

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

The BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series in association with the JJ Charitable Trust

Julian Fellowes

26 September 2012 at BFI Southbank

Julian Fellowes: I always feel a bit of a fraud in these situations, because I know that one ought to be supplying some kind of answers to the whole condition of being a screenwriter – which is what I seem to be – but I never feel I know anything you don't know. One is given these jobs, and of course it's perfectly thrilling when you are, and you kind of tackle each one individually.

I never had any training at all in screenwriting, and like almost everything else in my life it all came about completely by accident. What happened was that I was in Hollywood, attempting to be a star – I saw myself as the new Robert Morley – but this did not come to pass. And, in fact as some of you will know, the high point that I reached was to come second to replace the dwarf on *Fantasy Island*.

So this meant, although I did get some work actually, I made a couple of films with Linda Carter – Wonder Woman – but it wasn't quite all coming together. I did spend a lot of time by the swimming pool of my rented house waiting for the telephone to ring. And I used that time really to read a lot of scripts. I had friends out there who were doing much better than I was, and they used to give me these scripts to read.

They'd say 'I've been offered this by Columbia,' or 'I've been offered this by Disney, what do you think?' And I would read it and say 'you sort of follow the set up, but why does the doctor leave?' You gradually unpick scripts when you're doing that with a purpose, and I suppose really that was my training.

Because then I came back to England. The acting was sort of all right – game boy got up and finished fourth – [but] I was beginning to feel the need of a Plan B which I thought would be television production. I'd done quite a lot of television by that time, and I sort of thought I knew how it worked – if anyone does.

In those days there was a drama department just for children that was much smaller than the

principal drama department at the BBC. I had done a couple of things for them, I'd been in *Swallows and Amazons* and something else, and I knew Anna Home who was running it. This seemed to me a good place to start, and I invited a chap called Andrew Morgan who had directed me in *Swallows and Amazons*, and I knew got on very well with Anna.

I thought if we formed this little company, by this time I had sugared the pill to such a degree that she would swallow it. We did get a project going, and they offered to develop it, to do one episode of it, pay for it and everything else. They chose a writer, and when it came back – this is where I think I'm probably rather unjust actually – when it came back I didn't think it was any good. This doesn't mean it wasn't any good, but I didn't think it was.

I felt if we handed it in they would never develop the other five episodes and it would all be over. So, because I didn't have any option and we didn't have any money, I rewrote it, but I didn't tell anyone. I handed it in without telling either the writer or the BBC.

Of course this was quite wrong, but it did result in us getting the commission. And of course it was very complicated, the writer – a perfectly respectable writer, I hasten to add – had had his option picked up and so he was to write the other episodes. In the end they didn't want to make it with those episodes, rightly or wrongly, and so we were stymied because we'd spent all the money.

I remember, I said to the producer 'perhaps we can get someone to write them for nothing,' And the producer said 'what fool would do that?' I was that fool. Anyway, the show did pretty well actually; we were the only kids' show in the top ten sales of the year for the BBC. So then I was commissioned to write *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and I was really lucky because there was a very strong battle to take over the Children's Drama Department and to absorb it into the main department.

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Faultieroy became the battleground, and so these people wanted to make it because it would establish that children's drama was still being made for itself and these people didn't want to make it... and so on.

I'll never forget that Alan Yentob had an advisory body of some sort, and they sent him in a report after reading my scripts, and said 'the market for class based period drama is dead.' Happily, for the rest of my life so far, this proved inaccurate. And in fact the show did get made, and it won an Emmy in New York, and in fact we got ten million viewers which was the highest they'd ever had for that slot.

So that was very, very helpful to me. And on the strength of that we did another one, *The Prince and the Pauper*, and that did pretty well. And then Anna left, and I had this strange thing that I'd only ever been a writer in this one, tiny context because I hadn't been a writer at all for the previous 20 years.

And I started to write scripts on spec, you know, and it always made me laugh when I read in the papers that *Gosford Park* was my first script – and the rest dear! But, anyway, one of them I wrote, an adaptation of *The Eustace Diamonds* by Trollope, and it never got made. But actually there's a bit of a lesson in this because it didn't get made but it did start my career.

I think one always has to remember when you're writing a script, if some of you are writers who haven't yet been produced, when you're writing a script it isn't necessarily going to be that that script gets made, but what it may do is be an audition that opens the door. That was what happened to me with *The Eustace Diamonds*, a jolly good script incidentally if anyone out there is at all interested.

But what happened was, in New York Bob Balaban was trying to set up a film with Robert Altman. And this really is as extraordinary as it sounds; they'd been trying to find a writer, which

for some unknown reason they had failed to do. I've always assumed it was my late mother simply preventing it from happening. But anyway, they couldn't get anyone to write this, and it was a sort of country house murder mystery turned on its head.

Like Altman always liked to make a western that wasn't really a western, or a thriller that wasn't really a thriller. This was going to be a country house murder mystery that wasn't really that. They looked and looked, and Balaban was summoned to lunch by Bob Altman, and he thought they were just going to talk about other writers.

Anyway, he got there and Bob Altman said to him 'I don't think this is going to work, I think we should call it a day and move on to something else.' Balaban was really, really keen to set this up, because he was an actor. As you know he played Phoebe's father in *Friends*, and he was in all Christopher Guest's movies, a very good actor actually. But he wanted to be a film producer, and he thought 'if I can't set up a picture when I've got Robert Altman happy to do it, it's never going to begin.' He suddenly remembered that he had my script for *The Eustace Diamonds* in his briefcase under the table.

