

# PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: JAMES CAMERON

*A candid conversation with the director of Avatar about huge blockbusters, fake sexy women, learning to be a nicer guy and reinventing the way movies are made*

This past August 21, film writer, producer and director James Cameron rolled the dice in a big way. The date was widely advertised, and not modestly, as *Avatar Day*, and it marked free public previews in IMAX theaters worldwide of 16 minutes of Cameron's latest movie—a \$200 million-plus science-fiction epic about a battle royal between human invaders and inhabitants of a faraway planet—rendered in what is being touted as cutting-edge photorealistic computer-graphics-generated 3-D and an astonishing sense of audience immersion. The hype and curiosity surrounding *Avatar* led audiences to expect nothing less than the *Second Coming*. After all, directors Steven Spielberg and Steven Soderbergh had already raved about the excerpts in print (the latter saying it was “the craziest shit ever”), and director Jon Favreau called it “a game changer.” Sony's boss claimed it would “change the way you consume entertainment.” Hyperbolic fans predicted on the web that the first film in 12 years from the director of such pop culture milestones as *The Terminator*, *Aliens* and *Titanic* would “fuck our eyeballs.”

So roughly four months before *Avatar*'s December 18 opening date, audiences got a chance to see—and weigh in—for themselves. And weigh in they did, instantly spattering and pontificating on Twitter, Facebook and scores of other Internet outposts. Some mentioned half-empty theaters. Many were dazzled and left panting for more. But others,

in what can best be described as a mixed response, were left with their eyeballs intact and virginal.

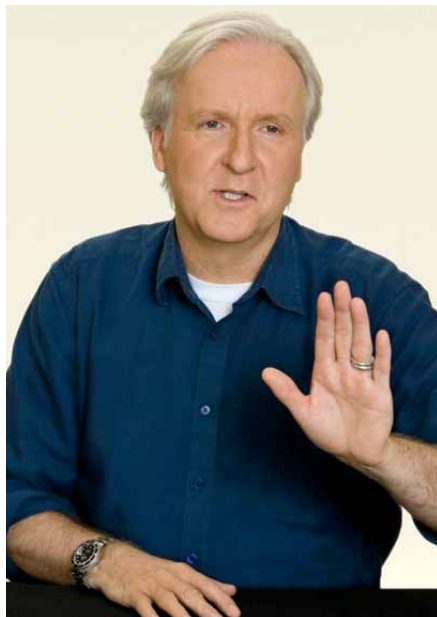
Cameron, fit, focused and immeasurably wealthy at the age of 55, is accustomed to being second-guessed. Few, at least in Hollywood, had expected all that much from the Canadian-born former pastry apprentice whose father was an electrical engineer and mother a nurse and an artist. In 1971 the family moved to Fullerton, California, where Cameron majored in physics at nearby California State University, Fullerton. Torn between his love of films, sci-fi and science, he supported himself by working as a truck driver while making short amateur action and sci-fi movies with his friends. In 1980 he landed work in and around the thriving basement-budget moviemaking scene presided over by Roger Corman.

Things looked way up in 1984 when Cameron wrote and directed a futuristic action thriller for which few had great expectations—*The Terminator*. It became a huge success, made a bona fide star of the unlikely Arnold Schwarzenegger and cemented Cameron's relationship with co-writer and producer Gale Anne Hurd, Corman's former executive assistant, who in 1985 became Cameron's second wife (they divorced in 1989). From there Cameron continued to exceed expectations by directing some of the biggest and most admired financial successes of the 1980s and 1990s, including *Aliens*, *True Lies*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*

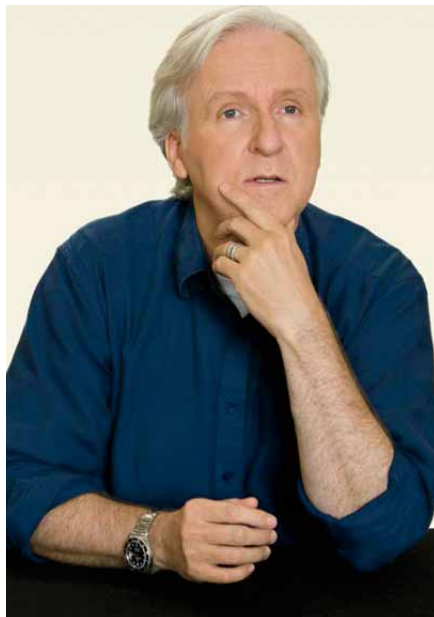
and *The Abyss*. *Doom* was predicted in 1997 for the crushingly expensive, troubled production of *Titanic*, yet it went on to become a phenomenon, made a movie idol out of Leonardo DiCaprio and won 11 Oscars, including a best director award for Cameron. His Oscar ceremony declaration “I'm the king of the world!” raised eyebrows, but that's the kind of thing you can get away with when you've created Hollywood's all-time biggest moneymaker.

