

RUSSELL CROWE HEATHER LOCKLEAR HAYDEN CHRISTENSEN

Biography

Every life has a story.



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Reese Witherspoon
Blond Ambition



As a high-school senior, 1994

Reese Witherspoon Blond Ambition



Dr. Reese Witherspoon? It has a nice ring to it, but it's not exactly the image most people have of the 26-year-old actress. Blame it on her baby doll looks or the oft-reported fact that she was both a cheerleader and a debutante while growing up in Nashville. Then there was last year's *Legally Blonde*, in which she played a ditzzy sorority girl who brings her pup and her bubble-gum pink wardrobe to the Ivy League.

But Witherspoon is no featherweight. "If I ever get burned out on Hollywood I'll go to medical school," she says matter-of-factly. She's not kidding. What few people know is that Witherspoon is sharp as a tack, articulate, and an expert on subjects ranging from English lit to psychology. Accuse her of being just another pretty face and she'll set you straight. **BY SHERYL BERK**

Celebrity Dossier

NAME: Laura Jeanne Reese Witherspoon

DATE OF BIRTH: March 22, 1976

PLACE OF BIRTH: Nashville, Tennessee

PARENTS: John, an Air Force surgeon; Betty, a professor of pediatric nursing

SIBLING: Older brother, John Jr.

EDUCATION: Attended Stanford University

SPOUSE: Actor Ryan Phillippe. They have an almost 3-year-old daughter, Ava Elizabeth

FYI: So much for those Brits being prim and proper. Witherspoon describes *The Importance of Being Earnest* as “a light, funny movie, almost in the spirit of a Preston Sturges film, like a ’30s screwball comedy. We had such a great time on the set, laughing all the time and joking around, and I think that comes through onscreen.”



Witherspoon and Frances O'Connor in *The Importance of Being Earnest*; as the only American in the cast, she worked on her British accent “three hours a day for six weeks”

“I had an interesting meeting the other day with a very prominent meeting director,” she explains. “He sat there, looked me right in the eye, and said, ‘To be honest, I didn’t really want to meet with you. I didn’t see you as right for this part. I see you as a comedic actress.’ So I told him that in my experience, I have found that the smartest people are often comedians. To understand character and the subtle nuances of what makes things funny, you have to be incredibly emotionally intelligent about people. You have to be highly perceptive and attuned to what makes people tick.”

Figuring out what makes Witherspoon tick requires some homework. Talking to her colleagues, you get a picture of Mensa material and mint juleps. “I see Reese as somewhere between Jodie Foster and Meg Ryan,” explains Andy Tennant, her director on the upcoming film *Sweet Home Alabama*. “She has this amazing intellect and eloquence which people are surprised by because she is so warm and accessible.”

The words “edgy” and “tough” also come up quite a bit when people describe her—which is fine with Witherspoon. “I don’t think you can be in this business for 12 years and not have an edge,” she says. “It’s a really tough business. It’s very competitive. It’s very challenging. You have to deal with a lot of rejection. You have to have a certain amount of determination to weather all the ups and downs of it. You have to stand up for yourself. I stand up for myself every week of my life.”

Laura Jeanne Reese Witherspoon was born in Nashville on March 22, 1976. Her fa-

ther John was an Air Force flight surgeon and her mom Betty (whose maiden name is Reese) has a Ph.D. in pediatric nursing. Because of her dad’s work, the family (including an older brother, John Jr.) traveled across Europe until Reese was 5 and the family settled down in Nashville.

In school, she was always a straight-A student, “big into books,” yet also the class clown (“I liked attention”). At 7, she made a few commercials for local businesses and convinced her parents to enroll her in acting classes.

At 14, she auditioned to be an extra in the coming-of-age drama *The Man in the Moon*. Director Robert Mulligan (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) recognized raw talent and cast her instead in the lead. “It was a wonderful opportunity to work with a brilliant director,” she says. “I went to Louisiana and made the movie and thought, ‘Well, that was fun.’ But I didn’t know if I’d ever do it again.”

