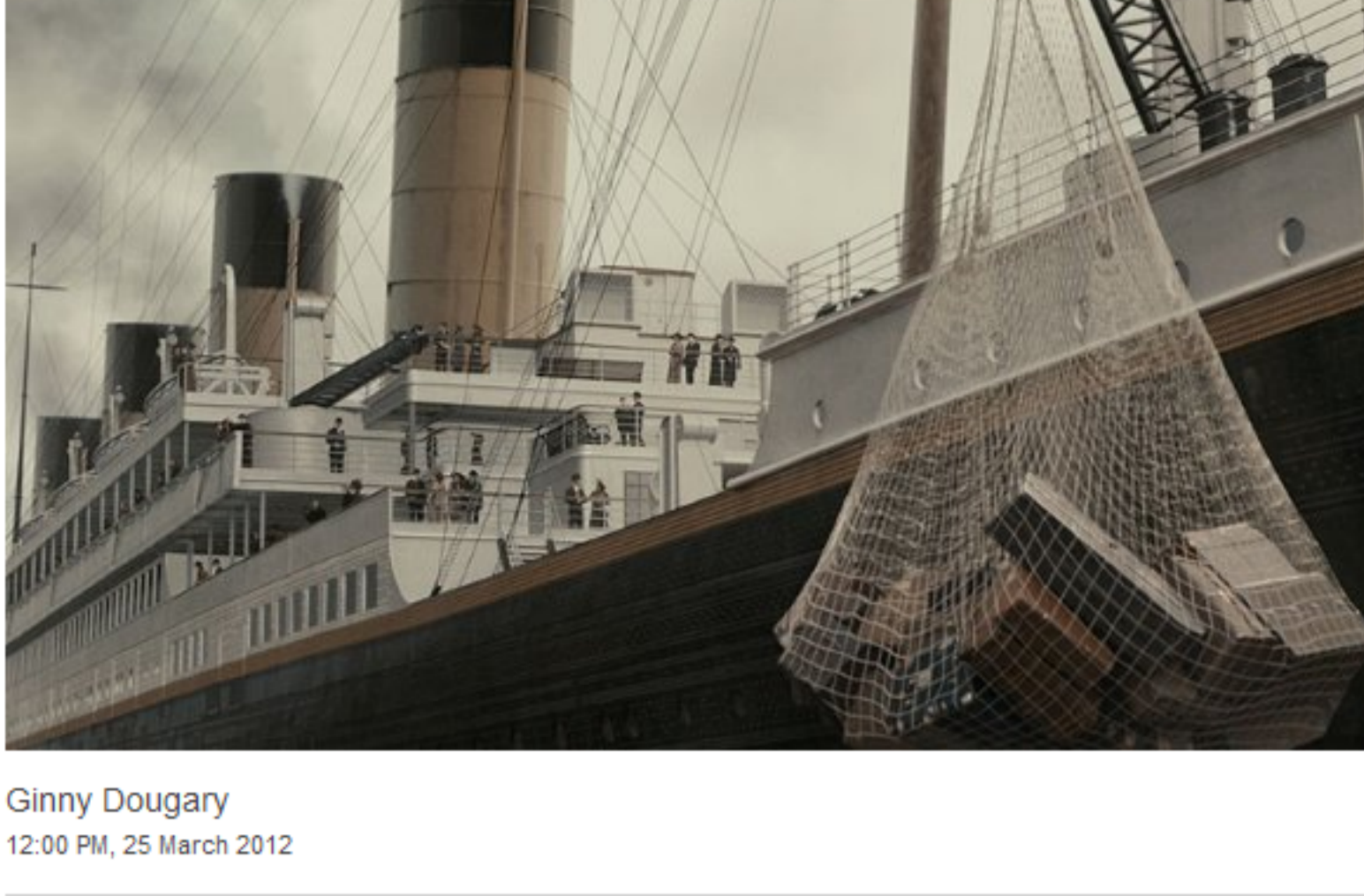


## Julian Fellowes vows to separate fact from fiction in Titanic

Writer is keen to set the historical record straight in his new four-part ITV drama



Ginny Dougary  
12:00 PM, 25 March 2012

Exactly 14 years ago, the people of Dalbeattie had a special visitor. The vice-president of Twentieth Century Fox had come to town, bearing an apology. He wanted to say sorry to the inhabitants of the town in Dumfries & Galloway for the film company's part in the betrayal of one of its most famous sons.

William Murdoch was first officer on RMS Titanic, and went down with the ship when she sank after hitting an iceberg on the night of 14 April 1912. Murdoch was a local hero – a master mariner credited with launching the lifeboats that saved 75 per cent of the survivors. More than 1,500 people died when the Titanic sank, but if it hadn't been for the diligent and selfless Murdoch, the figure would have been considerably higher.

