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# Sitcom Ethics

Michael Schur on *The Good Place*



# Afterlife Lessons

## How Michael Schur's *The Good Place* uses a wild premise and goofy humor to explore the philosophy of ethics.

**H**ow do you solve a problem like Eleanor? It's not that she's a terrible person—more like a disappointing person, but in a commonplace sort of way. She's petty, rude, selfish, and unreliable, though her misbehavior never edges into real malice. Beneath her obnoxious façade, however, hides a wounded little girl raised by useless parents, so what the world perceives as narcissism is actually a twisted form of self-preservation. But, hey, it's not like anyone's keeping score...except someone is. And when Eleanor dies, it's time to crunch the numbers.

Enter Michael, the otherworldly being responsible for Eleanor's afterlife. He's the architect of Neighborhood 12358W, a subdivision of the ethereal plane he euphemistically describes as "The Good Place." And in the first episode of Michael Schur's ingenious NBC comedy series *The Good Place*, viewers discover exactly why Eleanor (played by

Kristen Bell) is such a conundrum for Michael (Ted Danson). She ascended to glory by mistake—and her presence in Neighborhood 12358W is, to use the show's playfully coded vulgarity, forking up the whole situation.

Since debuting in September 2016, *The Good Place*, which was recently renewed for a fourth season, has blended concepts, styles, and textures that shouldn't be compatible. Among other contradictions, it's a meditation on moral philosophy that occasionally features scatological humor. What's more, the show's premise reboots at the end of each season, thanks to massive plot twists in finale episodes.

Orchestrating this enchanting lunacy is two-time Emmy winner and two-time WGA Award winner (and Emmy/WGA Award nominee many times over) Schur. A veteran of *Saturday Night Live* (created by Lorne Michaels) and *The Office* (created by Ricky Gervais & Stephen Merchant, developed for Ameri-

WRITTEN BY **PETER HANSON**  
PORTRAITS BY **TOM KELLER**



Standing L-R: Jen Statsky, Dylan Morgan, Cord Jefferson, Kate Gersten, Josh Siegal, Dan Schofield, Chris Encell, Michael Schur  
Sitting L-R: Joe Mande, Rae Sanni (computer), Kassia Miller, Andrew Law, Megan Amram (photo), Matt Murray

can television by Greg Daniels, based on the BBC series), Schur previously co-created *Parks and Recreation* (with Daniels) and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (with Dan Goor). He and the rest of the show's writing staff recently met with *Written By* on the Universal backlot, where the series is shot, to discuss how *The Good Place* works—and why considerations of morality have special relevance in the Trump era.

“One of the things I love about this show is that it's very intellectual—we talk about philosophers like Kant and Sartre—and we also have fart jokes,” says co-producer Kate Gersten. “It's so delightfully daffy.”

Explains co-executive producer Megan Amram, “We want to actually teach people things, but we try to make comedy the thrust of everything. We don't break the stories like a sci-fi show that's devoid of jokes and then put jokes in later. We try to make sure that the general structure of each episode has jokes in it already.”

“I am not a particularly smart person,” deadpans co-executive producer Josh Siegal, “so I know that when I understand the philosophy, that's when we've hit the sweet spot.”

“It's that mix of high and low that gives us a lot of our energy,” suggests executive story editor Dan Schofield, adding that constant reinvention is another core value of the series. “We introduce premises and squeeze as much out of them as quickly as we can, then discard them and move on,” he says. “I think a lot of people reading the logline at the beginning of Season 1 were like, ‘How long could a show like this sustain itself?’ It's a reasonable question. So we continually reinvent ourselves.”

“We churn through stories,” adds story editor Christopher Encell, who notes that the writing staff takes a bold attitude whenever the show introduces a new concept. “It's like, ‘Let's



really have fun with this,’ because what in most shows would be six episodes, with us is one.”


And then there's the consideration of how *The Good Place* fits into the national conversation. “There's a lot of darkness in the world right now,” observes executive story editor Andrew Law. “What this show is about, at its core, is people trying to be better—not as individuals, but making each other better as a group. It's about how our values don't exist in a vacuum.”

And if that doesn't intrigue you, the show also has giant flying shrimp.

### THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

After *Parks and Recreation* ended in 2015, NBC offered to air 13 episodes of whatever series Schur came up with next. Once he'd discarded two more conventional ideas, Schur leaned into *The Good Place* because he felt an obligation to do something special with his unique opportunity to put anything on TV he wanted. The seed for the show was the notion of souls rising or falling through eternity based on points earned or lost from their behavior while mortals—X number of points added for helping a senior citizen cross a street, Y number of points deducted for cutting someone off in traffic. Soon Schur designed four central characters: Eleanor (Bell); Chidi (William Jackson Harper), a cripplingly neurotic ethics professor; Jason (Manny Jacinto), a sweet, immature dolt; and Tahani (Jameela Jamil), a self-involved socialite. Yet it wasn't until Schur contrived a massive plot twist that he knew the premise was workable. (Beware: spoilers ahead.)

Halfway through Season 1, Eleanor publicly confesses that she doesn't belong in the Good Place. But that's not the *real* shocker—in the final scenes of Season 1, viewers discover that Neighborhood 12358W is an illusion created to torture Eleanor, Chidi, Jason, and Tahani. And instead of the benevolent figure he appears to be in early episodes, Michael is a demon.

A portrait of Michael Schur, a man with short, wavy brown hair, smiling slightly. He is wearing a dark blue, long-sleeved Henley sweater. The background features a red brick wall on the left, a green window frame, and a teal pendant lamp hanging from the ceiling. The lighting is soft and indoor.

“When I conceived of the show, none of this crap was happening, so it was not a reaction,” Michael Schur says. “The finale of Season 1 aired the day before Trump was inaugurated. The show would have been executed differently if it were in any way a reaction. So I think there’s a little bit of coincidence in there—I’m gonna do a show about ethics, and then the word *ethics* appears on the front page of every newspaper every day for months and months and months.”

**The Good Place**  
Production Draft  
CONTINUED:

2

"EP. 101: EVERYTHING IS FINE"

[101]

2.  
3/24/16  
2

She nods.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

You were in a grocery store parking lot. You dropped a bottle of something called "Lonely Gal Margarita Mix for One," and when you bent over to pick it up, a long column of shopping carts that were being returned to the shopping cart collection area rolled out of control and plowed into you.

ELEANOR

Oof. That's how I died?

MICHAEL

...No, sorry, there's more. You were able to grab onto the front of the column of shopping carts, but it swept you out into the street, where you were struck and killed, by a mobile billboard truck advertising an erectile dysfunction pill called "Engorge-ulate."

Eleanor stares, incredulously, then GIGGLES.

ELEANOR

That's awful.

MICHAEL

Funnily enough, the EMT who showed up was actually an ex-boyfriend of yours --

ELEANOR

That's fine, I get it. Thanks.

(beat)

Okay, so, who was right, about all this? I was a Presbyterian -- did we totally nail it?

MICHAEL

Well, no, not really. The Hindus are a little bit right, Muslims are a little bit right, the Jews, Christians, Buddhists -- every religion guessed about 5% of it. Except for Doug Forcett.

ELEANOR

Who's Doug Forcett?

MICHAEL

He was this stoner kid who lived in Calgary in the 1970s.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

**The Good Place**  
Production Draft  
CONTINUED: (2)

"EP. 101: EVERYTHING IS FINE" [101]

3.  
3/24/16  
2

2

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

One night he got really high on mushrooms, and his friend Randy said, "What do you think happens after we die?" Doug launched into this long monologue, and he got it like 92% correct.  
(chuckles)

I mean, we couldn't believe what we were hearing. That's him right there:

On the WALL: a POSTER of a 1970s STONER smiling. A plaque reads "DOUG FORCETT, CALGARY, CLOSEST GUESS, 10/14/72"

ELEANOR

(deep breath)

Okay, well, here's my biggest question. Is this... am I in...

(pointing up and down)  
Where am I?

MICHAEL

Well, it's not the "heaven" and "hell" idea you were raised on. But generally speaking, in the afterlife, there's a Good Place, and there's a Bad Place. You're in the Good Place.

(smiles warmly)  
You're okay, Eleanor. You're in the Good Place.

She smiles, relieved.

ELEANOR

Well. That's... good!

MICHAEL

Sure is. We should get going. There's a lot to teach you, and we only have -- all of eternity! Ha! Right this way.

They get up to go --

ELEANOR

Did I have a purse with me?  
(then immediately)

Nope, I'm dead. Right. Okay, let's go!

END OF COLD OPEN

**“I think the show puts forward the idea that it’s not about the individual,” says Andrew Law. “It’s about how we make each other better. Our characters are in Hell, but they’re taking care of each other. That certainly feels fitting for 2018.”**

“Once I figured out that it was actually a bespoke Hell for four people instead of Heaven, I was like, ‘OK, this has legs—now I can commit to it,’” Schur explains. “But it took a long time, because for 12 years I’d been writing realistic mockumentary-style goofballs, and this is completely different. It scared me.”

