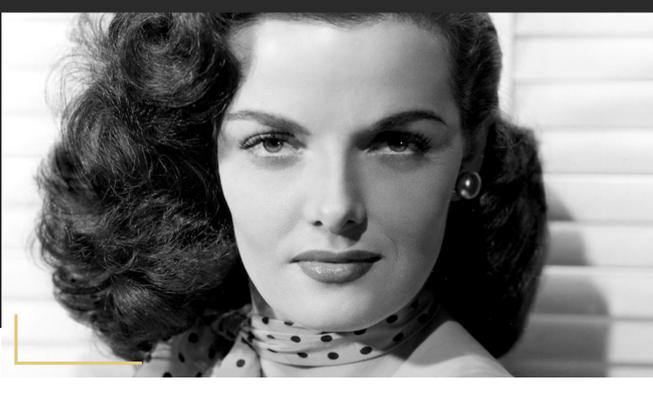


# Christina Rice on Jane Russell

By Raquel Stecher | June 17, 2021



Christina Rice is a librarian, historian and archivist and the author of *Ann Dvorak: Hollywood's Forgotten Rebel*. Her latest book *Mean...Moody...Magnificent!: Jane Russell and the Marketing of a Hollywood Legend* is the first-ever biography of Jane Russell to be published and is timed perfectly for the 100th anniversary of the screen legend's birth. In this interview, Rice shares details about Russell's film career, her legacy heading WAIF (World Adoption International Fund) and Rice's process in writing her book.

**In 2013, you published a biography on Ann Dvorak which went on to garner much acclaim. How did you choose Jane Russell as your next subject? How do the two compare?**

**Christina Rice:** The Ann Dvorak book had been a deeply personal passion project that took around 15 years to complete, so when it finally came out, I figured I was DONE writing Hollywood biographies! After I had some distance from that book, I unexpectedly found myself contemplating diving into a similar project. Many of my favorites already had books written about them, so I turned to my publisher, the University Press of Kentucky, for advice and they are the ones who recommended Jane Russell. I was surprised to discover that other than Jane's own 1985 memoir, there had never been a book written about her. She was someone I was very much aware of but knew very little about. After mulling it over for a few months, I finally decided to take the plunge.

The experience was very different from Ann Dvorak in many ways. Whereas Ann was rather reclusive and didn't leave much of herself for the world other than her films, Jane was hyper-documented from the age of 19 until she passed away a few months before her 90th birthday. Information on Ann was so hard to come by that pretty much everything I found was included in that book. There's so much on Jane that I had the opposite problem and had to make a lot of choices on what to cut out. As I mentioned, Ann Dvorak was a very personal project and is probably the one time her story will be told with any depth, so I feel like I am the custodian of her legacy. Jane, on the other hand, was able to tell much of her own story, so instead of writing a definitive book, I felt like I was building off of and contextualizing what Jane had already put out there. The other day, someone commented that with *Mean...Moody...Magnificent!* I've gone from fangirl to author, which I think is a good summation!

**What kind of research did you do for the book? Did you encounter any major surprises?**

**Rice:** The first thing I did was to read Jane's memoir to get a sense of where the gaps in her story might be or what topics needed to be fleshed out more. Obviously, the marketing campaign of *The Outlaw* (1943) and Howard Hughes' ongoing handling of her publicity was a huge part of her story and something I wanted to explore in depth. Fortunately, the papers of Russell Birdwell, the publicist behind *The Outlaw*, are at UCLA so I was able to dive into their day-to-day discussions of how to market Jane, which was fascinating.

I was surprised to discover that Jane, with her husband, started their own production company in the mid-1950s which wasn't super commonplace at that time. Jane's long-time advocacy work to ease restrictions on international adoption was something I was fascinated by. The library that I work at (Central Library in Los Angeles) actually had a file folder all about Jane's WAIF foundation, which has a goldmine of information and eventually led me to a gentleman who served as the executive director for a number of years.

**Jane Russell was the subject of one of Hollywood's most elaborate publicity campaigns. How did Russell starring in *The Outlaw* affect her life and career?**

**Rice:** The publicity campaign for Howard Hughes' *The Outlaw* launched Jane's career and is what introduced her to audiences around the world in early 1941. However, the movie wasn't even released until 1946, and even then, only on a limited basis. It wasn't widely released until 1950. She received so much press in the early 1940s that she was often referred to as the "Motionless Picture Actress" because she wasn't actually showing up in movies! Even though her film career was stalled for most of the decade, the strength of that early *Outlaw* publicity turned her into a popular pin-up with servicemen during World War II...[and] she still somehow managed to use it to springboard for a decent film career in the 1950s. The way Jane was marketed for that film was often a bitter pill for her to swallow, but she learned to live with it and make the best of it.

**Russell's career as an actress was intrinsically tied to Howard Hughes who kept her under contract for many years. What was their working relationship like?**

**Rice:** Jane's working relationship with Howard Hughes is absolutely fascinating and I get the impression it was one of the more positive associations in his life. Hughes seems to have seen something very special in Jane from day one, and he seemed determined to hang onto her contractually rather than selling her contract to another studio like he had done previously with Jean Harlow and Ann Dvorak. Jane's agents at MCA had other plans and were constantly trying to get her to leave him, but she remained loyal and honored her contract with him. He so appreciated the loyalty that he continued to give her better contracts until eventually she signed a 20-year deal at \$1,000 a week whether she was making movies for him or not. Lew Wasserman at MCA couldn't even argue with that!

I get the impression that they had a tremendous amount of respect for each other, but also tested each other at times. Jane tolerated a lot from Hughes when it came to how she was presented onscreen, but there were times when she drew a line in the sand. I think there were many times Hughes didn't know what to make of Jane and vice versa, but there was a genuine affection and she always remained loyal to him.

