

Julian Fellowes: 'Abbey' owes much to Wharton

By Julian Fellowes, Special to The Eagle Berkshire Eagle

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It is quite true that Edith Wharton has been a tremendous influence on me and on my writing although actually she came quite late into my life. I think I was in my 30s when someone gave me a copy of "The House of Mirth" and I was instantly impressed by the extraordinarily contemporary feeling of Wharton's writing. Her dialogue was so immediate, her understanding of emotional predicaments was so vital. She observes but she does not judge.

Then I moved on from Lily Bart to "The Custom of the Country" and it is quite true that I felt this was my book; that the novel was talking to me in a most extreme and immediate way. I think it's a remarkable piece of writing. In Undine Spragg, Wharton has created an anti-heroine absolutely in the same rank as Becky Sharp, Scarlet O'Hara, or Lizzy Eustace. Undine has no values except ambition, greed and desire, and yet through the miracle of Wharton's writing, you are on her side. That's what's so extraordinary about the book.

I particularly like the following sentence which comes very near the end. At this point in the novel Undine is married to Elmer Moffatt and everything is sort of marvelous. 'Even now, however, she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted but she felt at times that there were other things she might want if she knew about them.'

All of this was a tremendous inspiration to me. I decided, largely because of her work, that it was time I wrote something. Because of Edith Wharton and the old saying "write what you know," I decided to write what I knew, not to try and find a more interesting story than my own but to write about my own past and the world I'd grown up in. The result was "Snobs." Actually having finished it, I was quite unable to find a publisher. The truth is I couldn't get a publisher even to read it. Not if I'd pinned 50-pound notes between the pages.

Nevertheless, I had begun. After that, I started to work on scripts, again unpaid and unmade, but nevertheless I was writing. One of them was for actor/producer, Bob Balaban. A little while later he got in touch and asked if I would be interested in writing a film about an English country house in the 1930s. The end product was a film called "Gosford Park" written for Robert Altman. In a way it was a more bitter vision than some of my later work. Of course, I suppose one could say it was my "House of Mirth." The picture was a hit and I won an Oscar for it.

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The following decade was a very lucky one for me which took me to the warm, safe, shores of "Downton Abbey."

I'm often asked whether the characters and incidents in "Downton" are based on real people. Of course they often are, even if I'm a bit leery of identifying them ever since I told a great friend, an early patroness of mine and an encourager of my youth, that she was the model for the Marchioness of Uckfield in "Snobs." I thought she'd be enormously amused. I was quite wrong and she didn't speak to me for two years.

Anyway, it is obvious that the "Downton" experience has been an extraordinary one. I mean, it's the kind of thing that happens once in your career if you're incredibly lucky, and I have had real luck. People say, "Why do you think it's all happened? Why is it so popular?" The answer is I don't really know. I think it's a great show and I absolutely love the fact that people enjoy it as much as they do, but if I knew why, I would never write anything but enormous hits for the rest of my life.

I like to think I am kind to my characters. I want "Downton" to be a warm show and I hope I am kind to them in their weakness and kind to them in the errors of their ways. If I am, I do feel it is a lesson I have learned directly from the writing of Edith Wharton, from her tolerance and her wit and her humor, even while she wields the rod. Consequently, I consider myself grateful and blessed in having made her acquaintance.

These are the edited remarks of Julian Fellowes, the creator of "Downton Abbey," from The Mount's fall gala where he was honored with the Edith Wharton Lifetime Achievement Award.

