

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: DAVID FINCHER

*A candid conversation with the controversial director of *Fight Club*, *Gone Girl* and *The Social Network* about why his movies are so damn strange*

People tend to think twice about messing with David Fincher, director of perverse, wickedly funny, impeccably made head-twisters such as *Fight Club*, *Zodiac* and *The Social Network*. That's understandable. He is, after all, the dark, icy moviemaker who merrily snuffed Sigourney Weaver's iconic Ripley character in *Alien 3*, served up Gwyneth Paltrow's head in a box in *Seven*, trapped Jodie Foster and Kristen Stewart in a home invasion in *Panic Room* and choreographed Rooney Mara's brutal rape in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. He made TV viewers' jaws drop with his series *House of Cards* when Kevin Spacey's ruthless politician shoves his lover Kate Mara (Rooney's sister) in the path of a subway train. Expect more Fincher-style dread, mystery and uneasy laughs from *Gone Girl*, his big-screen version of Gillian Flynn's relentlessly readable whodunit that spent 11 weeks at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list, tore through 40 printings, sold more than 6 million copies before hitting paperback and sparked an adult fan base almost as rabid as the young-adult crowds obsessed with *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*. Of the movie, in which Ben Affleck can barely convince anyone he didn't kill his beautiful wife, *Nine Inch Nails* frontman Trent Reznor, who scored the picture with Atticus Ross, says it's "a much darker

film than I was expecting. It's a nasty film."

Fincher wouldn't have it any other way. With a reputation for being obsessively perfectionistic and passionate about his creative vision, he has also apparently rattled some of Hollywood's biggest studio bosses and stars. Scott Rudin, producer of *The Social Network* and *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, has said, "He has an anarchist's mentality. He likes to blow up systems." Robert Downey Jr. compared the *Zodiac* set to "a gulag," and to salute Fincher's notorious proclivity for demanding as many as 60 takes from his actors, he left urine-filled mason jars around the set. But in an industry that often runs scared from off-killer projects and inconvenient truths, Fincher stands out for bringing to the mainstream what may be hard to hear and watch but can also be entertaining as hell.

David Andrew Leo Fincher was born August 28, 1962 to Claire, a mental health nurse who specialized in treating drug addictions, and Howard Kelly Fincher, also known as Jack, a *Life* magazine bureau chief and author. When Fincher was two, his parents relocated the family from Denver to Marin County, California. When he was about to enter high school, his parents moved again, this time taking Fincher and his two sisters to bucolic Ashland, Oregon, where he graduated from high school. Intro-

duced to films by his father and inspired by seeing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* at the age of seven, Fincher, who was shooting eight-millimeter movies by the time he was eight, returned on his own to Marin County, where he ducked college and instead landed a job with director John Korty (*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*). By the age of 19 he was working at George Lucas's special effects company, Industrial Light & Magic, where he became an assistant cameraman and matte photographer. Two years later he jumped at the opportunity to make some noise of his own by conceptualizing and directing an attention-grabbing American Cancer Society public-safety commercial in which a fetus puffs a cigarette.

That spot started him on a lucrative career filming TV commercials for Nike, Coca-Cola, Chanel and Levi's, which he alternated with directing award-winning music videos for such artists as Madonna, George Michael and the Rolling Stones. Fincher's feature-film career was launched—and nearly crushed overnight—when 20th Century Fox hired the 27-year-old neophyte to direct the 1992 film *Alien 3*, the trouble-plagued, critically skewered sequel to Ridley Scott's 1979 futuristic masterwork. Oddly, the failure enhanced Fincher's burgeoning reputation as



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"My responsibility to myself is always, Am I going to be the commodity that people want me to be, or am I going to do the shit that interests me? I don't like most comedies. I don't like being ingratiated. I don't like obsequiousness."

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a visionary, and he parlayed that into a successful movie career. Fiercely private and not given to sharing glimpses of his life, Fincher met his longtime companion and producer, Ceán Chaffin, in the early 1990s when she was producing and he was directing a Coke ad. Fincher had previously been married to model-photographer Donya Fiorentino. They have a daughter, Phelix Imogen Fincher, who is 20; Donya subsequently married actor Gary Oldman, and Fincher gained custody of Phelix.

