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Christian Bale Biography



Christian Bale
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(January 30, 1974 • Pembrokeshire, Wales

Actor

Christian Bale has performed a feat that is astonishing for most Hollywood actors. Although he became a professional performer at age ten and a star at age thirteen when he played the lead in Steven Spielberg's World War II epic *Empire of the Sun*, Bale did not follow the usual path of the child actor. Many fall prey to the temptations of early fame and quite a few struggle to make the transition to adult movie roles—not the Welsh-born Bale, who shunned the limelight and instead focused on building an impressive body of work. Acting steadily since the late 1980s, Bale has appeared in over twenty-five films, most notably *American Psycho* (2000), and the critically acclaimed independent film, *The Machinist* (2004). Even as an adult, the modest actor steers clear of the spotlight; but considering he donned a flowing black cape to appear in *Batman Begins* (2005), he may not be able to maintain his usual low profile. After all, everyone wants to know the man behind the mask.

Born into show biz

Christian Charles Philip Bale was born on January 30, 1974, in Pembrokeshire, Wales, into a family with a long history in entertainment. His grandfather was a stand-up comic and children's entertainer; his great-uncle, Rex, was an actor; and his mother, Jenny, was a former circus performer. Two of Bale's three older sisters even joined the business eventually: Erin is a musician and Louise is a director and actress. Only Sharon managed to escape the lure of Hollywood; she is a computer analyst.

Because Bale's father, David, was a commercial pilot, the family moved around quite a bit, which meant that young Christian was raised in several countries, including Portugal, England, and the United States. To this day, Bale credits this constant change as one reason he became an actor. "I not only inherited an aversion to the nine-to-five routine," he commented to Graham Fuller of *Interview* magazine in 2004, "but

the sense from my parents that being bored and boring is the worst thing that you can be." When he was not traveling with his family, Bale was trying his own hand at acting. In 1983, at the age of nine, he landed his first job—a British television commercial for Pac-Man cereal. The following year Bale made his professional debut on the London West End stage, starring in *The Nerd*, opposite British comedian Rowan Atkinson (1955–).

In 1986, Bale made the jump to California and straight into his first U.S. television appearance, in the NBC miniseries *Anastasia: The Mystery of Anna*. Several other miniseries followed, but it was Bale's role in *Anastasia* that first caught the eye

"I don't want to know about the lives of other actors and I don't want people to know too much about me."

of the acclaimed Hollywood director of such films as *Jaws* and *E.T.*, Steven Spielberg (1946–), who was casting a new movie called *Empire of the Sun*. The fact that Spielberg's first wife, Amy Irving (1953–), starred in *Anastasia* may have had something to do with Bale's good fortune. The young Welsh actor was not simply handed a role in *Empire*, however. He auditioned for the role along with four thousand other hopefuls, and was eventually cast in the lead as Jim Graham.

Conquers an *Empire*

Empire of the Sun (1987) is an epic story that follows the harrowing adventures of a twelve-year-old spoiled, British aristocrat who is separated from his parents during the 1941 Japanese invasion of Shanghai. (From 1937 until 1945 there was an ongoing conflict between Japanese and Chinese forces to control China; Shanghai was an important Chinese seaport.) He is captured and imprisoned in Soo Chow confinement camp, where he grows up fast as he struggles to survive. The role of Jim would have been difficult for even the most experienced actor. Because he was at the heart of the story, Bale had to appear in almost every scene of the movie, which runs two-and-a-half hours. In addition, the role called for an incredible depth of emotion. But young Bale proved up to the task and received critical praise for his performance. He was even given a special award by the National Board of Review for Best Performance by a Juvenile Actor. The board is a prestigious New York-based film society composed of teachers, actors, writers, and movie-production workers.

Along with the praise came a lot of attention, which the thirteen-year-old did not particularly enjoy. As Bale told *E!Online*, "I was very young and not ready for any level of fame and found that I disliked it. I felt like I was letting people down if I acted like a 13-year-old. That, I felt, was very unhealthy." Bale frequently ducked out on interviews and avoided talking about himself in any depth. He even thought about quitting the business. "I suddenly started feeling like a freak because everyone was treating me differently," Bale explained to Graham Fuller in 2001. "It was very confusing, and I did wonder if acting was for me anymore."

But acting was in Bale's blood, and Hollywood continued to call. In 1989, he was tapped by British-born actor and director Kenneth Branagh (1960–) to appear in the film adaptation of William Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, and in 1990 Bale starred as Jim Hawkins in the television movie *Treasure Island*.

In the early 1990s, Bale continued to take roles in films that were historic in nature. He costarred in the musical *Newsies* (1992) about a group of newsboys in New York City, circa 1899, who band together to form a union strike; and in 1993, Bale starred in *Swing Kids*, which focuses on young people in Nazi-

occupied Germany who listen to banned swing music from the United States. Both movies required a great deal of physical effort and Bale spent months taking dance and martial arts lessons. His dedication foreshadowed future roles that would require even greater physical stamina.