So with no pre-planning at all he said 'now wait a minute Bob, there is this writer, you won't have heard of him but this may be his territory.' And he got the script out, and from that I got this telephone call. I was in the kitchen on January 1st, and I picked it up and said hello [and heard] 'would you like to write a script for Robert Altman?'

I said yes. And that was the beginning. We had these mad telephone conversations, I remember the first one with Bob was a really, really bad connection that kept going out every third word, and of course I was dying to say 'can we stop and dial this again because I really can't hear you?' but as I heard these words in my head I thought 'God, sounds like such a loser,' so I tried to fake what he probably said and answer that.

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Once or twice I could hear I got it completely wrong, but anyway it ended up with me being commissioned to send over some character studies. And funnily enough several of them made it into the final movie. Like Jennings, who was based on the drunken butler of the Hon. Mrs Ronnie Greville at Polesden Lacey.

There's one wonderful story about him actually. She was a ghastly woman, and she was giving a frightfully grand dinner for Austen Chamberlain and Boles came into the room, completely plastered, and she always kept this little pad by her plate. She wrote 'you are drunk, please leave the room at once' And she gave it to Boles, and without a moment's pause he laid it on a salver and conveyed it to Austen Chamberlain, who sat looking really baleful for the rest of the evening.

But anyway, we got all these characters going, and then I was asked if I would write the first draft of the script. All the time I thought 'this can't be happening, it's impossible that someone who's never had a feature film made is writing this for Robert Altman.' But then, I thought, if it does happen and I have dropped out of the process through being feeble and not trying hard enough then I'll have to kill myself.

So I did write it as if it was going to be made, but I never believed it would. And funnily enough later Bob Altman told me that he had been humouring Balaban through this whole stage, and he never thought it would happen really either. So anyway, I sent off the script, and then I was summoned to California to spend three days working on it with Altman.

As I said, I had been living in California much earlier, at the beginning of the 80s, and I like Los Angeles. I'm not one of the Brits who says I can't wait until my plane takes off from LAX, I don't agree with that, I enjoyed it. But when I left I did think to myself I'm not coming back until someone else buys the ticket.

And that was going to be the mark of it. And it worked, they bought the ticket. Of course they only bought [economy class], back of the plane, and I remember [my wife] Emma saying to me – and we were frightfully broke actually – 'we've got to send you out at least Club.' I said 'no, I think it's OK, because they've told me I'm going back to the hotel, I've got a day to rest, and I won't start working with Bob until Thursday.'

She said 'even so, I don't think we should take the risk.' So we do invest in this one way, going Club. Not return of course, where it couldn't matter less. So I go out and, sure enough, I'm met at the airport by a nice young man who says 'we have your hire car here, you will follow me, I am taking you to the studio now.'

So anyway, I did sit down with Bob and we worked on various things and he made very useful, very good changes in the thing. The most obvious was that he wanted practical music and not just score, he was a big fan of Ivor Novello and so it was his idea to bring Ivor Novello into the house party.

I thought that worked incredibly well, and it was a wonderful performance [by Jeremy Northam]. What was extraordinary, and I'm sure lots of you know, [is] that trying to get a film made is the proverbial Sisyphus task of pushing a rock uphill. It takes forever, and some of them have been going for seven years when they get made, and 11 and so on.

The funny thing about *Gosford Park* was that it was so fast. I got the telephone call in January 2000, I was on the set in March 2001 and it was released in December and I won the Oscar in 2002. I mean that, in film terms, is like the Cresta Run. And in fact I didn't know it then, I know it now much better, so I didn't have too much time to sit and think 'you know, is this really going to happen, I can hardly believe it'.

In no time at all Bob had moved to London and it was being cast and we were off to the races. Although there was one really terrible moment

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when, just before we were about to start, literally about two or three weeks before we were due to start shooting, suddenly we lost all the money. It just vanished, overnight.

And I thought 'my God, this is my big break.' I arrived, Bob was staying near the park, and as I walked towards this apartment block this huge limousine came out and the door opened, like in a thriller, and a voice said 'get in!' So I got in and there was Bob, he said 'listen, we're going to a meeting, these people can save our movie, if we persuade them to put in the money. And you're going to do the persuading.'

I said 'Bob, what am I going to say?' He said, 'I dunno, you're the writer.' I got there and I thought I must give this everything I've got. I remember I did this whole speech, it was to Jane Barclay and Sharon Harel, and at the end of it I said 'when we're dying if people remember two of the films we've worked on, one of them will be *Gosford Park!*' Anyway, it worked.

They put the money in and then we made the picture, and it was very strange for me because Bob had got to England and the more he was here the more people said 'God, you're making a film about the English class system – good luck!' And he started to think there were more trip wires in this than he had previously envisaged.

Partly because he didn't want to look a fool, and because he wanted to get the details right because he felt, and I agreed with him 100 per cent, that if you get the details of something right even for people who know nothing about it, it takes on a kind of credibility. If you know that footmen don't knock on a ground floor sitting room or a library, but they do knock on a bedroom door, there's a sort of logic in that that makes it feel believable even if you didn't know it.

A film like *Monsoon Wedding*, I don't know much about contemporary India, but you watch that film and you think 'I bet this is what it's like, I bet this is truthful.' It just seems to come off it, and

that was what he wanted. The result was I was asked to be on the set for the whole shoot, which I'm sure the writers among you will know how rare that is.