Cameron earned a reputation for being a taskmaster, tough on his crews and actors, manic in his attention to detail and quest for perfection. Wild and woolly stories emerged from his sets of mutinous crews and actors vowing never to work with him again. But he seemed untouchable and unstoppable, co-founding a special-effects company, *Digital Domain*, and avoiding the ready-made projects Hollywood offered him. Instead, in 2002 Cameron, an avid diver, launched into a series of undersea documentaries such as *Expedition Bismarck* and *Ghosts of the Abyss* that explore legendary sunken ruins. Some speculated *Titanic*'s freak success had given him a permanent case of director's block.

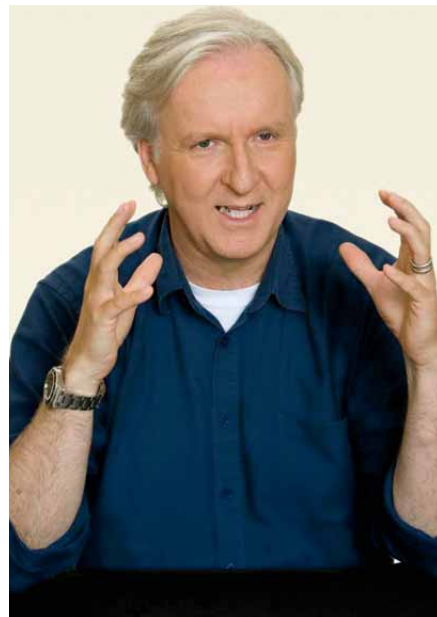
Now the five-time-married Cameron is about to resurface. PLAYBOY sent Contributing Editor **Stephen Rebello** to Cameron's Malibu mansion to investigate where the director has been and where he's headed. Says Rebello, who last interviewed Benicio Del Toro, “This was the kind of interview that at first I thought the intense Cameron may



“My dad treated science fiction as if it was porn. He used to throw my comics and science-fiction books in the trash because he considered them mental junk. I'd go out, wipe off the coffee grounds and read them under the covers at night.”



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“If you ever go to a 25th high school reunion, make sure that you've made the world's highest-grossing movie, won 11 Academy Awards and become physically bigger than most of those guys who used to beat you up.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIZUNO

*bolt up and expect me to go deep-sea diving, arm wrestle or book passage on an interplanetary flight. But he relaxed and was gentlemanly, and although he's known for playing it close to the vest, he loosened up and showed himself to be funnier, hipper and even smarter than you may imagine."*

**PLAYBOY:** Your new movie *Avatar*'s stereoscopic 3-D and CGI have people in the film industry and the media comparing its technological breakthrough to the birth of sound and color film. They've also predicted the movie could become a cultural phenomenon. Are you worried about Internet fans who have posted snarky comments about the preview footage shown in theaters in August?

**CAMERON:** The ones who were the most vocally negative will be there opening night, I promise you. The ones I worry about are those who haven't heard of the movie. We know from the exit polling that the response was 95 percent ecstatic. Most of the five percent negative response is from the fanatic fans who imagined the movie in their minds but now have to deal with *my* movie.

**PLAYBOY:** Does this prejudgment remind you of 1997, when people predicted big failure for *Titanic* because it took so long to make, busted its budget and had no big stars?

**CAMERON:** They know *Avatar* is expensive, but that story hasn't gathered any traction because—what the fuck?—I always make expensive movies, people always like them, and people always want me to do it again.

**PLAYBOY:** How will you react if critics come gunning for you?

**CAMERON:** *Avatar* is made very consciously for movie fans. If critics like it, fine. I can't say I won't read the reviews, because I may not be able to resist. I spent a couple of decades in the capricious world of being judged by those not knowledgeable about the depth and history of film and with whom I would not want to have a conversation—with a few notable exceptions. Why would I want to be judged by them? For me, this past decade has been about retreating to the great fundamentals, things that aren't passing fads or subject to the whims of some idiot critic. You can't write a review of the laws of thermodynamics.

**PLAYBOY:** Moviegoers have already been wowed by lifelike CG and motion-capture characters such as Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*. Will your blue-skinned aliens and gigantic monsters satisfy jaded audiences?

**CAMERON:** Ultimately audiences don't give a rat's ass how a movie is made. When people see the movie, the story will be about the world of the planet Pandora, the creatures on it, the characters—such as the former Marine and amputee played by Sam Worthington—and the huge conflict between the humans and the inhabitants of Pandora. How does it move you? How emotional is it? It's pretty damn emotional and dramatic. That said, I think we certainly exceeded our expectations in making these characters feel real.