Then the rave reviews came out and Witherspoon had little trouble finding future work. She went on to make *Jack the Bear*, *A Far Off Place*, and *Wildflower*, a 1991 telefilm directed by actress Diane Keaton. But even while making movies, Witherspoon led a “normal teenage existence” if you consider Harpeth Hall, an elite all-girl high school (Amy Grant and Minnie Pearl are also alumnae) and debutante balls “normal.” “I did the whole thing—big white dress, white gloves, and all,” she admits. “You don’t really think about it when you’re in the midst of it, but now that I’m older, I look back and think, ‘Well, that was kind of

crazy.’ But it’s really about tradition. My family had done it for a long time, so I was following in a long line of Witherspoons.”

She graduated and enrolled at Stanford, but it became difficult to juggle movie-making and midterm exams. In 1996, she appeared in two films, *Fear*, with Mark Wahlberg, and *Freeway*, in which she played an illiterate, foul-mouthed prostitute’s daughter on the road with a serial killer (Kiefer Sutherland). Critics called her “an on-fire revelation.” After making *Twilight* with Paul Newman, Gene Hackman, and Susan Sarandon, she decided to take a leave of absence from academics. “Out of *Twilight* came *Pleasantville*; out of that came *Election*, and the ball just started rolling,” she says. “The roles kept getting better and better, and that’s when I realized I could make a career out of this.”

Her parents were not thrilled with her decision to leave Stanford after two semesters but as it turns out, Witherspoon’s instincts were dead-on. Each new film brought her greater recognition, and she made sure her roles were varied and unpredictable: a sex-starved teen in ’50s suburbia (*Pleasantville*), a prep-school virgin (*Cruel Intentions*), a power-hungry overachiever (*Election*), even Jennifer Aniston’s coy kid sister on *Friends*. “I don’t think I ever have a design on [the parts I choose], but I think my own personality influences me,” she says. “I’m very ambitious and very focused—that’s the kind of character I gravitate toward. I also feel a responsibility as an actress to represent women in a way that I want to be represented.”



In her next movie, *Sweet Home Alabama*, Witherspoon plays a New York socialite with a complicated past in Alabama

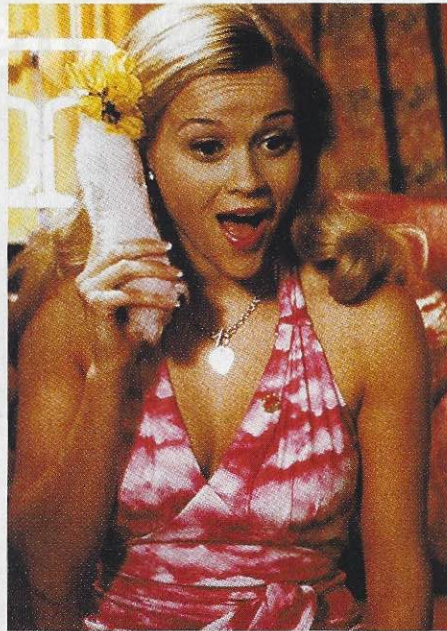
Says Tennant, “When most actresses become movie stars their choices tend to become much safer—they’re afraid to make a mistake. Reese finds that utterly boring. She’d rather take a risk.”

Which is precisely what she did in her personal life as well. After being introduced by mutual friends to actor Ryan Phillippe at her 21st birthday party, Witherspoon pursued him. “It wasn’t the typical courtship,” she admits. “When I met Ryan, he had to go away the next day to film a movie for three months, so we didn’t get to spend a lot of time together from the start. I was definitely the aggressor. I had a really good instinct about the kind of person he was, and it turned out I was right. We started seriously dating and we did *Cruel Intentions* together about a year and a half later.”

In 1999, the same year the film was released, the couple found out they were expecting a baby. So they tied the knot in a small ceremony in Charleston, South Carolina, and on September 9, Ava Elizabeth was born.