Normally you're as welcome as diphtheria. And there's a reason actually, you do cloud the chain of command if you're there, because the actors come up to you and they say 'what's the significance of the speech about the beach-ball,' and of course the last thing you do is shut up. So, of course, 'well, my uncle was playing with a beach-ball and.....' and that may not be what the director wants.

You may have completely confused his vision for the scene. I learnt this. Bob ticked me off actually, pretty early on, 'there hasn't got to be a lot of that,' when I was blabbing away to Charles Dance about something. After that I used to take a book in, and I would read this book incredibly fiercely, because of course I knew quite a lot of the cast as an actor.

But anyway, we got through it and the picture came out and it did very well, and I won the Oscar; which was extraordinary. The first thing I won was the New York Critics' Award, and that isn't an envelope job, you're told you've won, you go and you have a nice dinner and you do a thank-you.

What I didn't realise was the whole awards system in America, it's a season, the awards, and once you've won that you're on the track and from then on you're nominated for this and this and this. Every year they pick out maybe ten films and out of those ten films the five nominations for everything come.

The movie was on that, I won the National Critics' Award and I didn't win in Chicago but I did win the Writers' Guild and so on. You have this almost surreal period, and for me it was extraordinary because this was my first movie. It was extraordinary. Finally I remember I won the Writers' Guild Award and there was this big article in the LA Times the next morning saying

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'Julian Fellowes has won the Writers' Guild Award and this means he will probably not win the Oscar, because only one of the two winners of the Writers' Guild ever wins the Oscar and the other one doesn't.'

And because Akiva Goldsman won [for *A Beautiful Mind*] at the Golden Globes they said it was going to be him and not me. Then we got in on the night and Akiva won [for Best Adapted Screenplay], he was ahead of me, and I remember I got this fixed grin on my face [applauds, saying] 'very good choice.'

I always thought they tipped you off, I did actually have a friend who won for Best Actor and I said 'but did you know?' and he was so sort of vague I thought 'I bet he's missed it.' I can see why they don't tell you before, because then you might tell someone, but in the show surely they want you to just have a little bit of warning.

And you know, you have these commercial breaks, the show stops while the commercial breaks are running and then you come back on. And of course during these breaks, every time an official walked past me I sort of leant out of my seat to see if they would give me [a wink] but this did not happen, so I was completely unprepared.

But then I do remember a surreal moment, because they had a thing there – and I think they do it every year now – when they show a scene for the writers' awards they show a scene but they start by reading the stage directions from the script, then they go into the dialogue and then the clip's over.

I don't know if any of you saw this film, but there was a scene in it where the footmen are laying dinner and the false valet, who's really an actor, finds a fork on the right. And I remembered, at that moment, sitting in my lodgings in Kingussie as I was filming *Monarch of the Glen* and I had a late call to the set. I had this wonderful view of the Cairngorms.

Bob wanted the script to be very specific, not for people to be doing BBC servant acting with trays – what's on that tray? – he wanted it to be very precise. Everyone's seen the measuring, that's been done in lots of things, and I suddenly remembered thinking 'I bet a lot of people don't know that you can eat fish with two forks, and it's the only time a fork is ever laid on the right.'

I thought I'd do that, I'll do the two forks. And suddenly there we were in the Kodak Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard, with Whoopi Goldberg and Gwyneth Paltrow. She was there with Ethan Hawke, and they were reading alternately, and there was this thing about the two forks, and it was like this seven league leap, you know, almost surreal actually.

And then she said my name. I remember going up, and I hadn't prepared a speech because I thought it would be unlucky, and also I didn't think I'd won. It was just after 9/11 and funnily enough the simplified Oscar was not us, it was the following year. We were all big frocks and big hair, but nevertheless this had just happened and I remember as Emma and I drove in we said there's going to be a lot of 'God bless America tonight,' and in fact no one had said it.

I thought 'I'm going to say it,' because I do very strongly feel that America rescued me. All the stuff in England, the stuff we have about each other, they don't care about all that. They care about 'did your last picture do anything,' and 'what are you doing next,' but the other stuff they don't care about.

They allowed me a promotion within the business that I would not have been allowed by my British contemporaries; at least they would never have initiated it. And so I did finish my speech saying 'God bless America.' And then you go up into the attic where every journalist in the world is waiting for you, and all of that.

When you're an actor you go up alone because you're glamorous and lovely, but when you're a little fat writer they send a film star up with you

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just to gee it up a bit. I had Gwyneth Paltrow with me, and we walked in and I said 'God, this is mad,' and she said 'welcome to my life.'

Anyway, that was it really. And after that came many things, because when you win an Oscar, which I can heartily recommend, it's like a kind of mythic thing. The Americans set out to create a kind of mythic thing, and they've succeeded. I'm very lucky to have won other things, but when people come to the house now the one they want to hold is the Oscar.

The one they want to be photographed with is the Oscar, and so you've this kind of patina of having been blessed, as if you held the bones of some medieval saint. As a result, I'd won for writing a screenplay and I was offered other screenplays and I was very, very grateful to be offered other screenplays but I was also asked if I wanted to front this quiz show, did I want to make these documentaries, would I like to direct a movie, would I like to write a musical.