Cyber pinup

Bale worked steadily through the 1990s, making at least one movie a year. Again, he seemed drawn to period-style films, only now he was a grown-up, and he was being repeatedly cast as a mild-mannered gentleman. Such roles included the male lead Laurie in *Little Women* (1994), Stevie in *The Secret Agent* (1996), and Edward Rosier in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In the late 1990s Bale branched out and began to take on parts that were more edgy and challenging. For example, in 1998 he played a gay journalist exploring the 1970's world of glam rock in the indie movie *Velvet Goldmine*. That same year Bale earned praise for his portrayal of Bobby Platt, a mentally challenged young man who is abused by his father, in *All the Little Animals*.

By the end of the 1990s, Bale was in his mid-twenties and had successfully made the transition from spirited boy actor to a full-fledged adult performer. Critics considered him an up-and-coming force, and his fan base was enormous. At six-feet-two-inches, the young Welshman had sprouted into a handsome hunk who had a devoted following. And although he did not seek out the press, and he tried to stay under the radar, his fans, who called themselves Bale-heads, made him into a cyber pinup.

In 1998, Bale was one of the most downloaded celebrities on the Web, and there were several sites devoted to all-things Bale, including CBFC, the Christian Bale Fan Club (currently non-operational), led by a Toronto-based man named Harrison Cheung. Cheung and members of CBFC launched a publicity campaign for Bale, contacting magazines, producers, and Hollywood executives to dig up projects and score interviews. In one amazing move, the CBFC even raised money to adopt a gorilla for the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, one of the charities that Bale supports. Bale felt the reason for his popularity was that he was basically a man of mystery. As he explained to interviewer Brendan Lemon, "I've only done interviews when it's for a film, and tend to talk about the film and avoid talking about myself."

A man obsessed

Legions of fans appreciated the power of Bale's acting in the 1990s, but his real breakthrough came in 2000 when he was handpicked by director Mary Harron to star in the screen adaptation of *American Psycho*, a book written in 1991 by author Bret Easton Ellis (1964–). *American Psycho* caused quite a bit of controversy when it was published since its main character is a Wall Street executive named Patrick Bateman who is a brutal murderer. Critics predicted that the film would be equally controversial. Bale, however, was willing to take the risk. Because the character of Bateman is obsessed with his body, the actor prepared himself physically by weight lifting for weeks. Although the movie received mixed reviews, the buff Bale was universally applauded. According to Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly*, "The strapping and virile Bale acts with a newly potent leading-man danger."

Following his performance in *Psycho*, Bale began popping up on many industry lists, including *Entertainment Weekly's* Hottest Leading Men Under 30 and the The Most Creative People in Entertainment. The actor, however, had yet to truly become a household name. In the early 2000s, he

did appear in some big-budget mainstream films, including *Shaft* (2000) and *Reign of Fire* (2002), but it was another physically challenging role that thrust him back into the spotlight.

The Caped Crusader in the Movies

When Christian Bale starred in *Batman Begins* in 2005, he became the seventh actor to play the caped crusader on film. The story of Batman, however, began in May 1939 when the superhero appeared for the first time in a DC Comic called "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate," written by legendary authors Bob Kane (1916–1998) and Bill Finger (1914–1974). Taking their cues from detective films from the 1930s, Kane and Finger created a hero who was part crime fighter and part sleuth, a regular mortal whose skills were developed through years of study and training. The origin of Batman was explained in *Detective Comics* number 33, published in December 1939: After young Bruce Wayne witnessed the murder of his parents he vowed to devote his life to fighting crime.

Batman first appeared on the big screen in 1943 as a movie serial, which ran in theaters from July 16 through October 22. Lewis Wilson was the first Batman; his sidekick Robin was played by Douglas Croft. Robin the Boy Wonder, also known as Dick Grayson, was introduced by Kane and Finger in *Detective Comics* number 38. Grayson's parents, like those of Bruce Wayne, died as a result of foul play. Wayne just happens to witness their murders, and afterward he adopts the young orphan and becomes his mentor.

Batman and Robin appeared again on screen in 1949, featured in a movie serial that ran from May 26 through September 1. Robert Lowery was the second man to sport the black cape; Johnny Duncan played the tights-wearing Robin. It was almost twenty years before Batman returned to the silver screen. This time he was played by Adam West (1938–), who also starred in the television series *Batman*, which ran on ABC from 1966 through 1968. Like the cult TV series, the movie was a more comical light-hearted version of the original comic book characters. It also featured Burt Ward (1946–) as Robin, and a gallery of villains, including the Joker and the Penguin.

In the 1980s, Warner Brothers (WB) purchased the rights to Batman from DC Comics, intending to make a film early in the decade. The project, however, floundered for years until executives finally tapped quirky American director Tim Burton (1958–) to take the reins. Michael Keaton (1951–) was cast as Batman, which caused some controversy since he was mostly known for his comic roles in such movies as *Mr. Mom* (1983) and *Beetlejuice* (1988). When *Batman* was released in 1989, all doubts disappeared. The movie raked in an astounding \$251 million at the box office and "Batmania" swept the United States.