“It’s really challenging having to juggle being a parent with being an actor,” Witherspoon admits. “There’s a lot of scheduling involved.” Mr. and Mrs. make it a policy to never be apart for more than two weeks, and Ava is a fixture on her parents’ movie sets.

Before returning to work, Witherspoon insisted on a lengthy maternity leave. “When I had a child, it really changed my whole perspective on my career and on my life,” she explains. “It turns your world upside down be-



Legally Blonde (2001) showed off Witherspoon’s comedic skills—offscreen the former Stanford student is anything but ditzzy

cause you’re willing to sacrifice anything for this little person. It changed my personality a lot—you take inventory on yourself and realize, ‘Okay, that’s kind of a quality I would never want her to emulate.’ I was very young when I had her [23], and she really encouraged me to grow up, become more mature, more of the woman I would want my daughter to be. I think it’s important not to make decisions that you wouldn’t want your kids to make. It’s also important to me, for her sake, to help advance the role of women in this industry, to make sure the female voice is strong.”

With that in mind, Witherspoon starred in 2001’s *Legally Blonde*. On the surface, it’s a frothy comedy akin to *Clueless* and *Working Girl*. But underneath is a strong message: Don’t judge a bombshell by her cover.

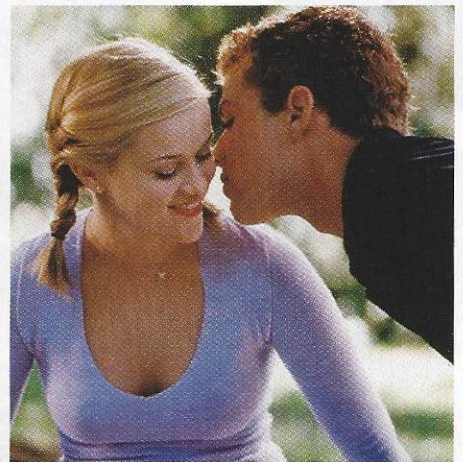
“This movie definitely struck a chord with people,” Witherspoon says. “I was on the set with Ryan while he was making *Gosford Park*, and I was always so surprised that really refined English actors would come up to me and gush, ‘I loved *Legally Blonde*.’ I would say, ‘You’re making fun of me, aren’t you?’ And they’d say, ‘No, it’s great!’ I think the movie expresses a modern feminine attitude. Women aren’t just frivolous or studious. They can be girly and accomplished.”

Which sounds a lot like Witherspoon herself. “I want to direct one day,” she says. “Right now I have a production company, Type A Films, and we’re working on projects that will break new ground with really inter-

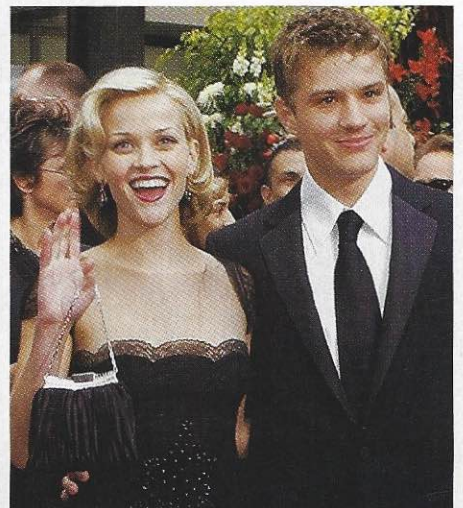
(Continued on page 96)



The 1999 satire *Election* starred Witherspoon as a power-hungry overachiever running for high-school class president



With real-life husband Ryan Phillippe in 1999’s *Cruel Intentions*; they have a daughter, Ava



The couple arriving last March at the Academy Awards, where they presented an Oscar

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Reese Witherspoon from page 41

esting roles for young women in particular, widening the scope of how they're perceived. I'm doing a movie about women's professional tennis—I'm in awe of female athletes."