PLAYBOY sent Contributing Editor **Stephen Rebello**, who last interviewed Samuel L. Jackson, to catch up with Fincher in his cavernous Hollywood production offices housed in a swank 1920s art deco former bank that later served as a location in *L.A. Confidential*. Reports Rebello: "You meet David Fincher and know instantly you've been scanned, processed and judged either 'quick' or 'dead.' He doesn't suffer fools. But instead of the cool, brusque, detached man some have described, he struck me as gracious, smart as hell, drolly funny and armed with a lethal dry wit. Tell him you like his films, for instance, and he shoots back, 'Well, it's always nice to meet new perverts.' Back at you, Fincher."

PLAYBOY: You've made movies as different from each other as *The Social Network* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, and earned best director Oscar nominations for both. But you're better known for darker, more twisted films such as *Seven*, *Fight Club*, *Zodiac* and *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. What frightens the guy whose movies provoke, scare and unsettle others?

FINCHER: Complacency. Also, I don't like spiders, snakes, sharks, bears or anything that could make me part of the food chain. In our part of Los Angeles I'm usually okay, but when our daughter was three, this big fucking green garden spider as large as my palm built a gigantic web at about face height for a three-year-old. We were convinced that thing was thinking, If I can just get the tykester to come into my net, I could feed off that little one for two years. It would build this web every single night, and every single morning someone would walk through it. I was like, Dude, seriously? Give it a rest.

PLAYBOY: What else creeps you out?

FINCHER: I heard about a German man who put an ad on an internet site saying he wanted to devour somebody. Someone actually answered the ad. The guy videotaped himself anesthetizing the willing victim, segmenting his body and consuming him. Before the victim died, they ate his genitals together. I don't know if it was some bizarre psychosexual fulfillment, but it's one of the most disturbing things I've ever heard. When you can't count on somebody to even fight for his life, when he goes willingly—well, it's so out of left field, it's not even on my radar. Even though that was the most troubling thing I'd heard in a long time, the things that interest me in cinema kind of work the same way.

I like starting with an idea that unlocks a whole Pandora's box of other ideas.

PLAYBOY: Do people ever confront you for unlocking their personal Pandora's box of dark thoughts?

FINCHER: It was offensive to me on a certain level that when *Saw* and those other movies came out, people said, "Well, torture porn really started with *Seven*." Fuck you. There's enough pervy shit going on in *Seven* that I don't have to get on my high horse to defend its artistic sensibilities. It was lurid. It was supposed to be lurid. But the thing I appreciated about it and what I thought Andrew Kevin Walker's script did so well was that it got your mind in overdrive. It worked on your imagination. We were extremely conscious of the fact that we were talking about torture, but we never actually showed it.

PLAYBOY: It's interesting how even some fans of *Seven* swear they saw the severed and boxed head of Gwyneth Paltrow, who plays the wife of the detective played by Brad Pitt, at the end of the movie.

FINCHER: Exactly, but they never saw it. Because we had Andrew's script and Brad and Morgan Freeman playing the detectives, we were in great shape and didn't have to show the head in the box. Directors get far too much credit and far too much blame. But the fun of movie storytelling is when you know you have the audience's attention and you can see or feel them working to figure out where the movie's going. I'm interested in the psychology of not only leading the audience along but also being responsible for getting them there sooner than the characters, so the audience is watching things and going, "Oh no!" It's an interesting relationship to have with 700 people, even if 200 of them miss it entirely.

PLAYBOY: You've cast Brad Pitt as the star of *Seven*, *Fight Club* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. What's the dynamic between you?

FINCHER: Brad fucks with me all the time. So does Ben Affleck. When we did *Fight Club*, the studio said, "This is awesome; this is going to be great," because we were going to have a scene with Brad opening the door naked. When it came time to shoot it, being Brad, he said, "I should open the door and have a big yellow dishwasher scrub glove on." I said, "Perfect." When the studio executive saw it, she said, "You got him with his shirt off and then you fucked the whole thing up." I was like, "Excavate that line from *Animal House*: 'Hey, you fucked up—you trusted us.'"

PLAYBOY: Obviously a movie star of Pitt's stature helps calm nervous investors so you can make the movie you want.

FINCHER: Yeah. With my first movie, *Alien 3*, I had to get permission for everything, but my second movie, *Seven*, was my movie, Andy Walker's movie, Brad Pitt's, Morgan Freeman's and Kevin Spacey's movie. I didn't look to anyone

for permission. I made a pact with [studio boss] Michael De Luca and just said, “Dude, the audience wants a revelation. I’m going deep. It’s \$34 million and fuck it.” He was a thousand percent there, even when push came to shove and we went \$3 million over budget. We gave the audience a revelation with Brad and Morgan and by throwing in Gwyneth Paltrow, whom people had seen a bit of. It was the alchemy of those faces, those careers and the ascendance of different talents in that period. I’d direct *Seven* in a different way today. I would have a lot more fun. It was only by the time I did *Zodiac* or *Benjamin Button* that I knew what I was doing.

