

Empire of the Son

"Difficult boy."

—*Empire of the Sun*

"The truth is this: if I didn't have to do a single interview, I never would."

—Christian Bale, *Tribune Media*, July 10, 1992

"*Empire of the Sun* changed my life quite considerably and I didn't like it one bit."

—Christian Bale, *In Focus*, July 10, 1992

The thin boy was sitting quietly, staring intently at an orange he held in his left hand. Across the table sat a seasoned journalist with a tape recorder and a notepad, pen in hand, hoping to continue his interrogation.

Whenever the reporter asked him a question, the boy absently muttered a tired "yes" or "no" until his eyes wandered to the tray on the table covered with remnants of his lunch. He slowly fingered different pieces of cutlery, finally settling on a knife. As the reporter looked on, he began stabbing at the orange, reveling in the spritz of orange rind and the happy scent of citrus, which began to perfume the air. To the boy, this was something tangible

and real—something he could do and feel while he ignored any further questions.

Exasperated, the reporter got up and stormed out. This interview was over but the boy, still fixated on destroying his orange, savored the sticky wetness dribbling through his fingers.

A worried publicist ran into the room. “Christian, is everything all right?” she asked.

“Yes. I’d like to go to the bathroom,” he announced. Christian then stood up purposefully, wiping orange zest residue off his trousers. He silently walked past the woman and headed out the door and down the hallway.

The woman watched the retreating figure, concerned and troubled at the turn of events. A number of journalists had complained at how poorly their interviews had gone, and Christian’s next interviewer was waiting patiently for his allotted appointment.

Instead of returning from the bathroom, Christian decided to make a break for the elevator doors. He was soon walking out through the hotel lobby and heading down the Champs-Élysées. With each step, he felt a weight being lifted off him and happily immersed himself in the anonymity of the noisy streets where everyone was speaking a language he could not understand.

It was 1988 and fourteen-year-old Christian Bale was on his very first press junket for the Warner Brothers film *Empire of the Sun*. As *Empire Magazine* wrote in 1998, Christian “was rude, gave monosyllabic answers and generally proved as uncooperative as possible. His reputation for being difficult was born.”

As the next interviewer lost his patience, it soon became apparent that Christian was going to be late for this interview. And the next one. And the two after that. Word would soon spread throughout the hotel that the young star of Steven Spielberg’s latest movie was missing.

While a small posse of worried publicists and personal assistants started combing through the streets of Paris, Christian

was contentedly sitting in the grass in a park, enjoying the cool weather and the solitude.

Back at the hotel, the publicist had alerted Christian's older sister Sharon, who was just seventeen, and she in turn anxiously called their father, David, who was back home in England. He would know what to do, she thought. He was the only one who could handle Christian.

"You *must* get a hold of Christian at once," David hissed at his daughter. "Tell him he's embarrassing Steven. He *mustn't* do this to Steven!" David was emphatic, his voice edging up in panic. From the very first wonderful review of his only son's major motion picture debut, the future looked absolutely bright. But to have Christian walking out on the all-too-crucial press junket would most certainly get back to Spielberg, and David was worried about Christian's acting future, if word got out that he was throwing tantrums and being difficult.

Christian often tried to describe to me that time period—there was an incredible amount of pressure riding on his small shoulders. He enjoyed making movies, but the publicity junket made him miserable. It was the beginning of his severe dislike of the words "must" and "should." He didn't like being told what he should do or must do—unless it was coming from the director of a movie.

This wasn't something I could understand easily. I always thought that if I had the good fortune of being a celebrity, I'd gladly deal with publicity. But then again, Christian was a child actor and he had a lot of people depending on him at a very early age.

Acting was not his chosen profession but an accident he had cheerfully stumbled into when he was eight years old. Acting was just something he played at, tagging along with his older sisters, Sharon and Louise, when they went to dance and acting workshops. Watching his sisters have fun, Christian jumped right in,

glad for the creative outlet to make some noise, conjure up silly faces, and to run around the room. “It was better than just leaving him in the van,” explained David.

Christian told the *Daily Mirror* at the time: “I wasn’t really interested in acting till I went to see my sister Louise on stage in *Bugsy Malone*. I saw it 27 times and thought it looked fun.” Also starring in that 1983 production of *Bugsy*—a stage adaptation of the 1976 Alan Parker movie—was Catherine Zeta-Jones.