**PLAYBOY:** Audiences may not give a rat's ass about how a movie is made, but didn't

you have to wait a decade before special effects technology could accommodate what you had in mind?

**CAMERON:** Here I was the CEO of a major digital effects company, Lightstorm, which was designed to create fantasy CG characters and was not doing that, so I said, "I'll write a script that is beyond state of the art, we'll make it, and it will force us to become a world leader in effects." Everybody looked at what I had in mind and said I was crazy. In the wake of *Titanic* I saw how much a project can go off the rails, and I got a little more conservative about taking risks. So I put *Avatar* away because no one had yet accomplished the photo reality and human emotional expression we needed until Peter Jackson cracked the code with Gollum and *King Kong*. And Industrial Light & Magic was doing it in a completely different way in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. With *Avatar* it's okay if the characters aren't perfect. Who knows what aliens are supposed to look like?

**PLAYBOY:** How is film technology influencing how we process reality?

**CAMERON:** Human society and human consciousness are evolving before our eyes in an unprecedented, historic way as we

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*I won't make a movie if I think I won't be tested and it won't be grueling for me, the crew, the actors. Anybody who signs on is going to be tested. There are challenges.*

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adopt and integrate with our machines. Typically people don't know when they're making history, but we are definitely making history right now, for better or worse.

**PLAYBOY:** You're a major techie, but does any current tech toy elude you?

**CAMERON:** On Twitter, a tweet has to be less than, what, 25 words? [Editor's note: It's 140 characters maximum.] There isn't one concept I would be interested in discussing with anyone that could be summed up in 25 words or fewer. I'm totally not into Facebook or Twitter, so that makes me a dinosaur right there.

**PLAYBOY:** Sigourney Weaver's character Ellen Ripley in your film *Aliens* is a powerful sex icon, and you may have created another in *Avatar* with a barely dressed, blue-skinned, 10-foot-tall warrior who fiercely defends herself and the creatures of her planet. Even without state-of-the-art special effects, Zoe Saldana—who voices and models the character for CG morphing—is hot.

**CAMERON:** Let's be clear. There is a classification above hot, which is "smoking hot." She is smoking hot.

**PLAYBOY:** Did any of your teenage erotic icons inspire the character Saldana plays?

**CAMERON:** As a young kid, when I saw Raquel Welch in that skintight white latex suit in *Fantastic Voyage*—that's all she wrote. Also, Vampirella was so hot I used to buy every comic I could get my hands on. The fact she didn't exist didn't bother me because we have these quintessential female images in our mind, and in the case of the male mind, they're grossly distorted. When you see something that reflects your id, it works for you.

**PLAYBOY:** So Saldana's character was specifically designed to appeal to guys' ids?

**CAMERON:** And they won't be able to control themselves. They will have actual lust for a character that consists of pixels of ones and zeros. You're never going to meet her, and if you did, she's 10 feet tall and would snap your spine. The point is, 99.9 percent of people aren't going to meet any of the movie actresses they fall in love with, so it doesn't matter if it's Neytiri or Michelle Pfeiffer.

**PLAYBOY:** We seem to need fantasy icons like Lara Croft and Wonder Woman, despite knowing they mess with our heads.

**CAMERON:** Most of men's problems with women probably have to do with realizing women are real and most of them don't look or act like Vampirella. A big recalibration happens when we're forced to deal with real women, and there's a certain geek population that would much rather deal with fantasy women than real women. Let's face it: Real women are complicated. You can try your whole life and not understand them.

**PLAYBOY:** How much did you get into calibrating your movie heroine's hotness?

**CAMERON:** Right from the beginning I said, "She's got to have tits," even though that makes no sense because her race, the Na'vi, aren't placental mammals. I designed her costumes based on a *taparrabo*, a loinloth thing worn by Mayan Indians. We go to another planet in this movie, so it would be stupid if she ran around in a Brazilian thong or a fur bikini like Raquel Welch in *One Million Years B.C.*

**PLAYBOY:** Are her breasts on view?

**CAMERON:** I came up with this free-floating, lion's-maned array of feathers, and we strategically lit and angled shots to not draw attention to her breasts, but they're right there. The animation uses a physics-based sim that takes into consideration gravity, air movement and the momentum of her hair, her top. We had a shot in which Neytiri falls into a specific position, and because she is lit by orange firelight, it lights up the nipples. That was good, except we're going for a PG-13 rating, so we wound up having to fix it. We'll have to put it on the special edition DVD; it will be a collector's item. A Neytiri **PLAYBOY** Centerfold would have been a good idea.