PLAYBOY: Do you watch a lot of crime shows on TV?

FINCHER: I like *Forensic Files*, that kind of stuff. My wife will turn it on, roll over in bed, and things like “The body was found near the parking lot of the 7-Eleven just off the interstate” go into her ears while she’s asleep.

PLAYBOY: Having lived with, raised a daughter with and worked closely with your wife, Ceán Chaffin, as your producer since the 1990s, do you ask her for advice when you’re on the fence about material?

FINCHER: Constantly. It’s a blessing and a curse, because she’s obviously someone who knows me, in some ways, better than I know myself. There are definitely things we disagree about. She was extremely vociferous, for instance, when she said, “Don’t make *The Game*.”

PLAYBOY: That’s the 1997 thriller in which Sean Penn gives his brother Michael Douglas a voucher for a live-action game that takes over his life.

FINCHER: Yeah, and in hindsight, my wife was right. We didn’t figure out the third act, and it was my fault, because I thought if you could just keep your foot on the throttle it would be liberating and funny. I know what I like, and one thing I definitely like is not knowing where a movie is going. These days, though, it’s hard to get audiences to give themselves over. They want to see the whole movie in a 90-second trailer.

PLAYBOY: Do you ever feel trapped by your own track record as a director?

FINCHER: I know that if a script has a serial killer—or any kind of killer—in it, I have to be sent it; I don’t have any choice. [laughs] My responsibility to myself is always, Am I going to be the commodity that people want me to be, or am I going to do the shit that interests me? I have a lot of trouble with material. I don’t like most comedies because I don’t like characters who try to win me over. I don’t like being ingratiated. I don’t like obsequiousness. I also have issues with movies where two people fall in love just because they’re the stars and their names are above the title. I could maybe do some gigantic mythological *Hero With a Thousand Faces*-type movie, but so many other people are doing that.

PLAYBOY: Superhero stuff?

FINCHER: I find it dull. I like to anticipate the energy of a movie audience that’s waiting for the curtain to come up and thinking, Well, one thing we don’t know about this guy is that we don’t know how bad it can get.

PLAYBOY: Things get really bad in your new thriller, *Gone Girl*, both for the audience sweating it out and for the ex-magazine journalist played by Ben Affleck, who keeps swearing he had nothing to do with his wealthy, blonde, apparently perfect wife’s disappearance. The book is famous for its twists and turns, so it’s tough to discuss the movie without spoiling it. You’re known for toying with audiences, but do you worry that the big international fan base for Gillian Flynn’s best-selling novel may be rocked by alterations you and she made for the movie version?

FINCHER: There are certainly a lot of elements in Gillian’s book that are well trod in my movies, like the procedural aspect, people putting together clues and things like that. It’s also a very naughty book. But my thought when I first read it was, Fuck, how do you throw away two thirds of this and still end up with the same journey? How do you still play with the Scott Peterson aspect [the notorious case in which Peterson murdered his pregnant wife]—which we all know is the jumping-off point—but make it about something bigger and more universal?

PLAYBOY: Bigger and more universal, such as...?

FINCHER: I think the movie works on a purely procedural level and on a purely page-turning-mystery level. But it has a real riptide to it, taking to task our cultural narcissism and who we think we are as good wives, good husbands, good Christians, good neighbors, good Americans, good patriots. Once you get fractal about every fissure in somebody’s public facade, you’re going to see stuff you wish you hadn’t. Can we hold ourselves to the same scrutiny to which we hold people we’ve never met? The great gift of Gillian, who’s very wry and bright, and the fun I’ve had on this movie was having a kindred spirit who likes the naughtiness of going, “You can have your cake and eat it too—but it’s *preachy* cake.”

PLAYBOY: The book also says dark, funny, troubling things about marriage.

FINCHER: I think Gillian’s book is talking about marriage and hiding it in an absurdist confection. When you peel back the layers and get to the kernel, you think, Wow, I feel queasy for a whole different set of reasons than I thought I would. Remember the 1970s *National Lampoon* record *That’s Not Funny, That’s Sick*? That was what I wanted to go for in terms of performance and tone. That and *Lolita*, because both are unbelievably funny and unbelievably naughty. They’re about disturbing ideas and very disturbed people and their facades of

normalcy. There are moments when you find yourself torn by what the characters in *Gone Girl* have done in service of their urges. They're kind of irredeemable and yet intensely human.