All of which were firsts, and you know one of the advantages of being quite old when all this starts, people say to me 'wouldn't you rather this had all happened when you were 30?' well the short answer to that is yes, but the long answer is that by the time you're 50 you've made a fool of yourself so many times that the thought that you might make a fool of yourself is no longer a deterrent. So you just cheerfully take it on board and have a crack. And as a result I've had a marvellous 12 years now, since that all happened, leading I suppose to *Downton*. Anyway, that's the story so far, thank you very much.

Briony Hanson: Taking you back to the concept that you were the overnight sensation that took 30 years, the internet suggests that you wrote about 12 scripts.

Julian Fellowes: Well, I didn't really write at all for about ten years. When I was at drama school I wrote some bodice rippers, because I just wanted to have something I'd written published,

really. It was just a straight exercise in vanity. But there was nothing of me in the books really. Once I'd done it I didn't want to go on with it. So for about ten years I wrote nothing at all.

It was really in the period after Anna Home leaving the BBC, and until *Gosford*, I kept churning out these unfilmable dirge-like scripts.

BH: Well, what I wanted to ask you is do you now look at those scripts, and do you know what was wrong with them? Do you know why they didn't get filmed?

JF: One of the great problems of life is that if you are not successful in a particular arena by the time you're about 33, I don't mean a mega-success but if you haven't begun by the time you're about 33 there is an automatic dismissal of your efforts. In fact, subsequently, *Separate Lies* was one of those scripts which is my favourite thing I've done. From *Time To Time* was another, so it isn't really as simple as saying they were no good.

They were perfectly good enough to have been worked on and developed up into things that got made, but there was no buzz coming off me. I was just this fat, moderately successful actor coming in with a script under his arm. I mean, if I had sixpence for every one of those. That was the problem, I mean all the time you're walking into rooms and you're trying to make people see you as interesting, or that you might have interesting ideas, but you've only got ten minutes. You either say too little or, in my case, far too much. And it sort of drives people back, they think 'my God, get him out of here.'

And it all changes when they've seen something you've made. I mean, my greatest stroke of luck was that Altman decided I had something for him, because he was a real maverick. He was a kind of lion, he was a lifelong hippy, with the dope all this stuff. But he was a complete free thinker. And when it did look as if we were going to make the picture, and the studio of course panicked.....

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I remember the moment when we sent over the draft which had the servants taking their employers' names, which of course when you think of the logic of it wasn't patronising or diminishing, it was essential. You had 40 people staying, and if you have to remember that Lord and Lady Salisbury had a valet called Watson and a maid called Smith, and you multiplied that by 40 – it's completely impossible. So for a house party they had to have the name, for the sake of the butler and the housekeeper and the other people who were running the whole machine.

I'd sort of kept it out, and then I suddenly thought I'd put it in and Bob loved it, and the studio rang and said 'Bob, this script has already got more characters than the second world war and now they've all got the same name!' So they were battling against that, and they wanted to put in an experienced screenwriter, just for a polish. You know that phrase; that makes you reach for your gun. And Altman just knew he didn't want their version of an acceptable film about this subject which they for the most part didn't understand anyway.

And he wouldn't let it happen. Most directors, even the ones you love, if the studio says 'we're not prepared to make it unless you allow us to choose a writer for a polish,' will give in to that. They'll buy you dinner and you'll all cry together but they'll give in. And he wouldn't. I remember him shouting down the telephone, he said 'the day I fire my writer is when I don't like what he's doing.'

You can't have that kind of polar bear on your side in every job, that's just not what life is like. My great stroke of luck was having him on my side for that first key job, and that was certainly why I was alone on the stage at the Oscars, but I'm sure why I was on it at all; because he was prepared to fight to protect this rather arcane vision of the movie. I consider myself very lucky. You don't often owe everything to one guy, but in my case I do.

BH: I think that's very generous of you, but was there a point when you got to the point when you could say the script was finished for *Gosford Park* – I know you worked on it as you went on – but was there a point when you thought this actually is something really special? Or was it only because of the association with Altman?

JF: I don't know that I ever think that. I think this is doable, this is actable. A film script is never finished because then they cut the scene by the swimming pool, and you've got to relocate it into a telephone box and all that. And 'we can't do the ball, is it alright if they're having a cup of coffee?'

And somehow you just have to kind of negotiate your way through all that. That's part of making a film. What Jeremy Brock was saying earlier I think as a screenwriter, it's not like a novel. I've written novels and enjoyed it very much because it's just you and your editor, and if you get on with them it's a very nice experience – particularly if the book turns out OK.

But a film is not like that. There must be a part of you that is a kind of businessman, or woman, and you are working to see this gets made and gets out and reaches an audience and all of that stuff. You can't keep fainting onto your *chaise longue* and saying 'that was my favourite scene,' there's just so much of that you can do.

Also, in my experience, if you have a fight about everything you don't win any of them. If you pick your fights... it's like a marriage. My mother used to say 'only have the important fights.' I agree with that, and in film.

BH: That sounds like you're viewing it as more of a business than art. I think Jeremy [Brock] said at the beginning, screenwriting is art.

JF: I was taken aback by that. I think some people can do it better than others. There are many different types of film, and just as you can't act every part that you like seeing other people act, you can't write every film that you enjoy.

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There are types of film that I don't know how to do, but I love watching them.

I think, in that, I sort of accept that I have a kind of arena and I suppose within that arena which I think is a little bit broader than some people credit me with, but within that arena when I'm given the job I feel part of my job is to help the film get made. Because if it isn't made what was it all about? And when you won't make those concessions other writers come on.