**PLAYBOY:** So you're okay with arousing PG-13 chubbies?

**CAMERON:** If such a thing should happen—and I'm not saying it will—that would be fine.

**PLAYBOY:** You reunited with Sigourney





# WORKING TITLE

**JAMES CAMERON CHANGED THE ORIGINAL NAME OF TWO OF HIS FILMS. WE'LL TELL YOU ABOUT ONE; YOU GUESS THE OTHER**  
**BY ROCKY RAKOVIC**

*Avatar* has been a decade in the making, but for much of that time it was referred to by its working title, *Project 880*. Doesn't have quite the same ring to it as *Avatar*, right? It's not unusual for filmmakers to do a last-minute title switch: *Snakes on a Plane* was supposed to be called *Pacific Air Flight 121* until Samuel L. Jackson put his foot down. Think you can match the blockbuster to the name they almost put on the movie poster?

- |                             |                                 |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. TITANIC                  | A. BLACK MASK                   |
| 2. ANNIE HALL               | B. SCARY MOVIE                  |
| 3. CASABLANCA               | C. ROPE BURNS                   |
| 4. PRETTY WOMAN             | D. \$3,000                      |
| 5. E.T.                     | E. HOW THE SOLAR SYSTEM WAS WON |
| 6. UNFORGIVEN               | F. GOD                          |
| 7. WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT? | G. A BOY'S LIFE                 |
| 8. DOGMA                    | H. THE GREATEST GIFT            |
| 9. SCREAM                   | I. IT HAD TO BE JEW             |
| 10. PULP FICTION            | J. DEAD TOONS DON'T PAY BILLS   |
| 11. PSYCHO                  | K. NOT TONIGHT, JOSEPHINE!      |
| 12. MILLION DOLLAR BABY     | L. EVERYONE COMES TO RICK'S     |
| 13. SOME LIKE IT HOT        | M. INFERNAL AFFAIRS             |
| 14. THE DEPARTED            | N. WIMPY                        |
| 15. IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE   | O. THE CUT WHORE KILLINGS       |
| 16. 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY   | P. THE SHIP OF DREAMS           |

ANSWER KEY. 1-P; 2-I; 3-L; 4-D; 5-G; 6-O; 7-J; 8-F; 9-B (SERIOUSLY); 10-A; 11-N; 12-C; 13-K; 14-M; 15-H; 16-E.

Weaver for the first time since *Aliens*, over 20 years ago. What took you so long?  
**CAMERON:** She was my safest casting choice to play the botanist, which is why I didn't want to cast her. I woke up one day and said, Don't be a dumb shit; she'll be perfect. Sig is worthy of awe, but she's also goofy, funny, deeply committed to acting, wicked smart and really sweet. There's no gun porn around her character in this film like there was for Ripley in *Aliens*, and she doesn't have big clanging brass balls. Instead, she has a scholarly hippie dowdiness that makes her look as though she no longer fits civilization—a little like Dian Fossey, which is interesting because I had originally gotten Sig into the Fossey movie *Gorillas in the Mist*; I bailed, but she stuck with the project. I'm really happy with the cast. We went way out on a limb casting Sam Worthington, but he came through for us. So did Zoe. As for Sigourney, we get along great because I don't have to be demanding with her; she is highly demanding of herself and me.  
**PLAYBOY:** You have a rep for being demanding of everyone you work with. Ed Harris is rumored to have punched you on *The Abyss* and was quoted as saying the strain of making that 1989 movie had actors hurling couches out windows and smashing walls. Kate Winslet said making *Titanic* had her thinking, Please, God, let me die—and she nearly drowned.  
**CAMERON:** I'll cop to my faults, but I'll also defend the situation in a rational way, and it goes like this: Isn't the purpose of being attracted to something intense and challenging—such as, say, white-water rafting—to come out the other side and tell everybody how you almost died? It doesn't mean you almost died. We simply let Kate *think* she was nearly drowning. A little sputtering and coughing does not count in my book, because I have almost drowned several times and know what it feels like. Asking God to please let you die? I was thinking the same thing at about the same point. *Titanic* was a catastrophic production financially and getting worse every day. Kate probably got some unnecessary stress from me, but I would say 99 percent of her stress was internally induced as part of her acting process.  
**PLAYBOY:** You're saying she was telling the press post-white-water-rafting stories?  
**CAMERON:** The real question is "Would she work with me again?" I'm sure it would have to be the right material and all those things, but my guess is, absolutely. I'd certainly work with her again; she's very talented. Whereas Leo DiCaprio switches his acting on and off like a faucet, Kate's acting process is to internalize all this stuff and use it. She was carrying the whole burden of this enormous production on her back. I probably didn't do enough to wrap the actors in cotton wool. The part of directing I wasn't good at—and probably still am not the best at, although I'm better now—is the personal touch: letting people know you appreciate what they're doing. Personally, I could not have oper-

