashamed of. Happens to the best of us.*

Intended or not, though, Tina owns her sexuality, is comfortable with her body for the most part, and offers a pretty strong female gaze to counteract the male gaze that dominates most of pop culture. As a child on the precipice of adolescence, she’s the most hormonally charged character on the show, but the show never winks at her proclivities or fetishes. They aren’t always meant to be palatable (remember: zombies), but neither are they meant to be derided.

“She should be feminist because everybody here thinks they [Tina, Louise, and Linda] can be multifaceted,” says Kelvin Yu, a writer on the show. “But not because we came out with an agenda. She’s like that because nobody at her house is deprecating. Her mom and dad never told her that she shouldn’t do that or that doesn’t look good.”

“They’re encouraging to a fault,” adds Steven Davis, Yu’s writing partner.

The two credit Bouchard and Dauterive for crafting a show that creates a truly relatable family by balancing the kids’ world with the adults.

“For writers, it’s like a two-story





house,” says Davis. “So, there’s Bob and Linda, who are always dealing with real, adult, American problems, like lower home interest rates. We can literally talk about that in the room. Or whatever—something middle-class and real. And then within the kids’ world, like in [Davis and Yu’s episode] ‘Runway Club,’ it’s almost like the holodeck on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.”

It’s not putting on a kid disguise and using it to say things adults normally couldn’t. It’s about entering a kid’s world and adjusting your priorities accordingly.

Louise, the youngest Belcher, loses her omnipresent rabbit-eared hat to a bully; in another episode, she’s forced to temporarily give up her room to a

“We wanted to tell this story partly as the story of an artist,” says Loren Bouchard.

“Bob, to us, was an artist who works in hamburgers. And he’s compelled to do it. He just can’t help himself. He’s been carried along by an urge that he almost can’t understand, which is how almost all of us end up feeling in this racket.

There’s no practical decision-making guiding you into this. It’s a combination of uncontrollable urges and luck.”

And to which Louise declares: “Messing with Tina is a privilege, not a right!”

“In the rewrites and when we were breaking the episode beforehand, it was like: This is about ‘no one fucks with my sister,’” says Holly Schlesinger, who wrote “Bad Tina.” “Louise, you know, she’ll make fun of her dad, she’ll erase

in the background [of a scene where Tina is grabbed by a classmate]: ‘Get your hands off my sister!’ It’s guttural. I’ve been in one fight: My neighbor invited his cousin to stay with him a while. I just came outside one day and walked into the middle of a fight. And this dude I didn’t know is on top of my brother, just hitting him. And I remember grabbing a metal trash lid and swinging it at this kid. I was a small guy, but it was a thing that was just kind of in you. And that’s definitely in our family. We’re *Belchers from the womb to the tomb*.”

When Dauterive built the staff, he brought on board a slew of *King of the Hill* veterans: Fybel, Garland Testa, Kit Boss, Gregory Thompson, Aron Abrams, Mike Benner, Rich Rinaldi, Mike Olsen. Plus, Davis and Yu point out, new writers with strong notions of close family. For example, sister-sister writing partners Lizzie and Wendy Molyneux.

Maybe it’s not impossible to achieve authenticity and sincerity when you’re building a loving family in a grouchy writers’ room, but it can’t be easy. “We wanted a fresh point of view and enthusiasm,” Dauterive observes, “and also just nice people. We wanted people we enjoyed being around. I came out of that culture on *King of the Hill* where we had a good work environment and people who got along. Life’s too short to work with people you don’t want to.”

*Bob’s* is Nora Smith’s first staff job. “I used to pitch things and then hide under a pillow,” she confides. But the good vibes at Belcher HQ changed that—at least a little. “No one will say ‘I don’t think that’s funny,’ or ‘I don’t like that idea.’ It’s definitely spoiling



houseguest. To a nine-year-old, these are seismic events, and Louise responds in kind. As the show’s heir apparent to Bart Simpson, Louise is no stranger to mischief and scheming; she sics a biker gang on the hat-stealing bully and a swarm of stinging beetles on the houseguest.

### Womb to Tomb

But Louise is at her most endearing when she uses those powers for good—and she does so more often than not. *Belchers from the womb to the tomb* is a line the show’s writers frequently reference, and the show’s sweetness shines when the Belchers stand up for one another. Nowhere is that solidarity on display more than in “Bad Tina,” the erotic-friend-fiction episode, when a classmate of Tina’s plots her undoing.

the burger of the day, but if anybody makes fun of her family, she’ll go after them. And she’s got a lot of spunk. There’s a scene in an episode that’s coming up, Dan Fybel wrote it, where Louise is defending her mom, and she jumps on this woman’s back, digging her nails in. A lot of times she thinks before she acts, and in that moment, it was like: ‘Get the fuck away from my mom!’ And Linda says, ‘Sorry, she doesn’t let us cut her nails.’”