Someone said to me just before this, 'I see on some films that you have collaborated with other writers.' I haven't collaborated with other writers, either they were fired and I replaced them or I was fired and they replaced me. That's how it works. And if you don't want that to happen.... you've got to keep moving forward.

You can't always do it; sometimes they want to take the film to a place where you can't follow them, where you just can't go. But that doesn't happen every time, and I think you do have a job to do.

BH: Just going back to the thing you just said about the arena of the kind of films that you make, and that people have a slightly narrow view of what you do, and I noticed in the clips that you'd chosen there were quite a lot of Crawleys and quite a lot of big houses...

JF: Lots of Crawleys, that [*Vanity Fair*] is where I got the name from.

BH: Do you see a through line in what you do, aside from the class and the big houses?

JF: Well, the difficulty of having a success with something is then you become the go-to guy for that stuff. I was incredibly pleased to be the go-to guy for anything. So a lot of period stuff found its way to me. But different, writing *Mary Poppins* was a very different experience and a different job, but again very collaborative but in a different way.

For me, my favourite film is *Separate Lies*, where I feel I'm looking at people I come from, in a way. It's difficult to write about people that are so far outside your own experience, that it's really hard to be truthful. I know inevitably if you write about a period you're guessing at certain attitudes and beliefs and prejudices.

I mean we have the writing of the time to go on, but nevertheless when you're writing about people in a contemporary setting you do have a pretty clear idea about certain groups I suppose and I did like that. For me the themes of my work – [in a mock upper crust voice] 'a study of the work of Julian Fellowes' – I suppose for me the things that interest me very much are the whole business of choice.

I feel in direct contradiction of the modern fashion that everything is someone else's fault. That your childhood was ruined by this, or if you fall over in the street it's the fault of someone. I don't really believe that, and more than not believing it – because obviously sometimes things are peoples' fault – I don't think it's a useful philosophy to embark on.

I think we have to take responsibility for what happened to us, and it's really more important to take responsibility for the things that went wrong than it for the things that went right. You'll see that in a lot of stuff that I write. And the other thing I do feel very strongly, my father always used to say that everyone has a key virtue and for him it was courage.

I think he felt he wasn't brave enough. He was very clever, but he was sort of bedazzled by the Establishment and he found it very difficult to just set it to one side. Although he did, once or twice in his life in quite large choices but nevertheless... for me the great virtue is self-knowledge. I think the more you know yourself the more you have a true understanding of yourself, and why you do things.

It doesn't mean you can control them but you can prevent yourself looking an idiot more often.

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It's harder to catch you out, because you go into certain situations and you think this is exactly the kind of situation where I will lose my temper. And you know why. It doesn't mean you don't, but nevertheless you're more on top of yourself.

And I think most people whose lives get into a real 'Horlicks', there is a lack of self-knowledge at its core and that is something else. That's really what *Separate Lies* is about actually, it's about the Tom Wilkinson character coming to understand the situation he was really in as opposed to the one he imagined he was in. A wonderful performance from him, I think. I see that as more than the theme of class.

But even with class, you know, with the Daily Mail if you write about class it means you're very snobbish. And class is important to you in that way. Of course the reverse is true. That if you are very snobbish, and class is very important to you in that way, you wouldn't write about it.

What is interesting about class is its effect on our lives; the divisiveness, the arbitrariness, the suppression. Even today, never mind a 100 years ago, our lack of social mobility now – our social mobility has practically collapsed – and you get this kind of inculcation all the time; 'you're not the type that goes to university,' 'ooh, that job.' Or, at the other end, 'well of course I'll be chairman, of course,' this assumption of ability.

You see often with very rich people who have not made their own money, that because we live in a kind of meritocracy on some level or other they look at their money and they look at the money of their friends, and their friends are clever so they assume they're clever. And in many cases they're not a bit clever. And, in fact, we could name several people in our address book who would be about 20 million richer if they'd never left their bedroom. That's the assumption at the other end of the scale.

There are some people who are free of it actually, but many, many people are shaped and damaged and either given false estimations

of themselves or a needless acceptance of mediocrity. Because from early on their teachers have been saying 'oh, I shouldn't bother with that.' All of that is class, and all of that fascinates me. So yes, I am interested in it, but not in the Daily Mail way.

BH: And do you think it's class that's the reason that your material has been so popular internationally? Particularly TV material with *Titanic* selling to a 100 countries, *Downton Abbey* – why do you think that's been so successful internationally?

JF: I wrote a novel called *Snobs*, which was a modern story about an upper middle class girl marrying into the nobility and discovering that this group that she'd wanted so much to belong to wasn't worth the effort. I remember a chap at a party saying 'I rather enjoyed your novel, it was about the top two per cent trying to get in with the top one per cent.' And this was an enormous success in Lithuania. Why? I don't know.

I think the division of humanity into these arbitrary groups, these people who have a kind of assumption of power and everything else. There are no societies that I have ever come across that are completely free of it, and most people feel underappreciated at some point in their lives because of these barriers. I can only suppose that, that is the reason.

But I believe in making films and television and writing books and all the rest of it, to draw people in to the predicaments of the characters. To make you care about them. I don't believe in the theatre of alienation, where you can't stand any of them. Some people do that and they can do it impressively. And you have a kind of fixated horror as you watch this drama unfold. But you don't like anyone.

I don't know how to do that. I want you to like nearly all of my characters in some way or other, and even when I've got a character that you don't like much then you give them some storyline, some aspect of their personality and

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hopefully the audience thinks they're not as bad as all that. And you change them. I love it when the audience changes their mind about someone.