ated under my direction back then; my pride wouldn't have allowed it.  
**PLAYBOY:** Have you ever thrown or taken a punch on a movie set?  
**CAMERON:** Absolutely not. It would be an alien concept for me. But I won't make a movie if I think I won't be tested and it won't be grueling for me, the crew, the actors. Anybody who signs on is going to be tested. So there are challenges, but it gets misconstrued that there was gross irresponsibility on the part of the production to put people into that situation, when in fact they wanted to be right there.  
**PLAYBOY:** Some heard your "I'm king of the world" speech after winning the best director Oscar as a sure sign of a highly developed ego.  
**CAMERON:** *Titanic* was wildly celebrated on every possible level, so sure, I knew how good that felt. It was almost like back in the 1980s when I got a taste of coke. That door opened a crack, and I saw a glimpse of what it was like to have something more powerful than you that you have to answer to. I put it down in, like, a week when most people—everybody around me—didn't. Getting a glimpse through that door and seeing that accolades can be so capriciously withdrawn made me know I didn't want to base my self-value on that.  
**PLAYBOY:** How has working with underwater exploration crews instead of film crews in the past decade changed you?  
**CAMERON:** People who have worked with me before think I'm just as crazy, but I think I've come back to moviemaking with a different perspective. On all my films prior to *Avatar*, the film was the one god you had to serve. Getting involved with NASA and various space projects and doing underwater exploration, I got to meet not only a diversity of people but also a diversity of cultures of thought. It was sobering and necessary to see that what we do in Hollywood means almost nothing to them. I look around the Hollywood landscape and see people who can't or don't want to exist outside that bubble. I don't want to be one of them. Now I see moviemaking as officially a job.  
**PLAYBOY:** What aspects of Hollywood megasuccess made you want to climb into submersibles and film documentaries starring sunken ships, instead of movies starring Leonardo DiCaprio?  
**CAMERON:** I made *Titanic* because I wanted to dive to the shipwreck, not because I particularly wanted to make the movie. The *Titanic* was the Mount Everest of shipwrecks, and as a diver I wanted to do it right. When I learned some other guys had dived to the *Titanic* to make an IMAX movie, I said, "I'll make a Hollywood movie to pay for an expedition and do the same thing." I loved that first taste, and I wanted more.  
**PLAYBOY:** So *Titanic* was a means to an end.  
**CAMERON:** *Titanic* was about "fuck you" money. It came along at a point in my life when I said, "I can make movies until I'm 80, but I can't do expedition stuff when I'm 80." My father was an engineer. I had

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studied to be an engineer and had a mental restlessness to live the life I had turned my back on when I switched from the sciences to the arts in college.

**PLAYBOY:** You've been a diver for years. When you make so many potentially dangerous exploration dives, how much are your wife and kids on your mind?

**CAMERON:** Whenever we tout one of our documentary films we sort of emphasize the risk or that we're going into unexplored territory, doing things few have done. The reality is it's pretty darn safe. Having said that, it can be quite white-knuckle when something unexpected happens. I've spoken at NASA seminars and symposia about the nature of risk because I make action movies and have managed to lead seven deep-ocean expeditions with no fatalities or significant injuries. And my films have been relatively injury-free—well below the industry average—because we have a pretty rigorous approach to safety.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you observe any rituals when you're about to climb into a submersible?

**CAMERON:** You don't want to put a big emphasis on it because you're there to do a job and stay focused. But every time I close the hatch of a submersible I say to whoever is gathered to see us off, "I'll see you in the sunshine." Of course there's no sunshine down there, so to say that means you're coming back to the surface. On most of our dives we come back at night because we stay way too long, and the only people waiting are a couple of bored deckhands. By that time the people who were waving and wishing you luck 16 hours earlier are asleep somewhere or drunk in their cabin.

**PLAYBOY:** As you mentioned, your father was an electrical engineer. Your mother was an artist and a nurse. How are you most like and most unlike them?

**CAMERON:** I'm a pretty representative fusion of their DNA, a Mendelian genetics experiment gone well. That created a lot of tension, though, because my father was very authoritarian and pragmatic, but my mom had a romantic sense of wanting to head for the hills, to explore. My mom used to nurture what I was about by taking me to the Royal Ontario Museum to draw. My idea of a great weekend was to spend it drawing, going hiking or building something, like a medieval siege engine.

**PLAYBOY:** You came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s. How did your parents view the sexual revolution, drugs and the antiwar movement?

**CAMERON:** They were pretty much against everything. I can't think of anything my dad was for except hockey. He used to throw my comics and science-fiction books in the trash because he considered them mental junk. I'd go

out, wipe off the coffee grounds and spaghetti and read them under the covers at night. He treated science fiction as if it was porn. I actually don't think I had any porn, but I had the occasional **PLAYBOY** I kept well hidden.

