

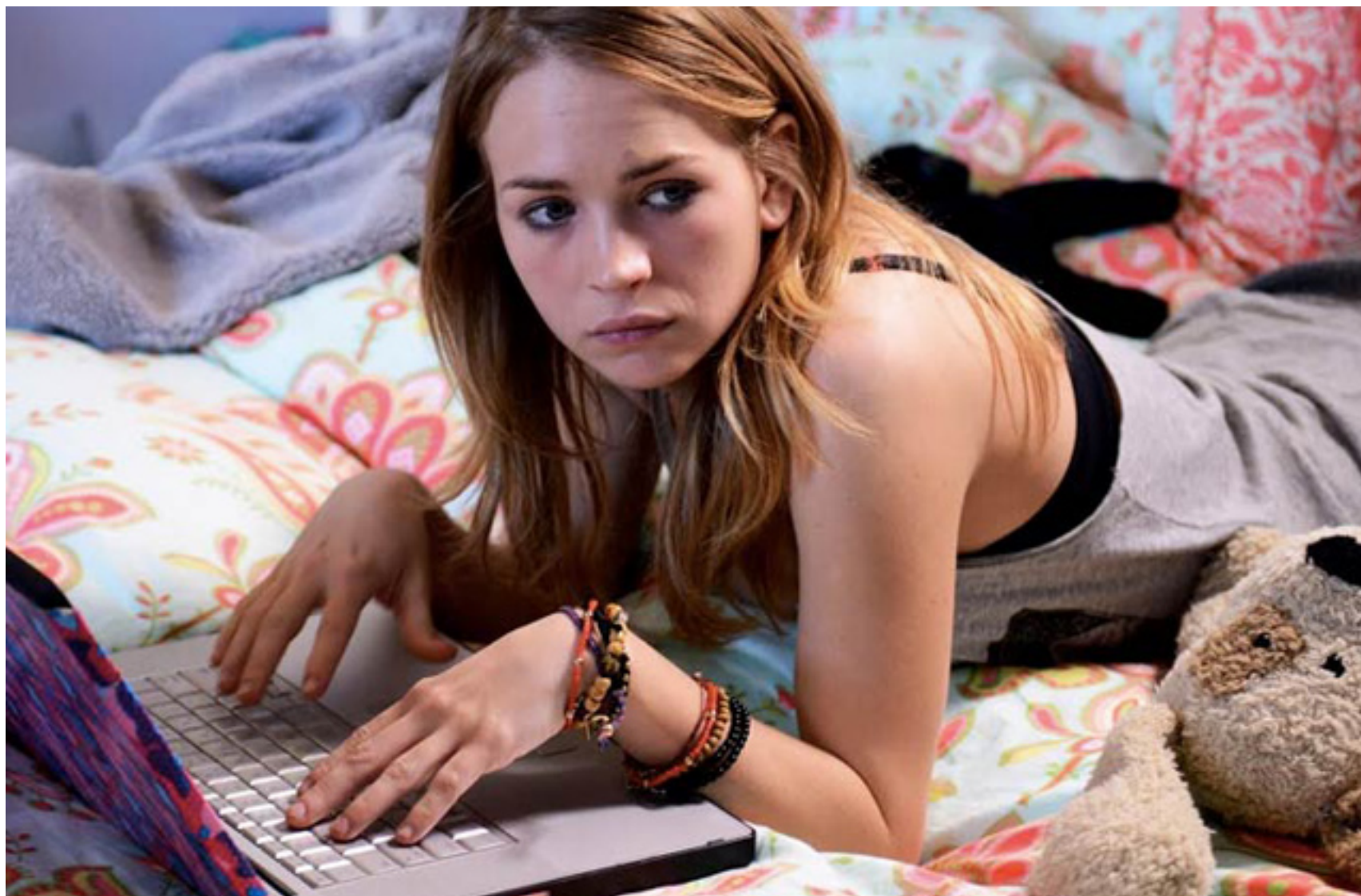
## Interview: Writer, Director Allison Burnett on 'Ask Me Anything'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on March 4, 2015 - 4:14pm

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CHICAGO – The number of writers who have adapted and directed their own novels as films is a very small and elite club, and it includes writer/director Allison Burnett. His 2014 film, “Ask Me Anything,” is being released on DVD on March 3rd, 2015, and features Britt Robertson, Justin Long, Christian Slater and Martin Sheen.