PLAYBOY: You're happily married, but you were previously married to, had a daughter with and divorced a woman who subsequently married and fought a very public and ugly divorce battle with actor Gary Oldman, who recently gave a forthright interview in *PLAYBOY*. Did any of your history and relationships come into play while directing *Gone Girl*?

FINCHER: Gary and I certainly have a shared history. I know him very well. In fact, I wanted to cast him in *Alien 3*, but we couldn't work it out—though, in hindsight, if we had, we probably would never have spoken to each other after that. Gary's not cruel. He's an incredibly thoughtful guy. I see him from time to time, but I haven't seen him in a while. I heard about the *Playboy Interview*, but I haven't read it yet. It shows you how pathetic it is that I don't know anything else that's going on when I'm in the bubble of finishing a movie.

PLAYBOY: Given your relationship with Pitt and considering how many actresses' names were floated to star in *Gone Girl*—including Charlize Theron, Natalie Portman, Reese Witherspoon and Emily Blunt—why did you choose Affleck and Rosamund Pike?

FINCHER: I offer everything to Brad, not because I'm pathetic but because he's good for so many things. Both Brad and Ben have a default "affable" setting. Neither wants you to be uncomfortable. You cast movies based on critical scenes. In *Gone Girl* there's a smile the guy has to give when the local press asks him to stand next to a poster of his missing wife. I flipped through Google Images and found about 50 shots of Affleck giving that kind of smile in public situations. You look at them and know he's trying to make people comfortable in the moment, but by doing that he's making himself vulnerable to people having other perceptions about him.

PLAYBOY: What kind of perceptions?

FINCHER: In Ben's case, what many people don't know is that he's crazy smart, but since he doesn't want that to get awkward, he downplays it. I'm sure when he was a 23-year-old and all this career-success shit was happening for him, he was like, "I just want to go to the after-party and meet J. Lo." I'm sure he said a lot of glib shit and people went, "Ugh, fake." If you have a lot of success when you're young and good-looking, you realize it's okay to let people write you off. It's the path of least resistance. You don't want to be snowbound with them anyway. I think he learned how to skate on charm. I needed somebody who not only knew how to do that but also understood the riptide of perceived reality as opposed to actual reality.

PLAYBOY: In casting the "girl" of the title, how familiar were you with Pike, the British beauty people may know from *An Education* and *Jack Reacher*?

FINCHER: I wanted Faye Dunaway in *Chinatown*, where you think, This person has experienced avenues of pain that no one can articulate. Or Faye in *Network*, where it's, You're never going to get to the bottom of this, so just stop. It's crazy how much Rosamund reminds me of Faye. I'd seen probably four or five things Rosamund had done, and I didn't have a good take on her. I realized why when I met her. She's odd. The role is really difficult and Rosamund was born to play it. There was a moment on the set when I overheard Rosamund asking Ben, "What do you think Fincher saw in me that he would cast me in this role?" Ben said, "Why don't we ask him?" I, of course, turned to Ben and said, "You should be asking the question, What did Fincher see in me that he wanted me for this role?" Because what we asked him

If you didn't get hugged enough as a kid, you won't find what you're looking for from me.

to do was "Open vise, insert testicles and turn" for the entire length of the movie. Ben and Rosamund are both great in it.

PLAYBOY: So far your *Gone Girl* cast has been mum, but other stars you've worked with, such as Daniel Craig, Robert Downey Jr. and Jake Gyllenhaal, have spoken about the experience as being tough but worth it, with you demanding many retakes of the same scene.

FINCHER: If you didn't get hugged enough as a kid, you won't find what you're looking for from me. That's not my gig and I'm not attuned to it. On *Zodiac* I had a conversation with Jake, and I said, "I guarantee I'm going to make a good movie out of this. You can decide if you want to be the weakest thing in it, or you can decide if you want to show up." Downey had an interesting relationship with Jake on that movie. I think he felt it was his job to point out how difficult it is to be a 24-year-old actor with a lot of eyes and expectations on you. In spite of all the drama about whether we were al-

lowing Jake to be the best version of himself because we were expecting so many iterations of his performance, to an extent I also felt that way about him. I also empathized with the wizened Downey looking back at himself in his *Less Than Zero* days and wanting a more nurturing influence for Jake.