**PLAYBOY:** You spent your first 17 years in Canada. Do you ever feel Canadian?

**CAMERON:** I went back to get an honorary degree at a Canadian university. When everybody stood and sang the national anthem, I stood onstage in front of a thousand Canadians just moving my lips because I had forgotten the words. I was never into the national anthem and never even went to a football game in high school, so I never had occasion to sing it.

**PLAYBOY:** You weren't a high school jock?

**CAMERON:** In a small, very jocky school I was president of the science club, which consisted of me, some other lab rats and a Czechoslovakian girl who could barely speak English. I had been accelerated twice in elementary school, so I was two years younger than everybody and small. I hung out with the smart, wide-bell-bottomed, paisley-shirt, hair-down-the-middle-of-your-back counterculture rejects. I didn't do drugs and looked like an accountant. Jocks would come up to me in the hall and punch me for no reason.

**PLAYBOY:** Have you since run into any of those guys?

**CAMERON:** Yes, and if you ever go to a 25th high school reunion, make sure that in the previous two months you've made the world's highest-grossing movie, won 11 Academy Awards and become physically bigger than most of those guys who used to beat you up. I walked up to them one by one and said, "You know, I could take your ass right now, and I'm tempted, but I won't." Actually, they were all nice guys except for one who was still big and mean. I left him alone.

**PLAYBOY:** Did anything in your childhood predict you'd gravitate to the career you're in today?

**CAMERON:** I could always get kids on my block to rally around some harebrained idea, such as, "Hey, let's build an airplane." It doesn't occur to kids that you don't build planes, but we built one that flew briefly until the ropes broke. A high school biology teacher encouraged us to do something interesting, so we started a theater arts program with a small group of kids craving something besides the football or basketball game. I did production design, lights and scenery and wrote and directed a little. Funny, but I didn't immediately relate it to some kind of career path.

**PLAYBOY:** How did your life change when your father's job relocated the Cameron family to Fullerton, California when you were 17?

**CAMERON:** In Canada there was a general resentment against America. We lived in a border town, and America was this huge culture generator that constantly bathed

us in its radiation. To move to Los Angeles was to go into the belly of the beast. At first I thought the culture was all about cars. The kids seemed so shallow. I wanted to shake them and say, "Can't you see how you're destroying the earth with your materialistic values?" I started college six months after we moved, and of course I learned to drive. In the U.S., if you don't have a car, or at least a license and your dad's car, you're not getting laid.

**PLAYBOY:** That's pretty much in the fine print on most driver's licenses. So you got laid?

**CAMERON:** Yeah, and I wound up marrying that girl seven years later. She was my girlfriend in college, on and off. We had a lot of fun. She was a waitress at Bob's Big Boy, and I worked at a machine shop. We were just two blue-collar kids who'd go out to the desert and have a large time, drive cars fast and be hellions. I was shaking off all my practical conservatism—before that I hadn't smoked dope, hadn't driven fast. It's a good thing I survived, is all I can say. And here I was living in the street-racing capital of southern California.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you do any street racing?

**CAMERON:** Hell yeah! All my new friends had hot rods and almost killed me a bunch of times on rides—accidentally spinning out or sliding backward down a freeway off-ramp because they thought they were such good drivers. After enduring these white-knuckle terror rides for about a year, I got a 1969 Mach 1 Mustang and made it really fast by tearing apart the engine, lowering it, putting in Coney shocks, putting the battery in the back to transfer the weight. I stripped everything off it and made my own kind of fiberglass hood and spoiler—all the stuff you now just buy aftermarket.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you good at street racing?

**CAMERON:** I got good by systematically taking my friends—the ones who white-knuckled me—for their karmic rides. After that they never rode with me again. I'd go out on my own at three or four A.M. and teach myself to drive really fast, then go out on wet nights and drive sideways for hours, putting myself into a drift to learn how to get out of it. There was no name for that then, but now we call it drifting.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you ever let loose behind the wheel now?

**CAMERON:** As a family man and father of five, especially two teenagers, I have to lead by example. For me to get in a dumb wreck racing would send the wrong signal. What's also taken the fun out of it is that there's no place you can drive fast anymore.

**PLAYBOY:** What were your earliest jobs?

**CAMERON:** My first job was at 15, working as an assistant to a crazy Viennese pastry chef in a giant restaurant that served 1,500 dinners a night in Niagara Falls, near

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where I grew up. A certain kind of showmanship gets in your blood when you grow up in a tourist town. In college in California I worked as a machinist, a bus mechanic, a precision tool and die maker, a high school janitor, whatever I could find. I'm pretty blue collar. I swear like a blue-collar guy when I'm on the set.

