



Brie Larson on stage at the British Academy Britannia Awards in Beverly Hills last October.

TAKING ACTION

The former child star is now Hollywood's newest It Girl. Brie Larson talks movies, mushrooms and Aussie mentors with Jenny Cooney Carrillo.

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You can learn a lot about Brie Larson from her Twitter account. “Actor / Mushroom Forager / SCUBA Certified Diver / *Scientific American* Subscriber / Dog Mom / Captain Marvel / Generally Stoked” is the self-proclaimed blurb the star of the upcoming blockbuster *Kong: Skull Island* posts under her grainy, make-up-free photo. And her steady stream of posts further testify to her varied range of interests, including video of a tiny jewel caterpillar, news from Nintendo on the newest Super Mario game and pleas for lawmakers to offer greater protection to rape victims.

It’s not surprising that the ingénue-turned-A-lister puts acting at the top of her list. The former child star is Hollywood’s latest It Girl, winning an Academy Award last year for Best Actress for her role the indie drama *Room* as a mother forced to raise her child in the confines of a small shed. But *mushroom foraging*?

“I am really passionate about mushrooms and I don’t mean the psychedelic ones,” she says with the kind of enthusiasm that quickly rules out the suggestion she’s joking. “I am part of a mycological society in Los Angeles and we go foraging – you have to go about an hour outside Los Angeles to find them, but I also like to attend the Wine and Mushroom Festival in Mendocino [Northern California].”

Larson says her passion for cooking led to an affair with fungi. “Cooking got me more interested in where food came from and how things grow and mushrooms became so fascinating to me. If you understood the way that the spores have to hit each other, the temperatures that it has to be at and the stages that it takes just to *exist*, you would be amazed that there has ever been one mushroom!”

Now her *Scientific American* magazine subscription makes sense, too. “The planet is super-cool and really weird and

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it’s worth learning about, don’t you think?” she asks rhetorically.

When I meet the 27-year-old California native, it’s at the end of a long press day for *Kong: Skull Island* and she’s camped out in a comfortable suite at West Hollywood’s London hotel. The twilight sun peeking through the window illuminates her perfect skin, unhindered by her brown hair pulled back in a tight ponytail and she looks youthful and mature all at the same time.

She insists, with relief, that her Oscar did not come with instant stardom, adding, “I feel grateful that somehow I managed to get through all this so far without anyone really knowing who I am, so I can still live my life normally.”

With her upcoming role in *Kong: Skull Island* and her entry into superhero territory in 2019 as *Captain Marvel*, those days may be numbered. Not surprisingly, Larson is often compared to Hollywood’s previous It Girl, Jennifer Lawrence, who also won her first Oscar in her 20s for an indie role and then jumped into the *Hunger Games* franchise. Larson says the pair are close friends.

“We first met years ago at a *Teen Vogue* Young Hollywood shoot and I distinctly remember her because we were the only two that ate the doughnuts,” she says with a grin. “We’ve become much closer since this whole ride started, because it’s invaluable for me to have friends who have gone through what I’m going through.”

Larson also claims she has found a benevolent posse of stars who have her back. “I couldn’t believe the emails that I got from people that I didn’t know when the whole awards thing started,” she says. “Incredible actresses wrote and said, ‘Here’s my number if you need to talk; I know this is weird, but you are doing great.’”

“During one press tour, I was in New York and Emma Stone was in the same hotel and said, ‘I am going to



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come sit with you during your lunch break’ and we sat and had fries and she was making me laugh so hard I thought I’d pee my pants!”

Set in the 1970s, *Kong: Skull Island* is a reboot of the *King Kong* franchise and also stars Tom Hiddleston, Samuel L. Jackson and John Goodman. Larson plays Mason Weaver, an “anti-war” photographer who is notorious for getting as close to the action as she can. She accompanies a team of explorers and soldiers to an uncharted island, unaware they are crossing into the domain of monsters as well as the mythic Kong.

“She joins this expedition to Skull Island for her own reasons,” Larson expands, “but she doesn’t touch a weapon in the whole film – so I loved that she was the one pushing for peace.”

It’s not coincidental that her character’s last name is Weaver. It’s a homage to the actor who smashed the glass ceiling for women in action films with her *Alien* series: “Sigourney Weaver is an incredible archetype and I feel like we need more of her and her kind, always.” Compared to Larson’s other characters, this role is also more physical: “Most of the things I do are usually more emotional or philosophical,” she says, “so this was the first time I got to be in there getting my hands dirty and that was exciting.”

