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Dakota Johnson on making *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Photograph by **Mary McCartney**

The whip-smart daughter of film stars, Dakota Johnson has acting in her blood. Now, with the lead role in the new *Fifty Shades of Grey* under her belt, she looks all set for world domination.
By *Helena de Bertodano*

Bound for stardom

More than 100 million copies of the book have been sold. It was the most-watched trailer of 2014, with 93 million YouTube views. And now, with the film version of EL James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* about to open, the young actress in the lead role is understandably nervous.

"There is something very scary about thinking everyone in the world [will] know who I am," says Dakota Johnson, 25, who, until now, has remained relatively anonymous, despite boasting not one but two film stars as parents – Melanie Griffith and Don Johnson – as well as a grandmother, Tippi Hedren, who was Hitchcock's muse.

In the trailer we see Johnson as the innocent virgin Anastasia Steele tied up on a bed, blindfolded, surrounded by straps and whips, while Christian

Grey, the billionaire with a penchant for sadomasochism, exercises his "singular tastes" upon her. "It was like watching someone who looked a lot like me doing really bizarre things. I was completely detached," Johnson says. (She has seen the film in its entirety – unusually there have been no advance screenings at the time of writing.) The book itself was lambasted by critics, and many column inches have been devoted to the question of whether Sam Taylor-Johnson, the Turner-nominated artist turned Bafta-nominated director, can pull off the challenge of making something that will satisfy both its fans and critics, and how she will portray the explicit sex scenes.

Anastasia is a daring role and you can see why some actresses would not even consider it. When it was rumoured that

Emma Watson might star, she quickly tweeted: "Who here actually thinks I would do *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a movie? Like really. For real. In real life." When I ask Johnson if she had any doubts about taking it on, she replies without hesitation. "Yes. Of course. Absolutely. The whole time. Even now there are moments when I think, 'What the f— have I done?' But most of the time I feel pretty solid about it."

The film opens just before Valentine's Day – which, insists Johnson, is appropriate. "I think it's actually an incredible fairytale love story." Perhaps it helps that Johnson has had an unconventional background. Her parents famously married, divorced, married again and had Dakota, their only child. They separated when she was four, reunited, then divorced for good when



she was seven. Her upbringing was, she says, “bizarre”, shuttling around different film sets, watching each of her parents start new relationships: Griffith with Antonio Banderas (from whom she separated last year after 18 years of marriage) and Johnson first with Barbra Streisand, then with Kelley Phleger, a teacher. She has six half-siblings and, unlike many Hollywood actors, doesn’t even try to pretend that she is down-to-earth and normal. “I grew up around really *not* normal people,” she says with a laugh. I ask if she is referring to her family or Hollywood in general. “My family is general Hollywood. They’re all artists: creative people who are advocates for expressing themselves. But I also have to say I’m not impressed by Hollywood.”

In fact, she tries quite hard to appear to be on the same side of the fence as most of us when it comes to celebrity, telling an eccentric story about her habit of booking tables at popular restaurants in the name of George Clooney. “And then I show up and the restaurant is like, ‘What name is [your booking] under?’ and I go [she looks at the floor and mumbles], ‘Clooney.’ I’ve never even met him,” she says, giggling. “But he eats a lot of meals: George Clooney is the hungriest man in Hollywood.”

filter what she says, coming out with random statements such as “Milking a cow is funny as f—” when discussing her desire to own a ranch one day and “I’m not going to poo in the street”.

The last is a reference to her recent statement that she has no shame, widely interpreted to mean she has no shame about anything. “What a monster I would be! I absolutely have shame and I do have guilt. I am a human. It’s true that I’m not



playback and really figure out: ‘Do we need to put a camera here? Should I take a breath at this moment?’ It was really important to us to convey the underlying intense emotion throughout all of these sex scenes.”

Unlike her co-star Jamie Dornan, she did not visit BDSM clubs (bondage/ discipline, domination/submission, sadism/masochism) but took advice from a “consulting dominant” who was on the film set. “We needed to do it the right way and also pay respect to the BDSM community. It is quite beautiful and very intricate: the way the knots are tied and the variety of knots and tools and rope. The details matter so much and there are rules

Left Johnson in *Anarchy*, out later this year. Below In *Fifty Shades of Grey*



We meet at the Chateau Marmont hotel, near Johnson’s home. Wearing a black Chloé trouser suit, Alexander Wang heels and little make-up, she looks professional and natural, and is considerably prettier than in some of the photographs I have seen of her.

ashamed of my body. I’m comfortable and I think more women should be more confident. I think nudity and sexual scenes in movies are beautiful when they’re tastefully done.”

Johnson said that she never felt uncomfortable shooting the explicit

and manners, an etiquette that goes with the whole world of it.”

She finds it surprising when people say that Steele is naive. “This woman is incredibly smart. It’s almost as if she’s all-knowing and therefore she hasn’t given herself up emotionally or physically before. She’s waited for this person who she can spar with mentally and who can completely ignite something in her.”

Despite her unusual childhood, Johnson says that her early years were especially happy, particularly the time she spent on her father’s Colorado ranch. “It was like a dream world; I loved it more than anything. My dad taught me how to build a fire, ride a horse, ride a motorcycle and shoot a gun – before I was nine. That’s really all you need.” But her teenage years were more unsettled.