Bouchard and Dauterive, says Davis, hired with family in mind. When they brought him and Yu on staff, Davis had just married. Dauterive told them, “Great. We’ll need those stories.” And so the writers dig through their own emotions and experiences as kids. “Louise had a line in ‘Runway Club,’

me. I love everybody here. We all hang out outside of work together.” Smith pauses as a shock of recognition strikes: “My gosh, we all have to have this job for the rest of our lives.”

Schlesinger, who likewise had never worked on a traditional writing staff before *Bob’s*, sees it too. “I’ve been told it’s a rarity that we have pretty much the exact staff as when we started [in 2010]. But that’s great. I’ll take it. I’ll take it all. I want it all. This is what I want: To work on a show for a long time with people I like.”

That closeness is vital to Bouchard’s original concept for the show: *Bob’s*, he reckoned, was the story of one family against the world. The restaurant is a struggling one, beaten consistently by its rival across the street. It’s located between a funeral home and one of those buildings occupied by a new dubious business every week.

Perhaps because of that setting, in the early days of development Bouchard and Dauterive found themselves focusing a bit too much on adults Bob, Linda, and regular customers Mort and Teddy.

“Things just weren’t working the way they should,” says Dauterive. That’s when their epiphany hit: middle-aged writers missing the teen target. If there was a problem at all, it’s not that the kids weren’t working—it’s that there wasn’t enough of them.

Despite his self-described middle-aged perspective, making animated families work was right in Dauterive’s wheelhouse; *King* had thrived with a dedicated fanbase for all 11 seasons—and similarly to *Bob’s*, that series dealt with a fairly straitlaced husband; an eccentric, high-spirited wife; and some fairly strange kids.

Like the Hills in *King*, the Belchers soldier on, and Bob soldiers on, bolstered by Linda. In conversation with Bouchard, you’d easily suspect that Bob and Linda are two halves of his own psyche: Bob, the devoted dreamer, dedicated to his art; and Linda, who provides emotional support with strong emotions.

“She’s seemingly got something inside her that wants to come out,” Bouchard senses. “Not in a conflict-y way, but in an irrepressible way. That was the idea behind Linda. She’s just got to occasionally burst into song. She just wants to do hamburger dinner theater so much. She has this desire to perform and to *siiiiing*. It’s fun to write for, so fun to have as this sort of loose cannon.”

### The Sounds of Music

That moment when Bouchard says *siiiiing*? That’s not a word normally spelled with six I’s. But just like Linda, Bouchard breaks into song, right there in the middle of the conversation—then returns to normal, non-melodic human speech. Which is pretty much what Linda does, sings songs about everything: Florida. Her porcelain Hummel knock-offs. Thanksgiving (on more than one occasion). Diarrhea. Okay, they’re not all classy, so maybe here should endeth the litany.

But in that moment, there in Bouchard’s one-word songburst—well, in that moment is the heart of *Bob’s Burgers*.

Bouchard has a big personality, a bright, bursting cumulus of cheer that fills every corner of the office. And

great things happen.

That’s true of Bob Belcher, and it’s true of Loren Bouchard.

“Early on,” Bouchard says, “we knew we wanted to tell this story partly as the story of an artist. Bob, to us, was an artist who works in hamburgers. And he’s compelled to do it. He just can’t help himself. He’s been carried along by an urge that he almost can’t understand, which is how almost all of us end up feeling in this racket. There’s no practical decision-making guiding you into this. It’s a combination of uncontrollable urges and luck. That aspect of the character resonated with me.”

*Bob’s*—along with its Writers Guild Award, its Emmy, its fan base, and its critical accolades—is built on this and many other factors: Kindness. Confidence in the face of your own personal weirdness. Credit where it’s due. (Everyone interviewed for this story made it a point to stress the contributions of everyone else on the staff.)

And family. Most of all, family.

“My dad is an artist,” Bouchard says. “He saw himself that way and sees himself that way. So I knew a couple of little secrets about what a family looks like when the dad is also an artist and



*Bob’s* is as packed with love. It’s also packed with music—and it’s hard not to see the parallel. There’s so much in there, and it’s got to get out. People with art inside them—words or music or hamburger recipes—have to express their art. They can’t not. And when they’re allowed to let it out,

dreamer. That word has a negative connotation—it almost sounds like you’re irresponsible and your head is in the clouds. But I don’t think of it that way.”

After a pause, Bouchard concludes: “I just think you’re open to the possibility that you should pursue this crazy idea.” **WB**