**Can you tell us about how Russell came to work on *The Paleface* (1948) and what her working relationship with Bob Hope was like?**

**Rice:** It's kind of astounding to consider that *The Paleface* was only Jane's third film, after *The Outlaw* and *Young Widow*, which was released in 1946, and didn't really do much to advance Jane's career. When Paramount was casting the film, they were looking for a marquee actress who wouldn't cost too much because Hope's salary was already taking a big chunk out of the budget. The Howard Hughes publicity machine had managed to keep Jane's name in print for almost a decade, so she had the name recognition but had made so few films, Paramount figured they could get her for cheap. Hughes charged them more than they would have preferred to have paid for the loan out, but the film was a success and Jane was great in the role of Calamity Jane. She and Hope adored each other and would go on to perform live together on stage and via radio. She credited the film with saving her career which had been stalled for almost a decade.

**Russell starred alongside my favorite actor Robert Mitchum in two films: *His Kind of Woman* (1951) and *Macao* (1952). Can you tell us a bit about how they worked together and their friendship after filming?**

**Rice:** Jane and Mitch hit it off immediately and truly enjoyed working together. They were both no-nonsense in real life, so their personalities really gelled, but they also had great chemistry onscreen. Unfortunately, they only made those two films together but remained lifelong friends. When asked later on why they worked so well together onscreen, Jane replied, "We looked like we deserved each other," which is such a great description of them.

**In addition to Mitchum, Russell seemed to greatly value personal and professional connections and made lifelong friends in the industry. Which partnerships and friendships stand out to you and what do these relationships say about Russell as both a person and an actress?**

**Rice:** Jane genuinely seemed to like people and enjoyed seeing other people succeed. She maintained meaningful friendships with students she went to high school with, but also got along smashingly with folks in the industry. One of her closest friendships was with her stand-in Carmen Nisbet Cabeen. They both had deep spiritual beliefs and remained friends long after they stopped making films. Another person Jane became instant friends with was Portia Nelson who was André De Toth's secretary when the director briefly worked on *Young Widow*. When Jane realized that Nelson was a talented songwriter, she insisted that Portia pursue that and even got one of Nelson's songs, "The Gilded Lily," into *Montana Belle* (1952), which Jane sings onscreen and is a highlight of that film. I think Jane's ability to forge such lasting friendships from different stages in her life says a lot about how secure she was with herself and how unpretentious she was despite being an internationally known movie star.

***Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) seemed like the ideal movie for Jane Russell. How did she come to make the movie and what was her experience with director Howard Hawks and her co-star Marilyn Monroe?**

**Rice:** Howard Hawks was originally slated to direct *The Outlaw*, but he and Howard Hughes didn't see eye-to-eye on the direction of the film, so Hughes ended up directing instead. Hawks was essentially the person who discovered Jane and she was bitterly disappointed when he left *The Outlaw* and longed to work with him. When Hawks was slated for *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, he immediately thought of Jane who he thought would be perfect for the role and a good match for Marilyn. He was right on both counts! Jane was thrilled to at last be working with Hawks in what is arguably the best performance of her career. Jane was very kind to Marilyn, who was on the cusp of superstardom but struggling with insecurities. Jane was impressed with Marilyn's work ethic and knew what a great opportunity this film was. Other actresses may have been worried about being upstaged by Marilyn as Lorelei, but not Jane. The genuine affection the pair had for each other really comes through onscreen.

**Russell and her first husband, professional football player Robert Waterfield, started Russ-Field Productions together to produce their own movies. What came out of this venture?**

**Rice:** Jane and Robert Waterfield formed Russ-Field Productions in 1954 when her contract with Howard Hughes was expiring and she had been pushed over the edge by Hughes' handling of the production and publicity on *The French Line* (1953). Russ-Field signed a six-picture distribution deal with United Artists but only ended up producing four films. The two starring Jane—*Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1955) and *The Fuzzy Pink Nightgown* (1957)—ended up losing money, though *The King and Four Queens* (1956), starring Clark Gable and *Run for the Sun* (1956) with Richard Widmark, did turn a profit. Overall, it wasn't a great experience for the couple, so they just kind of let the venture fizzle out, and she ended up signing that 20-year sweetheart deal with Howard Hughes.

**After Russell was unable to have children of her own, she set her sights on adoption but faced many challenges. Can you tell us a bit about how she became a champion for international adoption?**

**Rice:** Jane adopted her daughter Tracy in the United States without much difficulty, but when she tried to adopt a second time, the waiting list was a couple of years long. Around that same time, Jane was invited to England for a Command Performance and visited orphanages in Italy and Germany during the trip. Even though there were many children in need of a family, Jane as an American was not able to adopt any of these children. Her visits received some press, so an Irish woman surrendered her young son to Jane who brought the boy back to the States. This prompted a backlash from British Parliament and caused the FBI to open an investigation. Ultimately, Jane was able to adopt the boy, but the experience was so negative that she wanted to help unite children in need with families. She started WAIF, an organization that was the fundraising arm of International Social Service for a number of years and who also sought to change laws to ease restrictions on international adoption. WAIF was very active for over 40 years and was ultimately the life's work of Jane Russell. It's such an important part of her story.

**What do you hope readers will take away from your book?**

**Rice:** Jane is someone who still has a great deal of name recognition, but it tends to be in relation to Marilyn Monroe and Howard Hughes or maybe the commercials she did for Playtex Bras in the 1970s/80s. I hope readers will come to appreciate what a complex person she was and credit how much of herself she gave to WAIF and its mission. I also hope people will seek out some of Jane's films as she is amazing onscreen and an utter delight to watch. When watching Jane on film, she truly is a larger than life movie star.

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