They start off thinking 'that bitch,' and then they gradually come round and see her predicament, because I think that's more like life really. Nobody wakes up in the morning and thinks 'how can I be horrible today?' They [might] do horrible things, but that's not why, they do them because they think they've got to be strong, or it's weak to be considerate. But that's because they've been twisted out of shape by something.

I think you have to pull people in, I think that's more the reason, whether it's about class or posh people or any of that. Because actually *Downton* isn't about the posh people any more than it's about the un-posh people, it's about all of them. One of the things that I think we did right in *Downton*, which was a decision although complete luck really, was to treat the servants, the family, Mrs Crawley, the people in the village, the doctor, to treat them all with exactly the same narrative weight so there's never a moment where you think you're going to the lesser story.

You're never going to the lesser story, you're going to this story because one of the tricks, I suppose, of having a story set in two periods or between two households or whatever, is that there mustn't ever be a let-down. When you go from this one to that one, you've always got to have the audience thinking 'oh good, now we can catch up with these people.' Not 'oh, I wish we could go back to the ones with the nice frocks.' You have to avoid that, and I think we have avoided that. I think it's about all of them. But I would guess that's more the reason why it's been so successful.

BH: And when you have had such a success has it changed the way that you write? Particularly now that you know that you can command an enormous international audience, do you sit down differently or do you just write the way that

you've always written? I think I'm asking you if you are ever allowing yourself to be cynical now.

JF: Oh I think I'm cynical about everything, but I don't think you should ever think much about the audience in that way. This is not original, Steven Spielberg said it, but I think you should make films you want to see. And I think you should make films and programmes you want to watch. And if you are reading the script and you think 'put a sock in it,' then that's the moment to cut. My wife's always pretty tough about that. 'Darling nobody cares about this story!'

But I don't really go beyond that. I think if you start to think 'I must put something in for the Chinese,' you've had it really. You just have to keep banging it out. Of course what does happen with a series, which I've never written before, I've written a serial which is quite different, that's just telling a story in four parts of six parts or whatever. [But in a] series the actors come in, and we were very, very fortunate with *Downton* because we hit a period when absolutely nothing was happening, so we got our first choice for pretty well every part.

And normally it isn't just that they don't want to do your script, maybe they want to do it like mad but they're making a film in Germany and they can't. We didn't really have any of that, so we got our first choice for pretty well everyone. These really marvellous actors, when actors are really good they take what you've written and they add a whole layer of reality to it, they give it dimension.

And of course the more they do it the more you write for that so you are deliberately giving them situations and scenes that they can do something with. I think we started shooting the first series with about four episodes done, but once that was done you're very much writing for the characters as they are and to give them a chance to do something on points.

I enjoy that, actually, I love that. A character like O'Brien, in the first couple of episodes, was just a

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little lady's maid. Rather nasty, but I thought Siobhan [Finneran] did such a fantastic job with her, and sort of giving you a sense that she was this bruised personality behind all her malice that I wrote more and more and more stuff for her. All of that was rather enjoyable.

BH: And obviously Maggie Smith – did you have to rein yourself in? It's interesting; with writers you hear people talking about writers not writing in their own voice but must give all their characters individual voices, the one voice I can hear is you whenever Maggie Smith speaks.

JF: It is true actually, what I used to do – not with *Downton* because now I've got all the real actors – but with films, I always tend to cast them in my head. They can be dead, you can cast Marilyn Monroe or Clark Gable, but if you do that then you write to the rhythm that they spoke in. There's always a danger otherwise that everyone speaks with your rhythm. I think that is a bit of a trap that, but with Maggie this is my third go because we had *Gosford* and a family movie I directed called *From Time To Time*, and now *Downton*.

I do enjoy writing for Maggie, because she always gets it. You never have to explain why a line is funny. I remember, we had this line in *Gosford* where Bob Balaban – who got to play the part of the little film producer – was explaining the plot of this [film he was making], a detective film. And Maggie had the line 'but who turns out to have done it?'

And he said 'well, I couldn't tell you that, it would spoil your enjoyment.' And she said 'oh, none of us will ever see it.' And when we were doing the scene Bob Altman couldn't understand why this was funny, that no one would see the film. For him this was a horrible thing to say. He said 'I don't think we want that line.' And of course lots of the [others] said 'no, I don't think you need it Bob,' – anything to get rid of a laugh line.

And I was about to [speak up] when Maggie said 'I think I can make it work,' and of course after

that nobody dared cut it and it ended up being in the trailer and everything. I remember on *Gosford* she just asked me one question. She said 'I don't understand about the marmalade,' and I said that this came from a great aunt of mine who said you could always tell if a house was well or badly run if it ran out of its own jams and jellies and had to buy them in.

She said 'I've got it,' and then she does that line wonderfully, do you remember? 'Bought marmalade, I call that very feeble.' Again a wonderful moment. I suppose we have each other's rhythm a bit now, and it's a partnership that's given me a good deal of pleasure really.

Question: I've got a question about the fact that you write for TV, for series, for film, for stage and novels. Is there a different Julian that has to step up to the plate each time? And which [discipline] do you prefer?

JF: In a way one of the most enjoyable actually is writing novels, because it's just you and your editor. I've been incredibly lucky, I've only published two novels since the bodice rippers and they were both bestsellers so everything was great. Maybe it's less enjoyable if they're flops. But I love that, because the thing about film is everyone's got the right to give you notes.