PLAYBOY: Both Downey's and Gyllenhaal's complaints were about reshooting scenes over and over. What do you get on take 11, say, that you don't on take five?

FINCHER: Part of the promise when I work with actors is that we may be on take 11 and I'll say, "We certainly have a version that we can put in the movie that will make us all happy. But I want to do seven more and continue to push this idea. Let's see where it goes." Now, I may go back to them after those seven takes and say, "It was a complete fucking waste of effort, but I had to try because I feel there's something to be mined from this." That's a lot of extra work for an actor, and sometimes it pushes them out of their comfort zone. In some cases they're not getting paid as much as they would on another movie. I go out on a limb, and people work harder for me than they do for other people. But I want them to be happy with the fact that we were able to do something singular, something unlike anything else in their or my filmography.

PLAYBOY: Something that doesn't look much like anything else in your filmography is your big foray into television, the biting, juicy, inside-politics series *House of Cards*, starring Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright. The show has won a viewership and a slew of awards, put Netflix on the map and made binge watching the new normal.

FINCHER: Netflix is fucking righteous, so smart. I directed two episodes of *House of Cards* and also did the marketing. We were working with a tiny marketing budget, and I knew the cast, so I said, "Let's keep this really simple." I didn't want to drag Kevin away for three days to do a photo shoot, so we had the art department make that Lincoln chair, and we rolled it over in the corner, dropped Kevin in it and took a picture of him. It wasn't born of wanting to put talented photographers out of work as much as it was, "I think we can do this in an hour and a half because I can say to Kevin, 'Okay, that scene in episode 11, give me that look.'" We whacked this thing together and showed it to Netflix, and they said, "That looks great." I give all credit to Netflix. It was smartly done and very strategic, and they've been able to make a fairly big splash.

PLAYBOY: When *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* was about to hit theaters, some of the press focused on your mentor-protégée relationship with young actress Rooney Mara. Why do you think Mara's co-star Daniel Craig described the relationship as "fucking weird" in one magazine piece? *(continued on page 134)*



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FINCHER: The thing got cloud-seeded by way of one magazine story. Had that one journalist from *Vogue* delved as deeply into why people were behaving the way they were as he did into what shoes they were wearing, we might have gotten some insight. But it was more interesting for him to do a Tippi Hedren—Alfred Hitchcock sort of thing. From the beginning I said to the Sony publicity people that the purpose of plucking someone like Rooney from obscurity is that they walk on-screen and you immediately believe who the fuck they are, rather than, “You were on *Gossip Girl*, right?” Rooney will tell you that I let her do anything she wanted. But it seemed counter to what we were trying to do to see her on the cover of *Seventeen* or being trotted out on every television show to go, “Here she is, cute as a fucking button and not at all this goth Swedish punker.” I said, “I think this is absurd,” but it didn’t move the needle in any way. The Sony publicity people were frustrated with my getting in the way of the exploitation of the character Lisbeth Salander.

PLAYBOY: Do you know if any actors have backed away from working with you because of what they think you’re like?

FINCHER: I’m sure there are people who think I bite the heads off puppies. There’s nothing I can do about that. The relationships that matter to me are always with people who wouldn’t have preconceived notions based on somebody’s work. I gave up worrying about that years ago. I remember giving a quote, “I’ve got demons you can’t even imagine.” It was a joke. It was fun. It was out of context. My parents were always concerned about things I was quoted as saying. My dad thought for a time that I was playing into it.

PLAYBOY: Let’s talk about your parents and your home life. You were born in Denver, but when you were two your family moved to California, eventually settling down in San Anselmo in Marin County. What was it like growing up there in the 1960s and 1970s, when the area became synonymous with progressive thought, self-expression and a relaxed view toward drugs and sex?

FINCHER: It was a bizarre, great place to grow up in during that time, with the human potential movement, EST, a lot of drugs and a lot of mixed messages, like “We want you kids to feel free to do whatever you want, just not that.” There was always the potential for suffocating liberation. As absurd as it sounds, the movie with Martin Mull and Tuesday Weld, *Serial*, was a prescient and truthful view of Marin County—a place people think of as affluent, but at the time it wasn’t. I grew up before the yuppies, before the Me decade, before “Greed is good.” It was never “What are you driving?” I was a latchkey kid. I’d put a note on the fridge, “I’m going to Chris’s house” or “I’m spending the night.” No GPS, no cell phones. You were trusted. People had a much healthier attitude toward a lot of things.

PLAYBOY: Including sex?