“Ask Me Anything” was adapted by Burnett from his 2009 novel “Undiscovered Gyr!,” and is a gritty and multi-layered story of a girl blogger whose truth telling gets in the way of her expectations. Up-and-coming actress Britt Robertson portrays Katie Kampenfelt, taking a sabbatical between high school and college. Along the way, she can’t help being attracted to older men, including characters portrayed by Justin Long, Christian Slater and the always virtuous Martin Sheen. “Ask Me Anything” is a modern and incendiary love story, if loving yourself becomes necessary for survival.



Britt Robertson as Katie in Allison Burnett's 'Ask Me Anything'

*Photo credit: Phase 4 Films*

Allison Burnett was born on the East Coast in 1958, but later lived in the Chicagoland area, as his father was a professor at Northwestern University in Evanston. After attending that university, he studied play writing at the Julliard School in New York City. He moved to Los Angeles, and scored his first screenwriting gig in 1992. His debut novel, “Christopher,” was a 2004 PEN Center USA Literary Award finalist, and he has written the feature films “Autumn in New York” (2000), the remake of “Fame” (2009) and an underrated film featuring Amanda Seyfried, entitled “Gone” (2012).

"Ask Me Anything" is his second directorial effort, after 1997's "Red Meat." He joins Stephen King, Norman Mailer and Stephen Chbosky ("The Perks of Being a Wallflower") as novelists who have adapted and directed their own works as films. HollywoodChicago.com talked to Allison Burnett via phone from Los Angeles.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What observation spurred the idea for the novel 'Undiscovered Gyrl,' which became the basis for 'Ask me Anything'?

**Allison Burnett:** It was a combinations of things. One, is that I had known a girl who was 18 years old, who had been briefly involved with an older male friend of mine, and after that relationship ended she and I became friends. She would call me at strange hours. and tell me about her life, while at the same time I was going through an awkward transition in my own life. I started listening to this girl pass along her dramas, and I'd give her advice, which we both knew she would entirely ignore.

It seemed to me she was living recklessly. She was bright, funny and charismatic, but was making some really bad choices with drinking, pot smoking and dallying with older men. Fast forward to the Hollywood writers strike of 2007, when I was instructed to put down my screenwriter pen. I went back to fiction, and her voice came back to me.