But now acting was set to be Christian’s profession and his family’s livelihood. Christian and his sisters were enrolled in acting workshops while they lived in Reading. Their classmates included Kate and Anna Winslet. Soon, casting agents were picking Christian over his sisters for small parts in television commercials for the now defunct Pac-Man cereal, which capitalized on the video game’s popularity in the 1980s, and he was paid £80 for a Lenor clothes conditioner commercial.

“I was one of those annoying kids who peeked around the washing-machine with their dirty football boots,” recalled Christian. “I was just eight years old at the time and I had to say: ‘Oh mummy, this smells nice.’” Still, movie acting was just a fantasy. Christian’s only ambition at the time was to be a Stormtrooper in a *Star Wars* movie.

Commercials gave way to small stage, television, and film roles. Within a space of two years, he had a bit part in the BBC mini-series *Heart of the Country*, based on the Fay Weldon novel. Then, Christian ended up making £12 a night, playing a “noisy, obnoxious American kid” in the West End comedy *The Nerd*, opposite comedian and Mr. Bean star Rowan Atkinson. He had a supporting role in *The Land of Far Away*, a children’s film based on a book by Astrid Lindgren, the well-known author of the Pippi Longstocking series. And he was crowned Tsarevich of Russia, as Alexei, in the NBC telefilm *Anastasia: The Mystery of Anna*, opposite Amy Irving, who was then Mrs. Steven Spielberg.

When Spielberg was ready to cast the lead role in *Empire of the Sun*, a film based on the semiautobiographical novel by J.G. Ballard about his childhood in war-torn China, Amy suggested Christian. But Spielberg was not convinced. “Spielberg actually told me he didn’t like my performance in *Anastasia*,” Christian said. But the boy eventually won the role after many screen tests and readings. It took Spielberg almost seven months to cast the role, and choosing Christian ended up being a perfect casting decision that impressed Ballard when he visited the set.

David and Jenny Bale were thrilled when Christian landed the part. Christian later told *Movieline* that his father was preparing him for a life-changing experience: “Before we started, my dad told me: ‘This could be a fantastic experience, but it could also be the worst thing that could happen to you.’ There have been moments when I’ve wished it had never happened . . . You know, when you’re a teenager, you just want to be normal.”

It seems to me that *Empire of the Sun* was truly the last great American epic, lovingly crafted before today’s era of digital effects where crowds of hundreds can be digitally multiplied into hordes of thousands. The sixteen-week shoot involved 500 crew members and more than 15,000 extras. The film used real stunt pilots and real vintage World War II aircraft—not a computerized rendering of aerial battles as in *Pearl Harbor* or *Independence Day*. Shot on location in China and Spain, the film was Spielberg’s most ambitious project and an unusual subject matter for him at the time, because it was about the *end* of childhood—innocence brutally lost because of war. *Empire of the Sun* also happened to be the first major Hollywood production shot in China since the 1949 Communist revolution.

The subject matter was unique in many ways because it was set in Shanghai on the eve of World War II during the Sino-Japanese war—not an arena of the war familiar to American moviegoers but painfully known to my family history. I had lost

my grandmother during the war, and it was practically a family ritual for my parents to recount the tales of growing up as a child in war-torn China.

Shanghai was the unfortunate first city in history to suffer the devastation of aerial bombardment. Christian played Jamie Graham, a privileged English schoolboy who, like J.G. Ballard, was born and raised in the British section of Shanghai. (Before World War II, Shanghai had a number of European enclaves.) During the Japanese invasion, Jamie is separated from his parents. He is captured and thrown into a Japanese concentration camp where he survives through ferocious skills he learns from two American prisoners.

When production began on *Empire of the Sun*, the cast had grown to include an impressive list of distinguished actors including Nigel Havers, Miranda Richardson, Joe Pantoliano, and John Malkovich. (It also happened to be Ben Stiller's first movie role as "Dainty"—an imprisoned American!) But it was Christian who dominated the screen for the duration of the 154-minute film. It was a striking, career-making debut, and Christian's performance was the heart and soul of the film. Unlike the typical cherubic child actor, Spielberg needed a child who could compellingly portray a concentration camp survivor.