FINCHER: We talked about sex from the time I was eight or nine. I don’t think there was any confusion about what people were up to from the time I was in second or third grade. There were a lot of drugs. One of my dad’s friends was Thomas Thompson, a writer for *Life* magazine who also wrote the book *Richie: The Ultimate Tragedy Between One Decent Man and the Son He Loved*, about a man who killed his son who was on drugs. I had friends with older brothers who were well on their way to being strung out.

PLAYBOY: Did you really slather your sister’s dolls in ketchup and hurl them onto the freeway?

FINCHER: I did, because we thought it was funny. We used to egg cars and do all that kind of stupid shit, and it did escalate to all kinds of lunacy. No one was ever injured. I’ve gotten into a lot of trouble talking about that. You do a lot of dumb shit when you’re 10 or 12.

PLAYBOY: Your father also wrote for *Life*, among other magazines, right?

FINCHER: He was a reporter and then a *Life*

bureau chief. He quit to write nonfiction books on human intelligence, left-handedness and hundreds of magazine stories for *Reader’s Digest*, *Psychology Today*, *Sports Illustrated*. Later in his life he wrote a couple of screenplays. He also wrote a novel that he burned in front of my mother. That’s a story I was told and it has probably been hyperbolized, by me. But it’s who he was. He wanted to get it right.

PLAYBOY: Your mother worked in mental health, specializing in treating drug addiction. Were drugs attractive or scary?

FINCHER: I’ve definitely been there with my friend in high school on a sodden, rainy, pouring-down night after we’d drunk a bottle of really bad champagne stolen from a restaurant he worked at. I remember trying to keep his mom’s Corolla station wagon from slipping off a cliff. I’ve done all that stupid crap. It’s not to say I didn’t do my share, but there was no allure for me to see where experimentation could take you. My mom ran a methadone maintenance program, after all. Besides my mom’s work, I have too much of a work ethic to disappear into that space.

I had a normal teenage life. The only difference was that by the time I was 19, I was working six days a week, 14 hours a day for Industrial Light & Magic.

PLAYBOY: What brought you to a place where you’d be working at the George Lucas-owned, premier visual effects company in the world?

FINCHER: I was the guy who waited in line to see *The Empire Strikes Back*. I was the kid who didn’t read the *Time* magazine article about *Jaws* because I was not going to let that fuck it up for me. My dad took me to movie matinees. Movies were all I wanted to do. And I grew up in a perfect time and a perfect place, with all this incredible stuff happening around me.

PLAYBOY: Like what?

FINCHER: George Lucas lived two doors down from my house. I saw *American Graffiti* being photographed on Fourth Street in San Rafael. They were making *The Godfather* on Shady Lane in Ross, California. *Dirty Harry* was being shot at Larkspur Landing. By the time I was 14 I was on my way to a high school that had film courses, 16-millimeter cameras and double-system sound recording. I couldn’t wait.



PLAYBOY: So your career path probably hasn't surprised your childhood friends from Marin.

FINCHER: I still have a handful of friends from there—the most cynical, perverse, sardonic, funny, irreverent, ruthless people. They're dark and sinister but wrapped in this perfectly humane, affable package. They get the cosmic joke. I always wonder, Was it something in the water? Or maybe it was being eight years old and having people say, "Okay, if your school bus gets the tires shot out of it, just stay on the bus. The Zodiac killer has sworn that he's going to pick off the little kiddies." My dad was super dry in his delivery, like nothing was ever cause for alarm. He'd say, "Oh, Dave, you should know there's a homicidal maniac who has written to the *San Francisco Chronicle*." Years later, when we were making *Zodiac*, I remember the opening scene of the movie wasn't working until [music supervisor] George Drakoulias brought me Three Dog Night's version of the song "Easy to Be Hard," from *Hair*. We put that music over the scene, and it was like I was in Black Point and could smell the eucalyptus. I was suddenly in 1965, in a green Impala with a huge backseat and a steel dashboard, like I was transported. I've harbored bizarre dreams of returning, but you can't, you know? Sausalito's not the same thing it was in 1976.

PLAYBOY: Did you pursue your moviemaking passion once you hit high school?

FINCHER: My parents became disenchanted with Marin just when I was about to enter high school. They were a little too Midwestern and reticent to succumb to Marin's kind of grooviness. They came back from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival convinced that the three of us kids would love southern Oregon, so they moved us there. I was on the cusp of doing what I wanted to do, and to have it snatched from me was like being choked out of the perfect environment.