“Early on, Mike called a few of us in to tell us this idea,” recalls co-executive producer Joe Mande. “It took him two hours to describe the whole thing. Then he asked, ‘Would you want to work on something like this?’ I made a joke. I said, ‘Yeah, I’ll work for your *John from Cincinnati*,’” referencing the short-lived series (created by David Milch & Kem Nunn) that was a follow-up to Milch’s acclaimed *Deadwood*. “At the time, that’s kind of what it sounded like.”

Nonetheless, Schur’s longtime collaborators trusted the synchronicity between concept and storyteller. “I’ve known Mike for 23 years,” says consulting producer Matt Murray, who met Schur while they were students at Harvard University, “and I truly don’t know another person who devotes as much mental energy to thinking about what it

means to be a good person. When we first moved to New York [for *Saturday Night Live*], we watched a lot of Red Sox games on TV together, and we had this thing where if the Red Sox were in a jam, he would be like, ‘OK, I’ll give \$50 to the Jimmy Fund if Derek Lowe can get out of this inning.’ The Jimmy Fund is the team’s official pediatric cancer charity. Mike kept a tally during the whole year. It ended up being \$1,000 or something, and he gave the money to charity at the end of the season. He really means it when he talks about how

to be a good person.”

Hence the main plot engine of the show—Eleanor, Chidi, Jason, and Tahani striving to become better people so they can escape eternal torment. Thanks to surprising events in Season 2, Michael joins their cause, introducing a wild dramatic question: Can a demon learn to be good?

#### THE WORLD ACCORDING TO MICHAEL

Hanging in the *Good Place* writers’ room is a list of rules, and the final rule demands, “Is it taking advantage of the world?” Meaning, do story pitches exploit the unique possibilities of the show’s premise? In practical terms, honoring this rule is daunting, because not only does Michael have godlike powers, but he stole from the *real* Good Place a robot called Janet (played by D’Arcy Carden), who possesses the totality of world knowledge as well as the ability to alter reality. Given this bottomless bag of tricks, the writers of *The Good Place* must balance creating fantastical moments with the more grounded work of exploring the morality of the characters.

“The growing pains of Season 1 were [about] world-building,” notes supervising producer Jen Statsky. “You’re trying to establish rules for how everything works—can this happen, can that happen, what kind of powers does Michael have, what can Janet do? Every show I’d ever worked on before had been set on planet Earth, so building a sci-fi world was extremely challenging.”

Adds Schofield, “We can have almost anything happen to solve our story problems, so we have to remind ourselves to

tell the stories that convey the most narrative truth, without using the world to get ourselves out of corners that we’ve written ourselves into.”

“During most of the first season, Michael is lying, and he’s the keeper of reality,” observes co-executive producer (and Siegal’s writing partner) Dylan Morgan. “But our sense is that in general, the best liars use a lot of the truth. Things he said during

his lies were built on things that we identified as universally true throughout the show, even after the façade of his lie falls. There’s a lot of gymnastics in remembering, ‘OK, he said this was a thing in the first season, but he was lying, so have we contradicted that yet?’”

To help keep mythology straight, Schofield creates elaborate spreadsheets that track such granular details as when each character learned a particular fact, which character is lying about his or her identity at any given time, and when





the group learned about a certain philosophical concept.

Further complicating the writing process is the show's tendency to cram myriad layers of significance into dialogue. "We're forcing ourselves to do so much in every line," says Siegal. "There's story, there's character, there's mythology—if we write a scene where we lose any one of those things, the next four episodes aren't gonna make sense."