You get deluged with these endless, endless, endless notes until you really want to kill. The way I've dealt with that on most films is to get one producer sort of in cahoots, to be the channel of the notes. So that it is a sort of pseudo situation as if only one person was giving you notes, and it means if they're senior enough they take out the other notes from other people that they think are rubbish. They only let you get the ones they think have any value.

But that is quite hard, you push and push and pull and pull, so sometimes on a film script by the end all you're trying to do is to stop it getting any worse. You don't have that with novels. I enjoyed writing a musical because that's completely different. If you're writing the script,

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sometimes the musician will do the music and the lyrics, but in my case with *Mary Poppins* we had George Stiles doing the music and Anthony Drewe doing the lyrics, they are an established partnership.

So there you are, all three in a room, after you've done the basics and they take a bit of your dialogue to put in as a lyric and then you [argue] they've got to say that it's his birthday because some people might miss it, so that comes back out of the song into the dialogue. And all of that I really enjoyed. I loved them. I think it probably would be tougher if you didn't get on, but if you do get on that is a collaboration that I found very enjoyable, because you're all doing a different task.

You are collaborating but you have three distinct jobs. You comment on the music, you comment on the lyrics, they comment on the script, so you're all working together. In fact I'm just in the middle of doing *the Wind in the Willows* with them as a stage show.

Between film and television, the thing about a film is everyone is very hysterical because the amount of money is so enormous, and so you see human nature at its most raw by the end. But then, if the film turns out well and you're pleased with it, then that is very thrilling. You sit there and you think 'I wrote that!'

Television, I'm enjoying actually, because the great thing about television is that television is not exclusively but is largely for grownups. The largest television audience is aged between 30 and death. A lot of those people watch television. You can write a situation on television that is quite emotionally complicated and quite grown up, and you don't have to resolve everything and you can have things that don't work out, and all of that. Whereas film nowadays, unless it's a small film, what used to be called an art film, you frighten them if they don't think it's going to reach a wide audience.

So there is a tendency to want you to simplify things, not to have difficult information in there. I always remember one note when I had someone talking about Madrid, there was a ring round and they said 'where?' I said 'Madrid,' and they said 'but what about the people who've never heard of Madrid?' I said 'what about the people who've never heard of chairs and tables, where does this end?' You have that kind of pressure in a way, whereas you don't so much have it with television, and you can draw them in to complicated issues where there isn't that question 'but who are we rooting for?' you know.

And on television you can say 'you rooting for all of them,' or 'none of them,' and I like that. I always remember having a test screening of *Separate Lies* in New York and there is a situation in this film where the man is very, very much in love with his wife and she has left him for another man. He wants to hate her, really, but at the same time he knows he will never again be as in love with anyone as he is with her. And when she finally goes out of his life that will be the end of great love for him. And so he wants her back.

He doesn't care why or how or how difficult it's going to be, he just wants her back. We had a test screening, and one of the boys in the screening was about 19 and said 'I don't understand one thing,' and I said 'what was that?' He said 'when he learned she'd been screwing around why didn't he just tell her to get lost?' And I thought 'this isn't the film for you.'

But I think that premise; that I was talking about, is hard for people to understand who are younger than their middle 30s. When you're 23 you think that there's a great love around the corner, she's just the wrong one. Later you realise there aren't that many right ones so your perspective changes.

Question: You've written a lot of historical pieces, what would be your advice to a writer in regard to treading the fine line between historical fact at the expense of dramatic action in a story?

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JF: This is quite a tricky area. There is a sort of fixation that much of our phrasing and everything is very modern. People get alarmed [by it]. With *Downton* we were always being accused of using modern phrases, that no one said 'boyfriend' until the 1930s. In fact 'boyfriend' appeared in print in 1879, and most of that stuff was wrong. But it isn't quite enough to be right; it's also got to be believably right.

And that I may not have judged correctly. I always check on the phrase etymology [and] history and all that stuff. But that doesn't always mean you will carry people with you. But at the same time you don't want to create a barrier where there need not be one. As for actual historical fact, it is a tricky area. In *The Young Victoria* the real story was very good, and pretty well everything in the film was based on truth.

The moment when Conroy tried to make her sign the paper when she was ill with a fever, this is true; the moment when King William IV stood up at Windsor and insulted his sister-in-law and hurled abuse at her in front of the entire court, absolutely true. We have an eyewitness account, and most of what he says is true; when Queen Victoria proposed to Albert 'it would make me very happy, too happy really' – a lovely phrase, that was her not me. So it is nice if you can make it real.

But I had one situation in that film. She was absolutely mad about Albert but she'd had this very controlled childhood, she'd almost grown up under house arrest and she didn't want to give up any of her freedom. She was Queen, people had to do what she said, they had to involve her, and she didn't want her husband to come in and start making decisions and push her into the background as she saw it.

That was not what she wanted. Like William III and Mary, that was the last experience of that, and she didn't want it. So she wouldn't let him join in anything, and after a year she suddenly changed her mind. I think the reason for that was there was an assassination attempt on

Constitution Hill when this man called Edward Oxford jumped out as they were in a carriage bowling past. He produced a gun, he lowered it towards them and he fired. The Prince saw this man before the Queen did, and seeing him he threw the Queen into the well of the carriage and he covered her with his body, putting his back to the gun.