"I really enjoyed working on that film," recalled Christian. "The main thing I remember about it is that it was so well organized. Very well planned indeed. And Spielberg was very friendly to me. But at that age, I didn't know what was going on, which was just as well I suppose. Consequently, I wasn't nervous on the set—it didn't even cross my mind."

Off the set, an English boy stuck in China's largest city was a different story. "There was nothing to do, and everything is very dusty and crowded," Christian recalled. "There's no color anywhere and the Chinese are always coughing."

Though Christian was accompanied by his mother during the

production, he called his father whenever possible and David remembered how lonely Christian was during the shoot.

"He looked forward to playing table tennis with cast and crew, particularly with John Malkovich. But on some days, Malkovich refused to play with Christian and I had to console him and explain that grown-ups don't always like to play games with children."

Once the four-month shoot was finished, Christian was thrilled to be home in England. He told a reporter: "The first thing I did was to head with my sister Louise to the beach and then the local McDonald's. I hated the food in Shanghai."

When it was released in the U.S. at Christmas in 1987, the film itself received mixed reviews as it sugarcoated the nihilism of Ballard's book. With John Williams' "choir of angels" score, no major American stars, and Spielberg's trademark gloss on a part of World War II unknown to most Americans, *Empire of the Sun*, budgeted at \$38 million, grossed only \$22 million, making it the biggest bomb of Spielberg's career to date.

Worse, *Empire of the Sun* was released just weeks after Bernardo Bertolucci's masterpiece *The Last Emperor*, a film about the last emperor of China, Pu-yi. Spielberg's similarly titled film invited comparison. Both pictures were set in China. Both were centered on a young boy growing up during war and strife. America's pop director set himself up to be compared to Europe's highbrow film maestro, and the critics responded. *The Last Emperor* swept that year's Academy Awards, winning nine Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Director.

But most critics, regardless of how they felt about the film, were impressed by Christian's portrayal, from spoiled, privileged private school brat to feral young prisoner in a Japanese prison camp.

Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* wrote, "Mr. Bale takes the film to a different dramatic plane. This fine young actor is eminently able to handle an ambitious and demanding role."

Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, added, “Kind of a grim poetry that suggests a young Tom Courtenay.”

And Michael Atkinson, *Movieline*, praised, “Bale manages so many strange, heartbreaking, transcendent moments that we are continually caught off guard.”

At the film’s London premiere, Christian was presented to Queen Elizabeth II. It was a glitzy affair that made a deep impression on David, who recalled: “Here I was, a nobody from South Africa, and my son was shaking hands with the Queen!”

Christian’s performance earned him an Outstanding Juvenile Performance citation from the National Board of Review and a Young Artist Award. Christian was considered an odds-on favorite to be nominated for an Oscar, but when the nomination failed to materialize, Christian was relieved. “People are ready for recognition at different ages and I wasn’t.”

Empire of the Sun was my favorite film at the time. I was living in Toronto and belonged to a cappuccino-swilling indie film counterculture; we all dressed like Robert Smith from The Cure and had long outgrown Spielberg movies. But *Empire of the Sun*, with its epic sweep and a subject matter near and dear to my own family history, resonated with me. The bodies of the dead Chinese civilians floating down the river? That brought back to my mind every horrific story my parents had told me about the war. That poor little boy eating potatoes and weevils? I wanted to save him from the Japanese concentration camps!

David was soon making plans for Christian’s next film. The *New York Times* reported that Christian had several offers. By March 1988, the *Sunday Express* was reporting that Christian was planning to do a movie with his sister Louise. David had ditched his job to manage his son’s career full-time.

But David’s post-*Empire* plans were premature. Little did anyone know how Christian would react to the demands of a press junket. By the time Christian found himself in that hotel

room in Paris stabbing an orange in frustration, he had been doing ten hours of interviews a day with few breaks. To promote *Empire*, Christian would complete over 160 interviews with newspapers, television, magazines, and radio. In an almost parallel of the movie, Christian now saw himself as a prisoner, only this time his jail was a hotel room as different reporters were marched in and out.

After the Paris press junket, Christian was pretty confident that he no longer wanted to have anything to do with show business. His movie career seemingly over, Christian retreated to his home in Bournemouth in the south of England, happy to be finished with the movie industry.