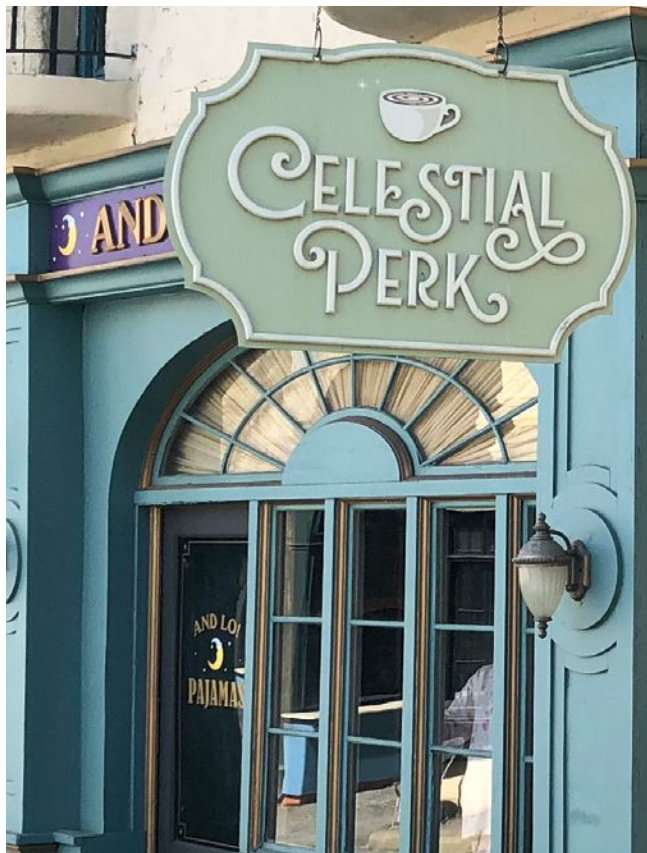
"I personally am obsessed with sci-fi," says Amram, "and when I was first talking with Mike about coming onto the show, I was so overjoyed at the prospect of working for a sci-fi show. I really love the game of, like, 'What is the timeline of the reboot?' Also, when we kicked the characters back to Earth at the end of Season 2, there were a lot of discussions of the sci-fi implications of that. Those conversations sometimes do get stressful, because we want to make sure everything is airtight."

"Each season is one giant long line of dominoes," Schur explains, "so we have to be thinking all the time about what came before us and what comes after in a way that I've never had to before. It's fun, but the anxiety nightmares that I have now are very different from the anxiety nightmares I've had in past years."

### I'M WITH STUPID

The mixture of silly and sophisticated comedy on *The Good Place* requires the installation of what might be termed *guardrails*, or intuitive barriers to ensure that, say, a Chidi monologue doesn't become too esoteric or a Jason gag doesn't become too ludicrous.

"We constantly ask ourselves that question about Jason: 'Is he being too stupid?'" says Schur. "Greg Daniels used to say, 'Stupidity is the nuclear bomb of comedy—nothing's funnier, nothing's better.' So we don't want to shy away from that, but at the same time, if Jason becomes too mind-numbingly stupid, then you're not gonna be invested in the long-term story of whether he gets into the Good Place or not, so it's a constant check-in with him. There's also a constant check-in for Chidi. When I pitched the show to NBC, they asked me about the role ethics would play in the show, and I said, 'Don't worry, it's not gonna feel like school.' And then, in the second episode, Chidi's literally standing at a chalkboard with 'Ethics 101' or whatever written on it, and I was like,



'Oh, boy.'"

"Chidi does a lot of the heavy lifting in terms of the intellectual backbone of the show," explains Law. "We give him a lot of dialogue that underlines the themes of episodes, but we try to make it as accessible as possible."

Executive story editor Cord Jefferson notes that following the easiest path to balancing high and low comedy—using one to immediately undercut the other—would lead to mediocrity. "If it's just Chidi saying something high-minded, followed by Jason saying something stupid, that tends to get stale quickly. We try to incorporate both things into the characters. Eleanor's a perfect example. Eleanor is a self-proclaimed 'Arizona trash-

bag' who gets off on getting drunk and eating junk food, but she's also very smart. She can hold her own in intellectual conversations with Chidi. And Chidi is also not without his flaws. Chidi's not a one-note philosophy professor, and Jason isn't a one-note moron from Jacksonville."

Echoing her colleagues, executive story editor Kassia Miller expresses protective feelings for the hapless Floridian. "We think Jason is a very emotionally intelligent person, even though he's not a valedictorian," she says. "His heart is always in the right place, even if the math he did to get it there is wrong."

"We're pushing the limits of how stupid Jason can be, especially this season," observes Murray. "But with Chidi, when we do the table read, if it's been 20 seconds and he's still talking, then we need to get some jokes in there."

### EXISTENTIALLY YOURS

"We had an episode last year in which Michael had an existential crisis," says Jefferson. "Mike [Schur] brought in two philosophy professors to speak to us about the idea of existentialism, and what an existential crisis actually looks like, and how one gets out of an existential crisis. That's one of the most unique parts about working here. Sometimes you come into work and have a morning lecture from a philosophy professor."