**PLAYBOY:** How did you make the transition to moviemaking?

**CAMERON:** I loved to write, draw and paint, but I also loved physics and astronomy. No career path seemed to reconcile those two directions except science fiction. Two of my closest friends in Fullerton were interested in filmmaking, but there was no film program. We formed a dumb-ass group of eventually four people, and every week one of us made his own little movie in which the other three would have to act, do stunts, set themselves on fire—whatever was necessary. Later we wrote a script and got it to a tax-sheltered group made up mostly of dentists and an investment guy who had dreams of doing *Star Wars*. We got \$20,000 from them, rented a \$200,000 camera that we completely disassembled because we had no idea how to operate it, and we made a movie even though we were monkeys and had no idea what we were doing.

**PLAYBOY:** What impact did *Star Wars* and George Lucas have on you?

**CAMERON:** My entrée into Hollywood came as a direct result of *Star Wars* because George Lucas suddenly made science fiction gold

instead of a ghettoized B-movie genre. When most people saw *Star Wars* there was the shock of the new. For me there was the shock of recognition, as if somebody had taken my private dream and put it up on the screen. I had gone through the same evolution George had: writing, drawing and envisioning these hyperkinetic World War II dogfights in outer space. Good thing I'm not paranoid, the kind of schizo who thinks the CIA is spying on his thoughts and then has to wear tin foil on his head. I took *Star Wars* as a sign that what I had to offer was something people wanted.

**PLAYBOY:** Your experience with amateur films helped you get a foot in the door of low-budget filmmaking with Roger Corman's company, where you made miniature models and designed sets for *Rock 'n' Roll High School* and *Battle Beyond the Stars*.

**CAMERON:** On a Corman film everybody just rose to his or her own level—the opposite of the Peter Principle, in a way. You didn't think of a career; you thought, What's my next opportunity? If you got an opportunity to direct, you didn't question it. Ron Howard didn't question it when he got *Grand Theft Auto*; Francis Ford Coppola didn't question it when he got to do *Dementia 13*. These are kind of junk movies, but we were interested in the process, in learning. That's where I met writer-producer Gale Hurd, and the recognition that we would make a great team was pretty instantaneous. It took only a year or two for us to make a movie together.

**PLAYBOY:** The movie you made together in 1984, *The Terminator*; got you your first big directing job and made a star of Arnold

Schwarzenegger. Did Schwarzenegger's ascendancy in Hollywood and politics surprise you?

**CAMERON:** If you've known him for even a short time, you're not surprised by anything he accomplishes. He used to say, "You don't program yourself for failure; you program yourself for success." At first I thought it was just macho bullshit. But I've subsequently made many decisions using that principle, especially in recent years. The decision to show 16 minutes of *Avatar* to the public during a special Avatar Day was based on the principle of programming myself for success.

**PLAYBOY:** Niagara Falls, near where you spent your childhood, is a favorite wedding spot. Did growing up there make you hyperaware of marriage?

**CAMERON:** I don't know, but I *have* been married five times. I'm a perfectionist, so I kept trying until I got it right, which I have, I'm happy to report. Suzy Amis is a keeper. They were all great women, but there are people you can love and later not like, or it can be your rhythms and energies are too disparate to function together as partners. I found—and this was the big one—you have to work at it. Before that I had this attitude, Well, I'll do this until it doesn't work, and then I'll bail. You'll never stay married if you have that attitude.

**PLAYBOY:** What caused the attitude shift?

**CAMERON:** It was something a therapist said. I don't believe in shrinks, and they're not part of my life, but in this particular case I had agreed to go because it might help, and he gave me something that has stuck with me as a philosophy. He said, "You don't do this for her; you do this for you, so things make sense to you."

## Tournaments & Exotic Vacations

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San Juan to St. Thomas

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COST: \$50,000



- Yachting Races
- High Limit Poker Tournaments
- Golf Tournaments



You get into a relationship and make certain promises, and you have to live by a code, a set of values, for your own reasons, not to please the other person. Your word is your bond. It doesn't matter what kind of money is involved or how the situation subsequently changes. You have to be smart enough to go into a situation knowing the dangers, and you have to live by the agreements you make going in.

**PLAYBOY:** Three of your four ex-wives—Gale Hurd, Linda Hamilton and Kathryn Bigelow—are prominent in the movie business. If director Bigelow asked for your opinion of her film *The Hurt Locker*, could you be honest without the discussion reopening old wounds?

**CAMERON:** Kathryn and I are still close, and we'd work together on a film tomorrow. The key is to be honest but diplomatic, constructive, not destructive. She was interested in my input on *The Hurt Locker*, and I basically said, "You did a great job, and I wouldn't change a frame," and it was true in that case. She has seen *Avatar* at different stages and given good input. Her current partner, Mark Boal, who wrote *The Hurt Locker*, gave me notes as well. It's very collegial. I don't have a lot of those relationships, but I value the ones I do have.