PLAYBOY: Did you act out because of it?

FINCHER: I always sort of acted out, but I wasn't a bad kid. Once I realized my parents weren't going to come to their senses, I knew the only way out of there was going to be on me. I wouldn't be able to be in the film business in southern Oregon and

wouldn't witness the things I'd been seeing. So instead, as this scrawny drama nerd who always wanted to be a director, I developed my own curriculum and executed it.

PLAYBOY: What kind of jobs did you have as a kid?

FINCHER: For most of high school, after school until six, I would work on plays and design sets and lighting. From six until 12:30 or one I would rush off to the local second-run movie theater, where I was a non-union projectionist. I got to watch movies for free, hundreds of times. That was a great job for someone who loved movies, because I got to see *Being There*, *All That Jazz* and *1941* 180 times. Of course, I also had to watch things like *Audrey Rose* 180 times. On Saturdays I worked at KOB

science fiction movies." My dad, who was big on taking long, deep breaths while thinking about things, said probably the most important thing ever: "Well, what if that doesn't work out?" I was kind of like, "Fuck you. I'm not thinking about plan B."

PLAYBOY: Your career pretty much followed that trajectory you laid out as a kid—except for the making-sequels part.

FINCHER: I went back to Marin, where my younger sister had done voice-overs for [filmmaker] John Korty, and I got a production assistant job with him—moving Xerox machines, mopping floors, helping rewire animation stands. I rose very quickly in the ranks because of my work ethic. I was doing effects animation, shooting some second-unit stuff and becoming a visual-effects producer. I met wildly talented, inspirational people there. It was kind of a great film school, though some people were definitely like, "Who the fuck does this 18-year-old think he is?"

PLAYBOY: What did your parents make of the fact that within a few years you were directing commercials for some of the biggest clients in the world?

FINCHER: When I was making commercials for Nike, Chanel and Pepsi, I think my parents thought I was doing stuff like "Come on down to Waterbed Warehouse." That was their idea of what television commercials were, so that's what they thought I was doing. My dad was an Okie and my mom was from South Dakota, and because they had a very different view of what one could expect,

they wanted to protect me from disappointment. I think it clicked after we started Propaganda Films, and they started to think, Oh wow, he's okay financially.

PLAYBOY: Propaganda was a very successful music video and moviemaking company that you, Dominic Sena and others launched in 1986 and which boosted the feature-film careers of interesting directors such as Spike Jonze and Antoine Fuqua, among many others.

FINCHER: It's weird. Ceán and I were talking about our daughter, who is 20 now. That's the age I was when I directed my first television commercial. The idea of walking in the door, rolling up my sleeves and saying, "Okay, here's what the next 10 hours are about. For the first shot, we're

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in Medford, a local television news station, as a kind of production assistant. I would lug incredibly unwieldy cameras to shoot location stuff, like when there was a barn on fire or something like that. I also had jobs as a fry cook, busboy, dishwasher.

PLAYBOY: Were your parents down with all this?

FINCHER: When I was about 15 or 16, they sat me down and said, "We want to know where you think you're going and what you think you're going to do." I laid it out for them: "After high school I'm going to move back down to Marin. I want to eventually get a job working at Industrial Light & Magic. From there, I'm going to make television commercials and move to Los Angeles. Then I'd like to make sequels to my favorite

going to....” That doesn’t seem so weird or different to me, because that was me at the age of 20. And yet I would have a hard time listening to a 20-year-old tell me, “Here’s what we’re going to be doing.”

PLAYBOY: You directed some of Madonna’s most stylish videos, such as “Vogue” and “Bad Girl,” the latter depicting the singer as a film noir femme fatale who gets strangled with panty hose. Why do you think that Madonna never translated to the big screen?

FINCHER: Madonna is very crafty. She’s street-smart. The video directors who did the best work with her—romantic, amazing stuff like what Jean-Baptiste Mondino did—were the ones she allowed to take risks and the ones who made videos she would throw herself into. I made commercials to make money, but I did music videos as a kind of film school. I learned that the way to be with Madonna was to follow her impetus, because the artist in a music video is not only the star but also the studio. I could say to Madonna, “I need you to do it again. I need you to stop blinking. I need you to get your fucking chin down. And I need you to be better.” Whether it was Madonna, Brad Pitt or Ben Affleck, I’m well aware that the work got financed because of them. But they needed to know I had to get them off their mark, get them to a place where it might get warm, because there might be friction.

PLAYBOY: How do you look back on directing your first feature movie, *Alien 3*?