Witherspoon's two new acting roles served up some interesting challenges. She is presently onscreen (with Rupert Everett, Colin Firth, and Dame Judi Dench) in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, based on the Oscar Wilde classic. "It's my first period piece," Witherspoon says. "I'm the only American among these incredibly accomplished British actors. It was really nerve-racking. I worked so hard on my accent, every day, three hours a day, for six weeks."

In *Sweet Home Alabama*, due out in the fall, her character, according to Tennant, "is an up-and-coming socialite in New York, very full of herself, who looks to other people for her own self-worth and validation." She has a complicated past (including a redneck husband) and when she finds herself engaged to the most eligible bachelor in America (Patrick Dempsey), she must go home to Alabama and tie up loose ends.

"This is the first character I've played that I've felt is really close to my own life story and my own personality," Witherspoon says. "She's a Southern girl who moves away and makes an entirely new life for herself in this urban world, then has to go home again. Eventually, she grows to love what's beautiful about the place she came from and recognizes it as part of herself, maybe the best part of herself. That's because it's who she truly is, not what people expect her to be."

SHERYL BERK IS SENIOR ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR FOR THIS MAGAZINE.

Hayden Christensen from page 78

named him as Anakin Skywalker. Within a month he was being whisked off to Australia, to spend six months on location. For the just-turned-19 Christensen, who'd never been outside North America, it turned out to be "the most amazing summer of my life." He was starring in *Star Wars*, seeing the world, and reliving childhood fantasies every time he swung a light saber. He was also getting a crash course in filmmaking from the *Star Wars* cast and crew, and forging new friendships with co-star Ewan McGregor, with whom he partied heartily, and leading lady Natalie Portman, with whom he did *not* have a real-life romance. Still refuting persistent rumors about what went on almost two years ago, Christensen has maintained that the relationship was purely professional, recently quipping, "I don't

think it's a good idea to date actresses—especially when you have to do sequels with them."

But rampant gossip about his on-location lovelife is only part of the clamor that has surrounded him almost from the moment he took on the Skywalker role. Still a very private person, he has had to make room in his life for the hordes of teenage fans, waves of reporters, even occasional "weird stalker-type people," as well as his own likeness on magazine covers, action figures, computer games, and T-shirts. For such a young guy still so new to all this, he's coping with impressive poise and perspective. "He's got this amazing head on his shoulders," *Life as a House* co-star Jena Malone has said. "With all this crazy buzz, he still wants to concentrate on his work."

Christensen has already laid the groundwork for life after Anakin Skywalker. The first step was landing his role as the blue-haired, body-piercing, drug-abusing son of Kevin Kline in *Life as a House*, which was released last November, but actually filmed after *Attack of the Clones*. And he can truthfully say that his *Star Wars* credentials had nothing to do with getting the part. "I had no idea that he had done *Star Wars* prior to his audition," insists Irwin Winkler, adding that by the time he found out, Christensen had already won the role.

"He was such a natural," Winkler says, recalling the day Christensen added some extra punch to an emotional scene with Kline, by spontaneously ramming his fist into the nearest wall. "He almost broke his hand! I said to him, 'Why didn't you tell me you were going to do this? We could have padded the wall.' And he said, 'I didn't know I was going to do it.' That's the kind of actor he is. Some have to be directed very specifically; some are instinctive. Hayden is instinctive."

Singled out by critics as one of the best things about the movie, Christensen went on to receive a Golden Globe nomination, a Screen Actor's Guild nomination, and the National Board of Review Award for Breakthrough Performance of the Year. The attention he received for *Life as a House* has meant at least as much to him as all the *Star Wars* hype. This is the kind of acting Christensen wants to do: intimately scaled, emotionally textured, deeply connected to real life.

He's off to a good start. Last March, he made his critically applauded professional stage debut, co-starring with Anna Paquin and Jake Gyllenhaal in the London West End revival of Kenneth Lonergan's *This Is Our Youth*. And he and his older brother