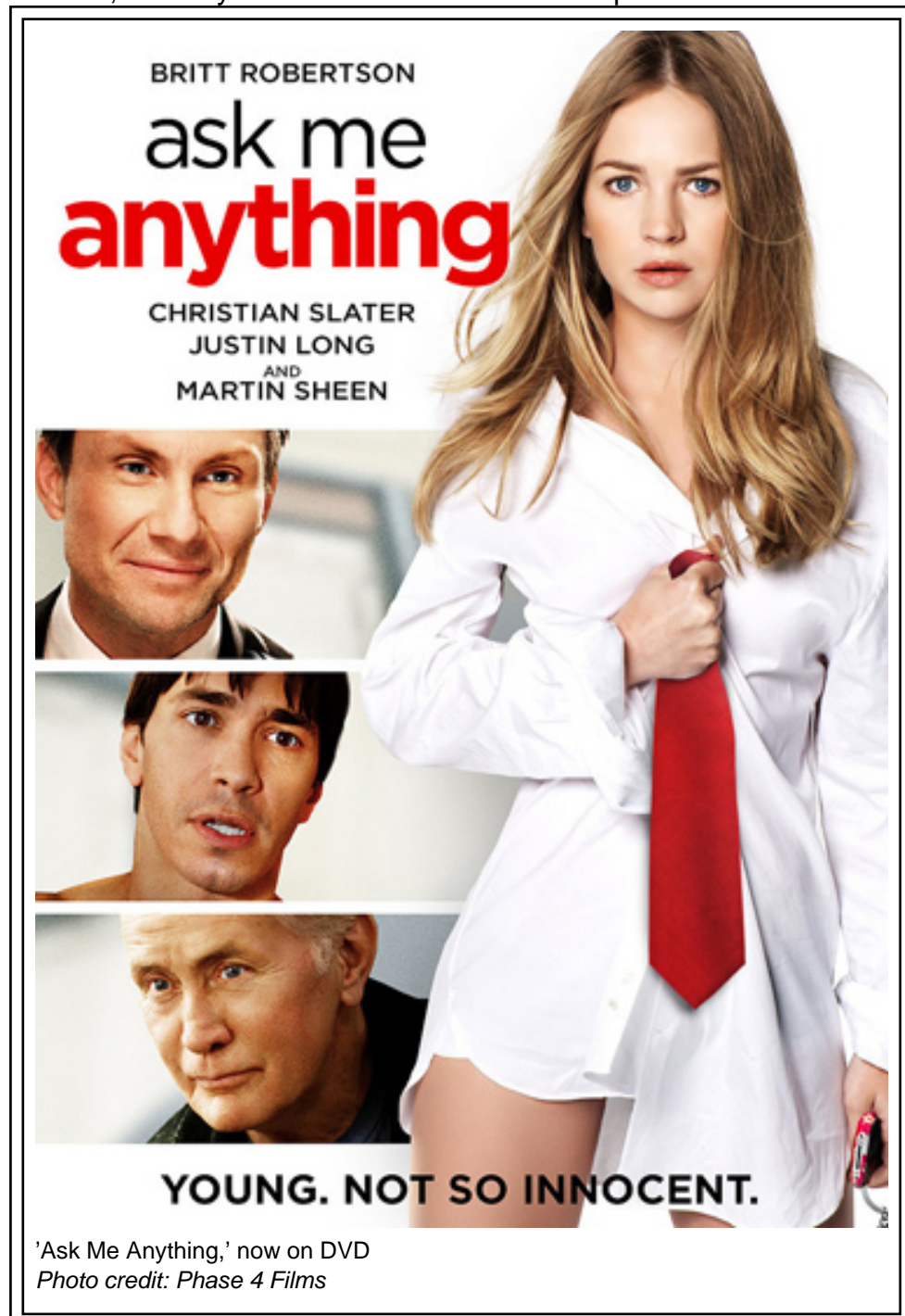
**HollywoodChicago.com:** You said it was a combination of things. What did you combine with your friend's voice?

**Burnett:** When I was promoting my first novel, MySpace was just starting out. My son got 50 of his friends at the time to add me to their MySpace pages, to help me get the word out on the book. I started reading blogs, which were just starting out. As I was reading about those lives, I was intrigued as they self dramatized themselves. It also struck me that the internet is a medium where you have no idea what a person is really like – they're just curating and branding themselves.

In the novel, I wanted her to sweep us into her world, and we become the voyeur. We feed on her beauty, youth and recklessness, and are drawn in, and then have her disappear in a cloud of smoke. We never really know what we have grasped. That was the impetus of the book, and of course the film was different. I think the ambiguity of the ending can be accepted better in the film.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Given your connection to the whole project, how were you able to get outside perspective apart from how you were formulating the book-to-film transition?

**Burnett:** For one thing, it takes forever for a book to come out. I waited a year in between delivering the manuscript to Random House Vintage Books, and its release. There was time right there. I really didn't have a desire to adapt it to film. Then it was optioned for a 27-year- old director, but they couldn't deliver a decent script.



I took the rights back, and by that time a few years had gone by since the release of the book. I was now ready to adapt it. The hardest thing about that was condensing a rich, multi-layered book – with Katie and her voice talking for pages – down to a core essence. It was a process



of cutting, cutting and more cutting. I cut ten pages out of the final draft of the script, and filmed all of what was left. Then I cut another 25 minutes from it. It's just a perpetual, disciplined and objective blood letting. The great thing is that I feel what is in the movie is essential, and the pacing of it really works.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You had quite an odyssey securing actress Britt Roberson as the lead character Katie [Robertson was doing another film, and when that was delayed, worked on 'Ask Me Anything' between the two movie sets]. What did you find in Britt that you put into Katie?

**Burnett:** I wanted the lead girl to be a blonde, blue-eyed beauty, a real American type. I wanted her to have emotional depth, and I liked that Britt was – as I described her – like hard candy. She had a tough outer core, but had warmth underneath that core. And the character was very bright, so I liked Britt's intelligence and approach to that part of Katie.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** All the key men in Katie's life were cast with high profile film veterans. What do these pros bring to a project that makes your production life easier?