FINCHER: I was a 27-year-old rube trying to navigate an impervious bureaucracy. It was an absurd and obscene daily battle to do anything interesting with what we were allowed to do. It was the same studio but very different players when I made *Fight Club*. There were 80 corporate people who, for all the

right reasons, became terrified of what the movie became. The biggest tipping point was, “God, the movie’s so homoerotic,” and that was a real problem for them. At the time, it was incendiary, but I look back on it now and it’s so fucking tame, it’s almost a TV movie.

PLAYBOY: After that movie, did guys try to fight you, to take you on just for fun?

FINCHER: I’m not tough, but I’m mean. I think people know I’m way too vindictive to try that shit.

PLAYBOY: If any movie divides your ferociously partisan fanboy base it’s *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*—a deeply emotional, odd movie clearly made by someone who has grappled with death and the passage of time.

FINCHER: I’d never made a movie with that big a body count. Everybody dies. And the truth of the matter is everyone is going to die, yet we spend so much time ignoring that fact.

PLAYBOY: Whose death has most affected you?

FINCHER: My father died in 2003, and I’d never been with someone when they died before. Almost all the decision-making I’d done in my life was in hopes of pleasing him or reacting against the things I felt he was shortsighted about. All of a sudden there was no north anymore, only south, east and west. When I read Eric Roth’s draft of the script, it felt as though it was talking about an experience I’d had. Everybody kept saying the character was a little passive, and I was like, “My dad was a little passive. People do go through their entire lives being passive.” *Benjamin Button* is a bit of a dirge. I thought it was beautiful. I thought it was an accomplishment.

PLAYBOY: What do you think happens after death?

FINCHER: When my father was sick, starting his chemo and puttering around our house

after moving from Oregon to L.A., I could tell when he was about to appear at the bottom of the steps even if I didn’t hear him. Of course, I knew him so intimately. When he passed I could tell he was no longer in the room. I was profoundly aware that the frequency he was on was suddenly gone. I’ve never been a religious person. I’ve always felt that the responsibility we have to one another should transcend punishment, that you should do what you feel is right because it’s right, not because you’re going to be scalded forevermore. I hope the ether is out there somewhere and all the star children pass on knowledge, experience, forgiveness, whatever.

PLAYBOY: How do you assess *The Social Network*, a movie many people thought deserved to win the best picture Oscar over *The King’s Speech*?

FINCHER: It’s as close to a John Hughes movie as I can make. For me that was stepping outside my comfort zone by showing nerds in their natural habitat. People said, “Oh, you’re making a Facebook movie?” as if we were capitalizing on a trend or doing a Linda Blair *Roller Boogie* roller-disco movie after disco was dead. I was able to say to the studio, “There are no movie stars in this, just kids between 20 and 25.” It was incredibly fun and freeing to be able to just put the best people in those roles.

PLAYBOY: For better or worse, over the years lots of Fincher projects have been announced and then vanished, including a top-chef project meant to star Keanu Reeves and a Steve Jobs movie with a script by Aaron Sorkin, who won an Oscar for writing *The Social Network*. But the most intriguing was a proposed remake of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

FINCHER: Dude, it was fucking cool. It was smart and crazy entertaining, with the *Nautilus* crew fighting every kind of gigantic Ray Harryhausen thing. But it also had this rip-tide to it. We were doing Osama bin Nemo, a Middle Eastern prince from a wealthy family who has decided that white imperialism is evil and should be resisted. The notion was to put kids in a place where they’d say, “I agree with everything he espouses. I take issue with his means—or his ends.” I really wanted to do it, but in the end I didn’t have the stomach lining for it. A lot of people flourish at Hollywood studios because they’re fear-based. I have a hard time relating to that, because I feel our biggest responsibility is to give the audience something they haven’t seen. For example, Gillian Flynn and I are doing *Utopia* [about fans of a cult graphic novel] for HBO, and that’s all I’m focusing on next year.

PLAYBOY: In the end, what do you most want people to know about you?

FINCHER: Studios treat audiences like lemmings, like cattle in a stockyard. I don’t want to ask actors or anyone else on a movie to work so hard with me if the studios treat us as though we’re making Big Macs. *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* is not a Big Mac. *Gone Girl* is not a Big Mac. This TV show I’m doing about music videos in the 1980s and the crew members who worked on them, or this other show, a *Sunset Boulevard* set in the world of soaps—they’re not Big Macs. I don’t make Big Macs.



“Serf’s up!”