### “Villainising” Murdoch

But in April 1998, Murdoch was also an international villain. In James Cameron's Titanic, the officer, played by Scots actor Ewan Stewart, was portrayed as a coward who shot passengers before taking his own life.

With the blockbuster film hoovering up 11 Oscars and powering full steam ahead to a record-breaking \$1.8 billion in box-office receipts, it wasn't just Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet who were finding their lives and reputations changing beyond all recognition. Murdoch's name had gone down the plughole, too.

“That was very unfair how Murdoch was depicted,” says Julian Fellowes, a writer who has spent much of the past five years immersed in Titanic lore. “He wasn't cowardly. He fired the pistol to just stop a potential riot. It was suddenly getting out of hand, and he fired it in the air. That's not being cowardly.

“I don't think you can do that,” adds the dramatist. As a writer and film-maker, he feels he has a responsibility to the truth, and to real individuals, historical or otherwise. He doesn't even think you can make a real person a coward “even when there's no evidence that they weren't cowardly.” You can't “villainise” someone.

### Duty to tell the truth

“Right,” nods the Oscar winner ennobled as Baron Fellowes of West Stafford and acclaimed for making us care rabidly about the lives of the made-up posh folk and skivvies of Downton Abbey.

“Because, these are people who died. And not that long ago. Both my grandmothers were pregnant with my parents when the Titanic went down. Not my grandparents but my parents! One was born in May, the other in July. I don't think you can just say, ‘Well, we'll make this guy a villain – he'll do.’

“I mean, you can invent a baddie if you want one. But I don't really do baddies. My baddies always have a sort of redeeming feature, just as my goodies always do something stupid.”

The Titanic – the world's largest and most technically advanced ship – plunged to the bottom of the North Atlantic 100 years ago. But in this centenary year the ocean-going behemoth, pride of the Belfast shipyards and of the White Star Line, is once again demonstrating what its engineers always said was its key feature: its unsinkability.

### Latest version of the Titanic story

After the Cameron big-screen epic and a considerably less well-known US TV drama – and long after the 1958 British film A Night to Remember – comes Titanic: the mini-series.

Fellowes's four-parter is an ambitious undertaking: an international co-production with a budget of £11 million, filmed in budget-friendly and tax-efficient Budapest last summer. It has an ensemble cast including almost 80 speaking parts, built by a 90-strong team of Hungarian craftspeople, the action taking place on a ruddy great hunk of wood made ship-shape in Stern Film Studio. The water tank cost £100,000 and holds 940 cubic metres.

Executive producer Simon Vaughan, who had the “acorn” of an idea to relaunch Titanic five years ago, says, “A typical, big British drama costs £1 million per hour.” Downton Abbey, he thinks, is more of the order of £1.2 million.

“Titanic is nearly three times that. If we'd been shooting in the UK, the cost would have doubled – £20 million. But even on a visit to the studios one hot, July day last summer, the avuncular, jacket-and-tied Fellowes professes to know nothing of such unseemly fiscal matters.

“Ah, I don't really ever know anything about budgets,” he smiles. “I'm not part of it. I write it, and sometimes they say, ‘We can't afford the ballroom, will it be all right if you put it in the fridge?’ So I do it...”

### Focus on character

Hired by Vaughn and his producing partner Nigel Stafford-Clark to make real their idea for a four-part series in which, in every episode, Titanic sinks, Fellowes's brief was straightforward: “My job was to people the ship.”

And rather than be distracted by the pennies and pounds, Fellowes sought to immerse himself in the nuts and bolts of those people. He would write a drama that included both real, historical characters, and fictitious individuals drawn from his research-based imagination.

“We had this initial conversation where we realised that obviously we couldn't conceivably rival the Cameron movie for special effects. They were the best special effects anyone had ever seen! In the end, we wanted to tell the story of the ship and all the different groups of people travelling on it.”

A Night to Remember, he points out, concentrated on the officers, “and the passengers were quite subsidiary”. The 1996 American mini-series did feature more of the 1,300 passengers and 900 crew aboard for the ship's maiden voyage, but via a somewhat Upstairs Downstairs route.

“Everyone's being gracious and charming in first class and everyone's dancing and jiggling in third – and there's nobody else on the ship. Then you have Cameron's movie which is essentially a love story told against the backdrop of the Titanic. But neither of those told the story of the whole ship. So that was our kind of rationale, that this hadn't been done.”

### Real people

The historically verifiable characters include the great and the good of Edwardian society on both sides of the Atlantic. The muscular, brash wealth of the new America is represented by JJ Astor, Benjamin Guggenheim and the Widener family of Philadelphia.

Fellowes found “lovely things in the true account” that he sought to honour and preserve. “Astor's wife was very pregnant, and at the very end he said [to the officers], ‘Could I get on the boat? I only ask because of her condition.’