"I went to my dad and said: 'I don't want to do this, it's not fun anymore.'"

Though Bournemouth was where the Bale family was living at the time and where his mother was from, Christian did not consider it to be his hometown. Years of nomadic living resulted in Christian having no particular allegiances with any of the towns he and his family had moved to and from. Christian was born in Wales but he adamantly did not consider himself Welsh.

Bournemouth was delighted to claim Christian as its biggest celebrity. With a population of 165,000, Bournemouth is a coastal resort town that earned the moniker "The Happiest Place in Britain" after a 2007 survey. It is the seaside town where author J. R. R. Tolkien retired to. And now it had Christian Bale, the local lad who was starring in a Steven Spielberg movie.

Though *Empire of the Sun* had already opened in the U.S. around Christmas to mixed reviews and a poor box office, critics were impressed by Christian's performance. There were high expectations in both the local and national press in the U.K. as they awaited the U.K. premiere. *The Star* declared Christian to be "The Boy Next Door who will be a Millionaire at 15." And on the night of February 17, 1988, all of England waited with baited

breath for Christian to land a highly expected Oscar nomination for Best Actor. When the Oscar nomination didn't happen, Christian told the press he wasn't disappointed.

Empire of the Sun had its Royal Premiere in London's Leicester Square for Queen Elizabeth II on March 21, 1988. Christian, father David, mother Jenny, sisters Sharon and Louise were all presented to the Queen. Christian told the local newspaper, the *Bournemouth Daily Echo*: "I've got a white tuxedo which I'll be wearing for the first time." The *Daily Echo* proudly continued to follow the exploits of its favorite son, proclaiming him "Bournemouth's Boy Wonder." The after-party in London went on until 4:00 am and celebrities like Cher and Twiggy were on hand.

So after the Royal Premiere, after his breakdown in Paris during the exhausting international press junket, after the noise and excitement of all the critics' reviews and award nominations from around the world, Christian tried to return to a normal life back in Bournemouth. But when *Empire of the Sun* became Spielberg's biggest box office bomb, Christian became the target of taunts from his school classmates at the Bournemouth School for Boys who jeered that, at the age of fourteen, he was a washed-up has-been. He told a reporter: "Kids would walk up to me saying, 'Where's that kid in *Empire of the Sun*?' and we'd get into a fist-fight. Things like that happened a lot."

In fact, Christian told me that the bullies at school were always trying to cut his face or break his nose, determined to permanently disfigure him to end his career. He told *The People*: "I took a beating from several boys for years. They put me through hell, punching and kicking me all the time."

Christian's mother, Jenny, recalled in a *Sun* interview: "He had a tough time at school. The bullying was quite bad and made him very sad. It really put him off the film and stardom thing. At the time he did not want to do any more acting."

There were perks to being the local celebrity. Christian made

money selling his autograph in the school yard and he was surprised to often find himself the target of local gossip.

"On one occasion," Christian recalled, "I was sitting with a friend opposite two girls in a café, and one girl was telling us how she was going out with Christian Bale, and I just sat listening, asking her what he was like. She said stuff, about how he was a good boyfriend, and my friend was crying with laughter. Eventually I told her who I was, she looked mortified and ran off.

"A lot of American journalists commented that I must have been the most popular kid at school after making *Empire*. The complete opposite was true. I walked down corridors with people going: 'Oh look, it's the has-been.' Fourteen-year-old boys would quote me box-office numbers. It was weird how much they wanted the movie to fail. I was mocked for the rest of my school years for having been in the movie."

Suddenly it was *schadenfreude* time, as if Christian were personally responsible for the film's failure.

"I'd go down the public toilets and see things written about me on the wall," he recalled. "Guys would start fights with me. The local paper took pictures of me getting back from school, then wrote features about how I wouldn't open a girls' school fete. I just felt a dick, you know? I was fourteen; I didn't want to stand there next to the mayor with a big pair of scissors, but they started saying I was big-headed, that I'd forgotten where I'd come from." A pause. "I didn't come from there, anyway."