**PLAYBOY:** When director McG's *Terminator Salvation* was up against Michael Bay's *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* at the box office last summer, McG said, "Michael Bay has a big cock, but I'd like to believe mine is bigger. If he's up for it, we can reveal ourselves on the *Spartacus* steps at Universal and put the question to rest." As co-writer and director of two *Terminator* movies, would you have been willing to drop trou with them to settle the matter?

**CAMERON:** No, I prefer we keep work and play separate. Being a good director probably doesn't have a whole lot to do with the size of one's penis, big toe, thumb size or anything else. That's about the dumbest fucking thing you could ever say. I'm surprised he didn't call me out.

**PLAYBOY:** As someone who has been accused of going off on the set, what do you make of those leaked tapes of Christian Bale berating a crew member on *Terminator Salvation*?

**CAMERON:** The *Avatar* crew all thought that was a hoot, and for the next few days we were all quoting what I thought was an inspired rant. The joke is I'm a tyrannical guy, but I said, "Man, I have to take my hat off to this guy. I could not pull a rant like that if I had to." I mean, I can get on a roll but not like that. I just had to bow down.

**PLAYBOY:** How old do you consider yourself to be emotionally?

**CAMERON:** Probably 14, and I'm happy about that. In some ways I'm even younger than that because I never want to lose the intellectual curiosity—of always wanting to know how stuff works and wanting to put things together with my hands. I can relate very well to my six-year-old, who's always building something. If I let him go he'd just take off into the woods and not come back until the end of the day, just like I used to do as a kid.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you already plotting how you might top *Avatar*?

**CAMERON:** I haven't decided. I always say that when a woman is in the midst of childbirth, don't ask her if she wants another child. I'm crowning right now.

## PYTHON SCARE

(continued from page 126)

Today there are almost 11 million captive pythons and other reptiles in America, and each year, when they become too big, some are released into the Everglades, which has the perfect temperature, swampy environment and ecosystem. No one releases a python into the woods in Michigan in December.

Pythons became popular with the south Florida cocaine cowboys of the 1980s, who saw exotic and dangerous pets as proof of the macho nature of their business. These tough-guy wannabes couldn't afford lions and tigers (à la Tony Montana in *Scarface*), so they bought Burmese pythons, which were cheap to buy, feed and maintain. By the late 1990s a lot of people were taken with the big snakes.

Crutchfield said he doesn't believe pythons are dangerous as pets. "They can be trained to be tame," he said. "They're not harmful unless they mistake you for food. Pythons kill only what they can eat." Then he said, "Adrenaline junkies own snakes. The attraction is it's something beautiful that can kill you. But snakes don't have enough personality to be good pets. They're not smart. They don't respond to you. Now, lizards and iguanas like to be petted. Gators are smart too and have interesting personalities."

Crutchfield opened the python's cage and took it out. He held it up to me with both hands, like an offering. The snake lay draped over his arms like a long, thick rope. It was a beautiful, powerful-looking animal. Its skin was olive colored and dotted with large gold rectangles outlined in black. Despite the reptile's beauty, python leather is not much in demand by the fashion trade. A large skin will not even fetch \$100.

"Go ahead, pet him," said Crutchfield. I petted the python. Its skin was soft despite the scales, and very loose, like the skin of an old man. The loose skin allows its body to expand when it swallows something big.

Reptile lovers like Crutchfield believe the whole south Florida python scare is a political ploy to get federal funds to restore the Everglades from destruction caused not by pythons but by humans. They also believe biologists precipitated the scare to get federal grants, a.k.a. scientific welfare, which could support their snake studies for years. As for the seven licensed hunters, the herps claim they are motivated not by the danger of these snakes or by a sense of civic duty but by a desire to escape the anonymity of their lives, to get their face on TV and their story in magazines like *The New Yorker*.

"It's a joke," Crutchfield said. "So they're eating Key Largo wood rats. It's a goddamn rat! Feral cats are a bigger ecological threat. They kill just to kill. And Nile monitor lizards—they're finding them in Cape Coral now. They're a greater threat than pythons."

Florida authorities disagree.

In May, Senator Nelson tried to persuade United States Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to allow hunters to trap and kill pythons on federal lands (where hunting is normally prohibited). To make his point, Nelson invited Salazar to the Everglades to witness the python threat firsthand.

Forty people, including Salazar and Nelson, went out on airboats but came across no pythons, or maybe they did but couldn't see them. Pythons are almost impossible to detect because they blend into their environment. Once, a captured python was fitted with a tracking device and released into the Glades. Sometime