**Burnett:** When you get a trained, experienced and professional film actor, and everything starts working with them, they are at their greatest as human beings. They become a wonder to watch. There was a particular scene with Britt and Martin Sheen, as Britt had been in a TV show for three years, and Martin of course had been around the camera much longer. There was nothing that both of them didn't know about the logistics of the camera and shooting. They were instructing each other about 'eye lines' and other technical that made the scene work much better. It blew my mind.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The finished film won festival awards, and a distributor signed on early. What factors prevented a wider theatrical release?

**Burnett:** I could write a short book about it. [laughs] The actual creation of the film, and the finished product, is only 50% of what needs to be done to get it actually released. Most first timers think it's about 90%, but once it is done that is just the beginning, then another trial and ordeal begins. We didn't show the film for a long time, because we were chasing festivals. So many of these festivals are based on what is new, what's happening and what is groovy.

We thought that Britt would be the 'flavor of the month' factor, but she is not an 'on the town' type person, and isn't a household name yet. Also, the film is different in its sophistication, and is in no way forcing you to love it. So we kept hearing 'what an interesting film' but we weren't getting into any major festivals. Smaller festivals, for example, were willing to give us a thousand seat premiere, but we had to hold it in case a major festival came calling. It became a trap. We ended up selling it to a distributor, and then was free to premiere at the Nashville Film Festival, where we won Best Actress for Britt, and Best Music.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What new lessons did you personally learn with this film, about a business you've been part of for over twenty years?

**Burnett:** Don't get trapped with the festivals, obviously. Chase one if the timing is right, but don't chase all the others as well. That's madness. Another thing I learned was that you have to get iron clad assurances that an actor will help promote the film. In an independent film, you can't afford to go after all these actors afterward and beg them to promote. Also, in relation to that, all deals must be signed. Agents tend to drag their heels when their client only makes small money on an independent, so no one really cares. Those things really stood out this time.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Your roots are in the Midwest and partially in Chicagoland. What survival instincts are present in Midwesterners that allow a smoother journey within the rigors of Los Angeles show business?

**Burnett:** Oh, just small things like ethics, a love of truth, being grounded, lack of pretensions and a lack of entitlement. [laughs] For example, I've always said that Chicago actresses, whenever they are interviewed, display such salt-of-the-earth qualities and pure earthiness. It's a great community out here, especially the Northwestern alumni, which have stronger connections than any of the other universities represented here.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** One of the best original screenplays of 2012 was your treatment of "Gone," starring Amanda Seyfried. Again, what factors do you feel prevented a wider embrace of this woman-in-control story, with themes that are universal?



Writer/Director Allison Burnett  
Photo credit: AllisonBurnett.com

**Burnett:** In this case, it was a wide release, but people didn't go. One of the problems I think was lack of star power, aside from Amanda Seyfried, and adult moviegoers saw it as a teenage-girl-in-peril movie. There was also a lot of confusion on how to market the film. I do think it will still have its day, but it never clicked at the time.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are in a very small club of novelists who have adapted and director their own original works. One of these rare people is Norman Mailer. What do you think you have in common with Mailer that both got you across this finish line?

**Burnett:** Grandiosity, tremendous self confidence and we don't suffer fools. [laughs] When it's something as personal as my own novel, I didn't want to see it screwed up.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** We were born a couple years apart, and grew up near each other. What do you think our generation has contributed to society, and work do we need to do before it's all over?

**Burnett:** Well, I think the world is a better place, because of the social changes that occurred during the 1960s and '70s. There is more consciousness in most social causes, and gay marriage, for example, would have never happened without it. But there is disappointment, it seems that there is an extreme swinging of a pendulum regarding viewpoints in American society. Each time, I think, it swings a little less. There is progress, but not as much as most of us would have hoped.

*"Ask Me Anything" is now available on DVD on Amazon.com and downloadable on other platforms, including Netflix, Amazon Prime and Pay-Per-View. See television providers for Pay-Per-View details. Featuring Britt Robertson, Justin Long, Christian Slater, Martin Sheen and Robert Patrick. Written and directed by Allison Burnett. Not Rated.*



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