In fact, the school fete was a charity event for the Avonbourne Girls School, which his sister Louise was attending. Even though Louise personally asked him as a favor, Christian declined and said: "I just didn't want to do it." He was furious when the *Bournemouth Daily Echo* ran an article on May 16, 1988, with the headline, "Empire star shuns fair. Won't aid sister's school."

"I told my parents I wasn't interested in doing anything again because the attention ruined it."

But David Bale had other plans in mind. Although he realized that Christian was severely affected by the press junket experience, he also felt that his son had a God-given talent and that he'd inevitably return to the big screen. The problem here was, how long would it take before Christian would snap out of his funk? Their Spielberg connection was fast growing cold. He was also getting discouraging advice from movie industry friends and acquaintances they had made.

"Frank Marshall [longtime Spielberg collaborator and one of *Empire's* producers] told me that the worst thing to do to a kid would be to pursue a film career," David recalled. But David wanted to move Christian to Los Angeles, the capital of the movie industry with a decidedly different attitude toward actors and acting. "Actors in England," David worried, "are essentially just civil servants. I wanted better than that for Christian."

Nor did David want Christian to follow the British route for actors by attending the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA). David boasted, "They had nothing to teach Christian. RADA churns out actors with exactly the same style. You can't tell them apart! Christian's talent is natural and I wanted to keep it that way."

But Christian's mother, Jenny, was very worried about the change in Christian's personality. Before making *Empire*, Jenny recalled: "Christian was a very happy child, who loved to laugh and wore pots on his head singing songs." After the incident in Paris, it was as if her son had become a recluse.

Christian would later tell the *Daily Echo* the same thing about the year following *Empire of the Sun*: "I just don't think it's a good thing for somebody that age to have it happen to them. I had gone from being able to walk about with nobody knowing me, to somebody people pointed at in the streets. It just freaked me out. I didn't leave the house for almost a year after that."

So went the tug-of-war between David and Jenny for the

control of Christian's future. While his father saw Christian's career as his own way into America, Jenny was worried about Christian's already damaged psyche. In Bournemouth, Christian had just started going out with a steady new girlfriend, Natalie, and seemed content with going to university in England.

After the trauma of the *Empire of the Sun* press junket, Jenny was thinking about the fates of other child actors. Hollywood is littered with child actor casualties who couldn't make the transition to a grown-up career. Gary Coleman, Corey Haim, Brad Renfro, Jonathan Brandis, River Phoenix—these were just a few victims of Christian's generation.

But David would twist Christian's mother's concern into something else.

"You see?" David would tell his son, "I have more confidence in you than your mother does." Christian had a lot to think about.

With a Steven Spielberg film on his résumé, David was positive that Christian could launch a major career in Los Angeles. David decided that if Christian were to have a future in film, it had to be in Hollywood, not in England.

David didn't want to overtly pressure his son into the movie industry, but he also didn't want Christian to lose this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become a star. Ever since the *Empire* press junket, Christian responded negatively to pressure (no more "must" or "should"), so David treated him with kid gloves, asking him to consider small TV or film roles as paid holidays from school. Christian didn't like his school anyhow and he felt that Bournemouth School for Boys—both the teachers and his classmates—didn't like him, which left him feeling like he was stuck in a downward spiral.

"That school couldn't teach Christian anything," David asserted. "He had been educated by the greatest director in the world and he had traveled to countries his classmates could only dream of going [to]. What did he need that suffering for?"

Like Christian's *Empire of the Sun* character Jim, David believed in the "University of Life" over formal education—a belief that appeared to have rubbed off on his son.

"Basically, I'd turn up late every day," Christian recalled of his school days at Bournemouth School for Boys. "My attendance was probably the lowest of anybody there. I think it was less than 50 percent or something. I remember the teacher saying: 'One day, Christian, you're going to go to an interview and they're going to ask to see your school registration, and when they see all your "lates" on it, they're going to think you're unreliable and you're not going to get the job.' The headmaster was constantly putting me in detention and trying to stop me from working. He succeeded on one movie—purely because of him I wasn't allowed to do it, as he threatened to put me down a year." Being forced to repeat a year of school was a threat that worked.

Christian got his sweet revenge though. Christian heard that he was now one of the "old boys" listed on the school wall. "Which is quite funny because the headmaster couldn't stand me. I can't help but feel smug knowing he has to walk past my name every day."