“And they said no, because [second officer and Titanic hero] Charles Lightoller had left these orders. And so of course she was crying and shivering and everything, and he pulled off his gloves and threw them to her. And said, ‘Give them back to me when we meet again.’ And of course they never met again.”

### Portrayal of Bruce Ismay

The British contingent includes Bruce Ismay, chairman of White Star Line. He survived the disaster but became known as the Coward of the Titanic. “He was a bit of a hysteric actually, but he had worked hard running round trying to round up the women, get them into boats,” says Fellowes, who trawled through the wealth of Titanic documents, including the post-disaster hearings that took place in New York and London.

Ismay was vilified for taking a place in the last lifeboat. “You could say it's a cowardly act,” says James Wilby, who plays Ismay. “Or it's an act of self-preservation. Or it's a momentary madness. You can rationalise it in a million different ways. But is he a coward? B\*\*\*\*\*s to that, frankly.”

Thus, Fellowes is careful to avoid “Murdoch-ing” Ismay all over again. “His whole life was ruined, and he and his wife became sort of recluses,” says Fellowes. “I don't admire him and I hope I wouldn't have done that myself.

“But I can't curse him as a disgrace to his sex because it's very hard to know what you would do in that instance. And he had a sort of excuse – he said that he felt it was important that he was at the hearings. And he'd been the only White Star man on board.

“And I can see how you would talk yourself into it being sort of OK. So I think on the whole I've taken a pretty merciful view of the bad behaviour. Because, you know, we weren't there.”

### Fictional characters

The new characters, meanwhile, are largely in place to allow the writer to tell the stories of the social and political themes of the day. The woman's suffrage movement is represented via Georgiana, spirited daughter of the Earl of Manton (played by Linus Roache).

The Irish Question is explored via John Batley (Toby Jones), Manton's lawyer and expat Irishman in London. “There's a jigsaw thing to the way Julian structures it,” says Jones admiringly. “It's hard to even contemplate how on earth he does that with all the different issues. Like with Downton Abbey and [Fellowes's screenplay for] Gosford Park, Titanic is another class machine isn't it? A class factory that's imploded.”

Enter, stage left, a collision between a real passenger – early Hollywood star Dorothy Gibson – and an invented one, the painfully snobbish Countess of Manton.

“Gibson has a usefulness,” suggests Fellowes. “Because a movie star in 1912 is very much a kind of early warning of the world to come. To people like Louisa Manton, a movie star is the rough equivalent of some juggler on the corner. But we know she's bringing a culture that will engulf people like the Mantons.”

### Setting the record straight

In the end, no matter who goes down with the ship, Fellowes hopes that all his characters stand up. “What I absolutely hope is that the dramatic treatment of the real people is indistinguishable from the dramatic treatment of the fictional ones. I would hope that after watching, someone who's interested would Google the whole thing and be surprised to find out which were fictional and which were not.

“I think with real people you have a kind of imperative to be true to who they were. I don't think you can take someone who was moral and decent and make them do something immoral and indecent. I would feel uncomfortable doing that. So we do have Murdoch, and we have him firing a pistol... [But] there is a little bit of setting the record straight.”

He clarifies that he didn't write Murdoch's part “with a particularly crusading zeal. But I think there are bits of information where the public either doesn't know something, or has got the wrong end of the stick.”

### Lack of lifeboats

He cites the oft-repeated fact that the ship only had a third of the lifeboats required for the people on board. “It's always interpreted as ‘What do we care if the steerage drown, as long as Lady Mary's rescued?’

“But that wasn't it at all. The great steam liners had been operating by then for a little less than half a century, and they didn't sink often. When they did it was invariably because of a collision with another vessel. And when that happens the damage is so localised that they took forever to sink. If it takes 12 hours to sink there was more than enough time for other boats to get there...”

“So on Titanic they thought there was no point in cluttering up the boat deck, making everyone hysterical and having 56 lifeboats hanging everywhere. In fact, they thought they had too many! It never occurred to them they would have the unique quality of the iceberg damage – which was a slash right down the side of the ship. I mean, it sank in 90 minutes.”

### Believability

On the good ship ITV Titanic, authenticity and believability are everything. On the Budapest set, this has unexpected ramifications. Coronation Street actor Bill Roache is today visiting his son Linus as he films evacuation scenes. Might his dad not have been offered a berth on the cast?

The younger Roache doesn't think that would have worked. “People would be watching, saying, ‘What's Ken Barlow doing on the Titanic?’”

*This is an edited version of an article from the issue of Radio Times magazine that went on sale 20 March 2012.*

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**We Won't Drop the Baby**  
10:25pm  
BBC1 (not Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland)

Documentary following comedian Laurence Clark and his wife Adele, who both have cerebral palsy, as they prepare...

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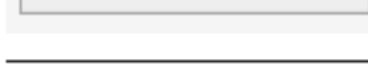


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10:15pm  
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