In fact the bullet missed him, but there was no reason to suppose it would miss him, and he would have been killed. She then, about four days after this incident, had his desk brought into her sitting room and put next to her desk and from then on they managed things jointly. He didn't push her into the background at all actually, they operated as a pair. I have always believed that these two incidents were linked. However happy she was with him this was the man that her mother and her uncle had wanted her to marry, there was an element of an arranged marriage about it. But the fact that he was prepared to die for her changed things, because that is not arranged.

His extraordinary loyalty to her, I think was very moving to her and that altered things. When I came to write it I felt that if the bullet just missed him, as it did in real life, we wouldn't really have a sense of how dangerous that moment had been. So I made it graze him, and he was carried into the palace. Of course this set up a cacophony of shrieks, and I sort of have a sneaking agreement with them that in a way it was weak of me not to find a way to make it sufficiently dramatic without departing from what really happened.

That was the lesson I sort of learned from that. Another time, it's better if you can take the true facts and make them deliver the dramatic punch you need from them, rather than simplifying it by slightly altering the facts. I hadn't, of course, altered the incident or the moral message that the Queen learnt at all, or indeed the Prince's bravery. But I had slightly altered what happened and I rather regret it now because everything else in the film is true.

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Question: Mr Fellowes you genuinely have an interest with your characters for *Downton*, any chance of a novel or a radio play, because there's a lot of back history of these characters that we'd really like to get into?

JF: I do actually have an idea of doing a prequel of the courtship of Robert and Cora, when all those American heiresses were arriving in London – the Buccaneers, as they were called – and their slightly troubled courtship, because she was in love with him before they married, as we know, but he fell in love with her a year after and he married her entirely for her money.

I sort of feel there's something quite nice in there because he's quite a decent cove, and so he feels rather guilty about this which has affected their marriage beyond that. I sort of feel that's probably the first book. For me, any other books or plays or films should follow after the end of the television show. I don't think you can continue a narrative in more than one area at once. I never really liked those Coronation Street Christmas specials when they all go to Haiti, and you don't have to watch it. Somehow it doesn't feel very organic. So that's probably what I would do.

Question: You've got a new job as a working peer in the House of Lords. Has this influenced your views and your interpretation of aristocracy and will it perhaps in the future mean you will produce more political novels or plays? One can't help also just throwing in, is what we're going to watch with Maggie Smith and Shirley MaLaine going to be the greatest thing since Bette Davis and Joan Crawford?

JF: That's rather a good idea; someone is trying to remake *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane*? I'd better get them on the phone. I'm very interested in being in the House of Lords. It's not an aristocratic institution now so much as a political one, and most of the appointee peers, life peers, are there because they have had interesting careers in one field or another. What is very attractive about debate in the Lords is that

the role of the Lords as it is presently constituted is to improve legislation. It has no other purpose.

Legislation that has not, sometimes, been tremendously coherently thought through in the Commons, or [has been] made too hastily, comes to the Lords and recommendations – some of which may be taken up, many of which are ignored – are made, hopefully to improve the legislation and make it more workable. Now obviously that means there is a much less confrontational atmosphere, because if there is a Health Bill and Lord Winston stands up to give a speech on what is good or bad about it, clearly you're a fool if you don't listen.

And because he's on the Labour benches and I'm on the Tory benches, that doesn't alter anything. So you have friends on all sides of the House, and you listen with interest to people speaking on all sides of the house. That, for me is a much more attractive form of debate than the 'ya-boo sucks' that the Commons can become at times. So actually I feel very privileged to be part of that. I've been asked to do things, I was on the Film Policy Review Committee, and I've got other things which overlap with the world in which I've made my living.

And, again, I think it's useful. You have a practical knowledge of trying to get a film made, whereas some of the people on the committee may have very good ideas but they've never tried to raise the money to get a picture made. So you're looking at it from a different perspective and all of that I hope is helpful to the country, and is a privilege to be part of, really.

BH: You've been quoted as saying that, despite your success, you are more fearful than ever now. Is that true, or is there a point where you feel you can take your foot off the gas a bit?

JF: That's so hard to answer really. I think you have a sort of terror that the moment you take it for granted the goblins will steal it all away. And I am a workaholic. If I have any work pending, to have a day off is hard for me. I go away on

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holiday, and I sit under the hot Italian sun typing, you know, 'Downton: gardens – day' I wish I was a bit more laid back, but I'm just not a very laid back person really. In the end, you know, you have your moment. There are a lot of people who never have a moment and they deserve one. You should always be aware of that. That however well things are going it could easily not have been so.

When I was very young I was in Hollywood, and I was at this dinner with Albert Finney who I didn't then know. I know him now and he's a terribly nice chap, but I didn't really know him [then]. We'd all gone to see this film he was in, which wasn't very good, so he was in a bit of a glump.

We were having dinner, and in the middle of it he said 'I know your sort!' I thought 'uh-oh' 'I know your sort. You're the sort who thinks he's never been given the chance to show what he can do.' Well, of course, this was exactly my sort, but I thought I couldn't just say 'yes, well spotted.' He said 'listen, if you've got it they find you.' Well, of course, I left the restaurant under the blackest cloud. I thought 'they haven't found me, so I haven't got it.'

But this is nonsense, there are lots of people who've got it and they never found them. And I know some of them. So I think you always have to remind yourself of that. The fact that you had your hour puts you among the lucky ones. And I hope that when my hour is closing, and I'm just wheeled out for the odd chat show I will remember to be grateful, because nobody has more than an hour and then your time is done and it's time for the next lot. I do feel that, actually.