On any given day, however, it's just as likely that Schur will warm up the room with word games, silly YouTube

clips, contests to see who can draw the best rendering of a famous person, or what staffers describe as “the morning podcast,” during which they discuss current events and their lives outside the room. The staffers also do a fair amount of extra-curricular reading, because the search for just the right match between a philosophical concept and a particular storyline is ongoing.

“On a good day,” says Siegal, “it’s like you’re 10 years old at a slumber party, and you’re dying laughing and there’s tears in your eyes, and you can’t believe you’re getting away with it. That happens pretty often. On a bad day, you’ve spent four hours discussing the larger mythology that may or may not work its way into a moment, just to make sure the universe is consistent and makes sense, and then you look at the clock, and you’re like, ‘Oh, wait, we defined the entire universe, but we still have to go back and make the script funny.’”

Statsky offers her perspective: “On *Parks and Rec*, it would be like, ‘The ‘A’ story for this episode is gonna be Leslie and Ann doing this, and so maybe let’s do a ‘B’ story with Andy and April—what could be funny?’ We did season-long arcs, but it was never as heavily serialized as this show. What I find challenging is we’ll be breaking a story for episode 10, but then realize we should probably go back and reverse-engineer this thing in 8 or 9. You’re constantly thinking of the long game.”

Fortunately, Murray notes, “Mike rarely points out a problem without also suggesting a solution. I’ve worked on shows where if one small thing in a ‘C’ story isn’t working, it’s like the house is on fire, and we need to stay till midnight and start from the ground up. It’s very easy to tear something down, but to also have a fix for it is a skill that a showrunner needs to have.”

“Mike obviously commands a lot of respect,” notes Miller, “but there’s no fear of saying the wrong thing, and then you’re gonna be in trouble. He’s very interested in a dynamic push and pull of the group. One thing I like that he does is when we’re done pitching a story and it’s all on the board, he’ll sometimes be like, ‘OK, let me tell you a story,’ and he’ll just verbally spin the yarn of the episode, and so we get to sit back and listen to it and make sure there’s nothing missing. He’s very good at conversationally pitching the story. He has a steel-trap mind. Every detail just stays in there.”



## ALL THE MARBLES

Although the writers of *The Good Place* strive to create a beguiling fantasy world, they’re cognizant of how their show reverberates off current events. Before Gersten was on the show, “I binge-watched the first season right after Trump took office, and I was so uplifted by it,” she recalls. “My agent called me the next day to say I had a showrunner meeting with Mike. I felt like this show had made a difference in my experience of how upsetting the world was at that time in early January of 2017.”

“It’s awful that the world is falling apart and that it feels like there are

demons everywhere in real life,” says Siegal. “It certainly feels like an OK time to be talking about what it means to be a good person.”

“When I conceived of the show, none of this crap was happening, so it was not a reaction,” Schur says. “The finale of Season 1 aired the day before Trump was inaugurated. The show would have been executed differently if it were in any way a reaction. So I think there’s a little bit of coincidence in there—I’m gonna do a show about ethics, and then the word *ethics* appears on the front page of every newspaper every day for months and months and months.”

“We’re trying to talk about how life on Earth is hard,” says Law. “It takes a lot of effort to be a good person. In Season 1, Eleanor has a ‘the rules don’t apply to me’ attitude. I think the show puts forward the idea that it’s not about the individual; it’s about how we make each other better. Our characters are in Hell, but they’re taking care of each other. That certainly feels fitting for 2018.”

“There’s a lot of famous philosophical books you can read about what it means to be good,” concludes Schur. “The show is an attempt to be a bridge between that stuff and a simpler approach, which is, if you just question whether you’re doing good or bad in the world, you’re more likely to do good. If you understand fundamentally that every day, you are making a bunch of decisions, and that those decisions are going to result in either good or bad being put out into the universe, then I think the world will eventually be a better place. A lot of the banal crumminess—not evil, just crumminess that you witness on a daily basis—comes from a lack of consideration, or a lack of basic empathy, or just blindness to the fact that we’re all marbles colliding with each other every day.” **WB**

# GOOD TO THE BONE

During interactions observed for this story, Michael Schur seems like a man eager to feel comfortable in his own skin—even though introspection forever impedes that comfort—and also like a man eager to help others feel comfortable in theirs (but only if the effort can be put forth without presumption).

In short, he seems as unaffected as a person of his accomplishments and stature could seem, and thus exactly the right person to imagine and orchestrate *The Good Place*.