Born Brianne Sidonie Desaulniers, Larson grew up in Sacramento, California with her younger sister and

chiropractor parents. She attended the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco at age six. When her parents divorced a year later, she moved with her mother and sister to LA. She appeared in sketches on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* as a girl scout, and in a string of guest roles on TV sitcoms – all before age 10. But after scoring parts in tween-friendly films such as *13 Going on 30* (2004) and *Hoot* (2006), a crisis of confidence almost ended her career.

“It just wasn’t working the way I wanted it to,” Larson recalls. “All the kids I went to school with were going to college and I was still trying to do this thing called ‘acting’ and not going very far. What’s weird about this profession is that no one can really tell you when you are delusional. I used to wish that I’d wanted to be an athlete because it’s easy to quantify if that’s working – just measuring your speed!”

A failed audition opposite Australian actor Toni Collette to play her defiant daughter Kate in the TV series *United States of Tara* was the final straw. “Toni was my acting hero and I’d really felt, like, ‘Nobody in the world could do that role but me,’ so when I didn’t get it, I felt like I didn’t understand reality anymore,” she says. She put her acting career on hold and began applying to colleges.

“I was toying with the idea of either studying interior design or marine biology, but then I got a call – the show was being picked up and they were

**FIVE FACTS:
BRIE LARSON**

At age 13, she landed a record deal at Universal Records and released a pop album, *Finally Out of P.E.*, but ultimately the album only sold 3500 copies.

Frustrated by people mispronouncing her surname (Desaulniers), she changed it to Larson, after the Kirsten Larson American Girl doll she owned as a young girl.

Her first big break was to be a starring role in the 2000 TV series *Schimmel* but right before filming, the lead actor was diagnosed with cancer and the show was cancelled.

Larson sang the song *Black Sheep* in 2010’s *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, in which she played Envy. However, the film’s soundtrack features a different version, by Metric.

As well as playing Toni Collette’s daughter in *United States of Tara* for three seasons, Larson also played Amy Schumer’s more mature sister, Kim, in the 2015 comedy film *Trainwreck*.



Brie Larson as female superhero Captain Marvel (top); and (above) in her Oscar-winning role in Room with actor Jacob Tremblay.

recasting my character – so I went back in and got the role.” She credits Collette, who won a Golden Globe for her role, with being a life-changing influence on her career: “She was my scene partner for three years and I got to grow with her and have her be a real guide in my life.”

Larson never looked back. She was already filming *Kong: Skull Island* in the jungles of Hawaii and Queensland’s Gold Coast when she earned her 2016 Oscar nomination and subsequent win. “It was a great counterbalance,” she reminisces, “because I would leave on weekends to go and do things for the awards campaign and then I would come back and they’d be like, ‘Yeah, congratulations – so, we need you to run from this part of the mud to that part of the mud!’”

She looks almost giddy as she recalls her time in Australia. “I dove the Great Barrier Reef and never saw colours like that in my life,” she marvels. “I also became the cruise director of the film for cast and crew, so I would find a Laser Tag place that we could rent out for an evening, or we would all go see the James Bond movie together, or one night I closed down the Movie World theme park for us to keep having fun. I sat next to John Goodman on the roller-coaster – and I’ve got photos to prove it!”

She’s casually fidgeting with her engagement ring but any questions about her fiancé, Phantom Planet lead singer Alex Greenwald, are quickly shut down. She’s happier talking about the other loves of her life, her two Papillon-chihuahua mix dogs, Bowie and Jonathan: “I usually take one or sometimes both of them to work, depending on where I’m shooting. They are gypsies, like everyone in my life.”

In *Captain Marvel*, Larson plays the title role, aka Carol Danvers, a fighter pilot with alien DNA who can fly and shoot beams out of her hands. “My gosh, you are going to make me emotional,” she says when asked about becoming an icon to little girls everywhere. “It’s definitely a glass ceiling in the world of these movies and I am really honoured to lead what I feel like has been bubbling to the surface for a while now.”

Big movies come with bigger pay cheques, but Larson isn’t one to splurge. “Besides travel – I hope I don’t sound like a fool – I really enjoy donating to charity,” she admits. “I feel at my best when I am socially aware and helping others.” The smile that follows says it all. Larson looks generally stoked. •