The next three sequels in the series did not fare as well. In 1992, Keaton reprised his role in *Batman Returns*, which was a moneymaker, but not a critical success. When Warner Brothers replaced Tim Burton with director Joel Schumacher (1939–), Keaton declined to make a third go-round as the caped crusader. As a result actor Val Kilmer (1959–) stepped into the Batsuit in 1995's *Batman Forever*. The cast also featured up-and-comer Chris O'Donnell (1970–) as Robin and comedian Jim Carrey (1962–) as the Riddler. Again, the movie did well at the box office, but fans and critics were disappointed by both the performances and the lack of story. In 1997, when *Batman and Robin* was released, not even Hollywood heartthrob George Clooney (1961–) as Batman, could save the day. The film did miserably at the box office and Warner Brothers shelved the Batman series for almost a decade. *Batman Begins* starring Bale opened in first place and earned over \$183 million in its first month in theatres.

Bale read the script for *The Machinist* (2004) and was immediately drawn to the main character of Trevor Reznik, a lathe operator who is so guilt-ridden over a secret that he suffers from insomnia for over a year. According to Stephen Applebaum of *The Independent*, the actor felt that he could "throw himself into [the role] body and soul." And that is literally what Bale did. Reznik is a haunted soul and the constant lack of sleep begins to take its toll on his body. To play such a tormented man, Bale wanted to lose weight, so he began running every day and started a diet regimen with the help of a nutritionist. He was not satisfied with his weight loss, however, so he began to eat less and less. By the time he started filming, Bale was drinking one cup of coffee and eating an apple a day. He looked like a skeleton. He had lost more than 60 pounds and was weighing in at 121 pounds.

Critics were astonished by Bale's gaunt appearance. They were equally amazed by his stunning portrayal of Reznik, calling it precise and intense. "Bale's haunted, aggressive and finally wrenching performance gives *The Machinist* a strong anchor," observed Todd McCarthy of *Variety*.

Bale as Batman

The praise Bale received for *The Machinist* were overshadowed by personal tragedy. In December of 2003, the twenty-nine-year-old actor lost his father to cancer. The distraught Bale was not even sure he was emotionally capable of taking on another role, but as chance would have it, he was offered a script that again appealed to him personally. And, again, he would have to put himself through another physical roller coaster. This time he needed to bulk up in order to play one of the most well-known superheroes of all time: Batman.

Bale was not a comic-book fan, nor was he a particular fan of the previous Batman movies. "What attracted me was Chris," Bale explained to Jennifer Armstrong of *Entertainment Weekly*, "and the knowledge that what was being aimed for was a reinvention of the Batman lore." The Chris Bale refers to is young English director Christopher Nolan (1970–), known for such



Christian Bale as Batman in the 2005 movie *Batman Begins*.

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unconventional dramas as *Memento* (2000) and *Insomniac* (2002). In Nolan's hands, *Batman Begins* (2005) promised to be a more intense film, more faithful to the original character, and with a full exploration of how Bruce Wayne, Batman's alter ego, evolved into the cape-wearing crime fighter. This included how the Batmobile came to be, how Bruce Wayne's parents died, and why Wayne is so close to his butler, Alfred, and his contact on the Gotham City police force, Lieutenant Gordon.

Nolan pored over sixty-five years of comic books that featured the caped crusader and came up with a gritty story that fully focused on Batman as a tortured superhero. Because of the demanding role, Nolan needed just the right actor. As he commented to *Entertainment Weekly* in 2005, "Batman has no superpowers. So everything that he achieves has to be credible, believable, that a normal man could do it. I think that puts an enormous burden on the performer. Christian was able to deliver because he's just got an incredibly focused presence on screen."

To prepare for his role, Bale, too, delved into the history of Batman, reading through various graphic novels, including *Arkham Asylum* (1997) and *Dark Victory* (2002). He also had to put on weight and go through intense physical training in order to endure acting in a rubber Batsuit for hours at a time. The shoot, however, did have its perks, especially since Bale got to work with so many Bat gadgets. His favorite was the Batmobile, which was a twenty-first-century monster of a car. "My heart was pounding every time I stepped out of that thing," the actor revealed.

Staying power

When the \$150 million *Batman Begins* opened in June of 2005, Christian Bale proved not only that he had staying power as an actor, but that he was truly one of Hollywood's most versatile stars. And as the star of a blockbuster, it was doubtful as to whether or not he could remain reclusive. Stephen Applebaum questioned the thirty-something actor about how he would react to the inevitable hype surrounding *Batman Begins*. "My hope is that I won't have to put myself everywhere and become some sort of soulless, empty being by the end of it. But I have to wait and see. I may detest it and run a mile, or maybe I will be able to deal with it."

In the meantime, Bale finished wrapping up two more movies, *The New World* (2005) and *Harsh Times* (2006). In what little downtime he has, the former child actor devotes his energies to a number of charities, including Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Foundation, and the Redwings Sanctuary. A devoted animal lover, Bale and his wife, Sibi Blasic, have two dogs and three cats, all of whom were rescued strays.

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And for the record, I'm against unjustified zoning restrictions that increase housing costs in cities. Then you get people asking for rent control, which makes matters worse.

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Doesn't Coronavirus put into question the widely held assumption that dense, walkable cities are better than the suburbs? I think it's fine to acknowledge that

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