Schur recalls how the concept for the show arose from a daily ritual. “I buy the same thing every time at Starbucks, a medium coffee, and it’s \$1.70 or whatever, and I always throw the 30 cents change into the little tip jar. I realized I was waiting until the barista turned around to see me before I threw the 30 cents in. I got very annoyed at myself, and also I laughed at the foible, because it’s like—*it’s 30 cents*. It’s the tiniest amount of money you could ever tip someone. And yet I still wanted the credit. It’s embarrassing that human beings have that instinct.

“I also played a game with myself driving around LA,” he continues. “Somebody would cut me off in traffic or something, and in my head I would say, ‘You just lost 15 points, buddy’—I started ascribing videogame rules to life and thinking, ‘You’re losing points, you’re gaining points,’ based on these tiny everyday actions.

“Those two things combined into the idea that maybe life is a videogame. Maybe there’s someone keeping score. It’s not based on any one particular religious worldview or anything; it’s just math. At the end of the day, your time is up and you get a score. The people with the high scores go up and everybody else goes down. The next big step, obviously, was, ‘What if someone gets into “the Good Place” who isn’t supposed to be there?’ I realized I was embarking on a

very complicated premise, which was far from what I had done before.”

While developing the show, Schur found guidance in *Lost* (created by Jeffrey Lieber and J.J. Abrams & Damon Lindelof), *The Leftovers* (created by Lindelof & Tom Perrotta, based on Perrotta’s novel of the same name), and *The Shield* (created by Shawn Ryan). The first two shows suggested ways to enliven intricate mystery-box stories with cliffhangers; Ryan’s cop drama featured a protagonist perpetually at risk of getting caught in a lie.

The Eleanor character came into focus first, with the key to her personality manifesting as a sentiment she expresses in the pilot: “There should be a Medium Place for people like me.” As Schur explains, “When Michael says [to Eleanor], ‘You’re in the Good Place,’ she immediately knows there’s been a mistake.”

Schur continues, “Tahani and Jason also came together pretty quickly once I designed them, for the simple reason that they’re both larger-than-life characters—an elegant party-monster type and a dirtbag from Florida. Chidi took a little longer, because it has to make sense that the characters end up in Hell, so how does a guy like Chidi, who is obsessed with ethics, end up in Hell? He suffers from complete indecision, which drives everybody crazy. He’s constantly fritzing out because he hates the idea that he’s an imposition on anyone else in the universe, so he’s a nightmare to be around.”

Actor Ted Danson, who plays Michael, had a profound impact on *The Good Place* before the first scene was filmed. In their first meeting, Schur explained his plans for the big first-season reveal about Michael’s true nature. “I was describing Michael as this architect who had built his masterpiece, and somewhere there’s a structural flaw, and he’s looking around in every room and every wall and every beam to find the structural flaw, and it’s driving him crazy. Ted

was like, ‘I totally get that, but that’s a hard thing to play for 12 and a half episodes—it’s the same thing over and over again.’ The way I was thinking of it was, ‘Yeah, but how cool will it be when we reveal the truth?’ He said, ‘I get that’ll be cool, but in the middle of that—in episodes, whatever, six to nine, when I’m just doing the same thing again and again—it’s gonna start to get boring.’

“I had imagined that Eleanor was gonna confess in episode 10,” Schur explains, “but when Ted told me that, I was like, ‘He’s right—I’m gonna move that up even further.’ So Eleanor ends up confessing right in the middle of the year, and Michael doesn’t have to do the same thing anymore. Now it’s, ‘Who are you, how did you get in here, what do I do about you—oh, God, this is such a nightmare.’”

Not lost in this whole conversation is the fact that Michael, the demon architect, shares a name with Michael Schur, the showrunner-creator. “The temptation to ascribe a massive amount of egotistical projection is great,” Schur admits, “but there is an actual reason for it. My wife and I went to Paris for our 10-year anniversary while I was working on the show, and we were taking a tour of the Notre-Dame Cathedral, and over the door is a stone relief of an archangel weighing people’s souls. I said, ‘Who is that figure deciding who gets in and who doesn’t?’ The guide said, ‘That’s Michael.’ I was like, ‘Well, that’s the character’s name—the symbolism is too great to ignore.’ Now, I say all this, but I will also say if you want to psychologically ascribe to me that I chose the name because there’s this weird metanarrative that he’s building a world with these people in it, and he’s kind of directing and writing a script as he goes along, I can’t tell you you’re wrong. I’ve read enough literary criticism to know that authors’ intentions should probably be ignored.” **WB**