‘Dad taught me how to build a fire, ride a horse, ride a motorcycle and shoot a gun – before I was nine. That’s really all you need’

Kicking off her heels, she tucks her legs beneath her on the chair. She seems grounded and comfortable, with none of the monosyllabic insecurity that sometimes characterises up-and-coming actresses. Quirky and fun, she laughs merrily and often and doesn’t seem to

sex scenes in *Fifty Shades*. “I definitely did trust Sam completely: she created a very safe, protected environment. The set was very closed. It’s not like there were hundreds of people around.”

Besides, she adds, it was all very technical. “Sam and I would watch

After her peripatetic childhood, her parents sent her to a strict Catholic all-girls boarding-school at the age of 15. "It was a nightmare, like oil and water. I'm surprised I made it a whole year there." Miserable, she persuaded her father to move her to an arty private school in west Los Angeles, where she wasn't much happier: "I went through a lot of very intense phases. I think that led to me being an actor. I feel like I've lived a lot of lives." She says that it never really occurred to her to become anything other than an actor. "I grew up under the impression that I wasn't capable of doing anything else," she says. "I don't have any other talents."

Johnson landed her first proper role in the 2010 film *The Social Network* as the one-night stand to Justin Timberlake's character. Two years later she played Jason Segel's hyper girlfriend in *The Five-Year Engagement*, whose director, Nick Stoller, described Johnson as naturally funny and very gifted. Afterwards she won a lead in the American sitcom *Ben and Kate*, about a brother and sister raising her daughter together, but, despite receiving positive reviews, the show only ran for one series.

When she heard that *Fifty Shades* was being made into a film Johnson says she was intrigued and read the trilogy. She was finally selected after a long auditioning process, partly based on her on-screen chemistry with the British actor Charlie Hunnam, who was originally cast as Christian. Her reaction when she got the part was relief. "I was relieved that there was no more not knowing." But the uncertainty continued when Hunnam suddenly pulled out

'When Mom and Dad were at the height of their careers, there wasn't social media. Now everyone's the press. Fame can destroy a human'

of the project after a few weeks. "It was like, 'Argh!' Half of my mindset was based around him. But Sam and I still had each other, and then Jamie came in and saved the day."

Although there have been reports that Johnson's father and her grandmother were not entirely happy that Dakota was

starring in such a risqué project, Johnson says today, "None of my family members were concerned. They were all like, 'Go, do it, cool, call me later.'" But she does admit that she banned her parents from watching the film. "I don't want them to see it," she states adamantly. "I wouldn't want to see *them* doing it." She grimaces. "At all!"

Although she is not dating anyone at the moment, Johnson jokes that the role has not got in the way of her personal life. "My imaginary boyfriend thinks it's great. He's very supportive." She was reportedly in a relationship until recently with the Welsh indie rocker Matthew Hitt, but now her rescue dog Zeppelin is, she says, her "main man. I don't have a lot



Johnson with her parents and stepmother, Kelley Phleger (right)

of time for a relationship. I'm too busy pretending and then I go home and there's no one." Sometimes, she says, she believes in perfect love. "But sometimes I'm really cynical about it." Nevertheless, she does envisage having a family some time in the distant future. "In 20 years'

time I will be on my ranch somewhere riding my horse. I'm going to have a bunch of kids by then." She frowns. "Well, at least one..."

The next two instalments of the trilogy (*Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*) have not yet begun shooting and it is thought that the studio is waiting

to see if the first is a hit. Johnson says that she is more than happy to do the sequels. "Which is lucky," she adds, "as I also have to..."

She is impatient with those who say that this role could make or break her career. "A lot of really amazing actors do really s— movies. It happens. Sometimes all the ingredients don't work."

And with the buzz building, Johnson's career has already taken off: later this year she will appear with Ethan Hawke in *Anarchy*, a crime-tragedy based on the Shakespeare play *Cymbeline*; with Johnny Depp (as the mother of his child) in *Black Mass*, a true-crime drama; and with Ralph Fiennes in *A Bigger Splash*, a remake of the 1969 French cult film *La Piscine*, in which she plays "a sociopath".

Although very close to her parents, Johnson hasn't really turned to them for advice on how to handle her imminent fame. "It's all so different now. When Mom and Dad were at the height of their careers and things were super-crazy and they couldn't

leave their houses, there wasn't social media. It was all about autographs. Now everyone's the press. I feel fame is perforated: it can be glorious but it can completely destroy a human too."

Instead of planning ahead, she focuses on the short term: where she will live when the lease on her Hollywood home expires shortly ("My next move is New York"); her latest "obsession" (learning to play the cello); and her next pet. "I'm about to get a pig – I do know that's not a smart decision." I have no idea whether or not she is joking but, given that her grandmother runs a refuge for wild animals and as a teenager her mother shared a bed with a pet lion, a pig seems like a relatively tame move.

Whatever happens, it is unlikely that she will continue to need to impersonate Clooney when trying to secure a reservation at Los Angeles' most fashionable restaurants. ● *"Fifty Shades of Grey" is released on Friday*