After *Empire of the Sun*, Christian did not shoot another movie for almost two years. It was a miserable time of retreat and contemplation as Christian agonized about his future. He definitely wanted to get out of Bournemouth but after his first brush with fame, he wanted nothing to do with movies anymore. It just wasn't any fun.

But luckily, David and Christian's U.K. agent came across a perfect project to get Christian back in the saddle. How about an all-expenses paid trip to sunny Jamaica? Fraser Heston (son of Hollywood legend Charlton Heston) was preparing to adapt the classic *Treasure Island*. It would be Fraser Heston's first job as a director, so he was delighted to have an experienced cast and crew on hand. A Heston family project under their Agamemnon

Films production company, Charlton himself prepared to star as pirate Long John Silver. In 1989, Christian, his dad, and sister Louise were enjoying themselves in Jamaica while he shot his first starring role since *Empire of the Sun*.

Playing plucky Jim Hawkins opposite Charlton Heston's Long John Silver, Christian loved sunny Jamaica and he enjoyed working with Fraser Heston.

Charlton Heston described Christian as "fearless" and was impressed that the boy happily did his own stunts. Christian also enjoyed listening to his left-wing father spar with his polar opposite, the conservative icon Heston, over issues like gun control and U.S. politics—something David loved to analyze and criticize.

Fraser recalled: "Christian was a real sport, and a good ship-mate. He was seasick the first day out, like a lot of us, but never missed a beat. He'd just lean over the [leeward] side between takes, have a good vomit, put on a brave face, and turn back to the camera for another scene.

"Christian did almost all of his own combats, climbing in the rigging of the *Bounty*, crossing the waterfall on the rope, diving from the bowsprit, and he (and his father!) were wonderful about it. We were always very concerned about his or any other's safety. But Christian was very game, and was physically adept at doing this stuff, and certainly unafraid of heights. I think the result shows on the screen."

During the shoot of a key scene—the death of Blind Pew—Christian accidentally hit Christopher Lee in the balls. When Lee doubled over in pain, Christian started laughing uncontrollably. Lee demanded that Christian apologize but David interceded and bellowed: "No, my son does not have to apologize! It was an accident." Father and son then had another laugh at Lee's expense.

Fraser recollected: "I think my favorite sequence is the death of Blind Pew, with Christian and his mum [played by Isla Blair, who in real life is married to Julian Glover]. Christian gives Blind

Pew a mighty whack with the empty blunderbuss and he and his mum barely escape out the window. I remember Christian gave Chris Lee a bit too mighty of a whack, and a bit too far below the belt too! It certainly got a very convincing reaction from Chris [Lee]. Now that's what I call realism."

Because *Treasure Island* was a made-for-TV movie on America's Turner Network, Christian didn't need to do publicity. Additionally, David had negotiated top billing for Christian, second only to Charlton Heston—an amazing feat given the caliber of the cast (which included the previously mentioned Christopher Lee, as well as Oliver Reed and Julian Glover). Powered by a spirited Chieftains soundtrack, Fraser Heston's gritty remake of *Treasure Island* earned strong reviews.

Fraser was thrilled with the results: "I think that Christian filled that wonderful role admirably; you really got the feeling by the end of the film that Jim Hawkins had come through a crucible, had been transformed by his ordeal from a boy into a man. The classic Joseph Campbell heroic transformation; the coming-of-age-by-ordeal ritual practiced by many cultures from the Masai to our own. I think our film was also more true to the book, and the spirit of the book, than the other films. I like to think that Robert Louis Stevenson would have liked this version the best."

The reviews ultimately assured Christian (and David) that he still "had it" and that his impressive performance in *Empire of the Sun* wasn't simply a fluke or solely due to Spielberg's expert direction.

David was delighted that *Treasure Island*'s confidence-boosting experience was bringing Christian back to making movies. His mind was made up.

By 1991, Christian had dropped out of sixth-form college and prepared to head off to L.A. to fulfill David's Hollywood dreams, but even though Christian was talented, he obviously wasn't prepared to deal with fans or the press at that early age.

Should David have realized his son was already close to the breaking point after *Empire of the Sun* rather than being more worried about Spielberg being embarrassed? Or did he simply believe that his own charm would somehow rub off on his painfully shy and inwardly angry son?