

Career writer

Reese Witherspoon continues to curate her own script as she moves from acting to producing and now writing too, as Harold von Kursk reports

When she first made a name for herself in Hollywood, Reese Witherspoon was known for her bubbly, effervescent screen persona. Little did anyone suspect that one day America’s sweetheart would evolve into a highly successful film and TV producer and a veritable industry powerhouse. In addition to *Gone Girl* and *Wild*, Witherspoon also developed, produced and starred in *Big Little Lies*, one of the finest TV series of the past decade, as well as *The Morning Show*, now into its fourth season on Apple TV+.

Her keen instincts for finding top draw material paid off handsomely in 2021 when Witherspoon sold her juggernaut production outfit Hello Sunshine to a private equity firm owned by Blackstone for \$900 million. Since then, Witherspoon has remained an industry mover and shaker with her work on *The Morning Show*, serving as co-star and executive producer on the highly popular Apple TV+ series for which she earns a reported \$2 million per episode. Today she has 20 projects in various stages

Right: Reese Witherspoon at the premiere for *Your Place or Mine* at the Regency Village Theatre in 2023

of development, including her collaboration with Nicole Kidman on a third season of *Big Little Lies* for HBO.

Ironically, Witherspoon’s decision to embark on a parallel career as a producer only came after she found herself mired in a post-Oscar slump in the late 2000s. After winning the 2006 Academy Award as best actress for portraying June Carter Cash in *Walk the Line*, she was unable to convince studios to let her play the serious dramatic parts that she craved. “I will never forget the day my agent sent me this terrible script and I called him and told him, ‘I’m not going to do this garbage. Who would want to do this?’ And he said, ‘Every actress in Hollywood wants this part.’ That kind of triggered something in me and I realised that I had to become more proactive and go out and find good projects. I also had the goal of wanting not just more opportunities for me, but to also create good opportunities for all the other women in the business who were experiencing the same level of frustration as me.”

“I ALWAYS WANTED TO BECOME MORE INVOLVED AND TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THE CHOICES I MADE AS AN ARTIST”

REESE WITHERSPOON

Eventually, in 2012 Witherspoon formed her own production company, a decision that proved to be as career-defining as it was life-altering. “For several years, I was a little bit lost as an artist not being able to find what I wanted to do and making choices that I wasn’t ultimately very happy with.” Witherspoon said.

“I wanted to play dynamic women and be part of stories that would allow me to explore all the doubts and anxieties that I was facing in my own life and that most women go through.

“I was already a voracious reader, and I just ended up buying [the rights for] books, like *Gone Girl* and *Wild*. And I had no idea – I bought them with my own money, and I self-funded my own production company for five years – that I would succeed on that level and things would evolve well beyond my expectations or anyone else’s, for that matter.”

It was her ex-husband Jim Toth (they divorced in 2023 after 11 years of marriage) who convinced Witherspoon that she had the right stuff to become a successful producer and expand her industry ambitions. “He said: you should produce movies. You read more books than anybody I know. You should just buy some of them and turn them into films.”

Gone Girl was the first project she undertook, buying the rights to the Gillian Flynn novel before

it was published and initially hoping to play the lead female role of Amy. But when David Fincher (*The Social Network*) was hired to direct the film (by the studio which financed the project Witherspoon brought to them), he wanted someone “cool and unapproachable” and Reese agreed that she “didn’t fit” into that category.

In the end, *Gone Girl*, which starred Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike, turned out to be one of the most successful films of 2014, earning largely positive reviews and grossing more than \$370 million world-wide.

Wild proved to be a turning point that emboldened the Nashville, Tennessee native to throw herself into acquiring book rights and developing multiple projects. She is now one of the most active producers in the business, and her relentless ambition is very much consistent with the “Little Miss Type-A” nickname that her mother gave her as a child when Reese was already exhibiting a level of ambition and zeal that set her apart from her classmates.

“I am the daughter of highly accomplished parents, and I always felt a need to match their achievements. My father was a surgeon who scored a perfect 800 on his SATs and his MCATs, (standardised college and medical school admissions tests – ED) and graduated at the top of his class from Yale. And my mother has five university degrees in nursing and education. They set a very high bar for me,” said Witherspoon.

“It was probably inevitable that I became very goal-oriented and serious while I was growing up. ►



I'm sure I became that way by watching my mom and dad work so hard and be very good at their professions. My mom was my inspiration because she was very hard-working and disciplined and really set an example for all women. She was a wonderful role model for me and I get my work ethic from her."

After graduating high school with straight A's, she was accepted into Stanford University but chose to pursue her film career instead. "It's very fulfilling for me to be in the position where I am now. I always wanted to become more involved and take ownership of the choices I made as an artist... I had also lost some of my confidence (as the result of a destructive relationship early in her life) and I needed to regain my sense of who I was and get myself back in a proper frame of mind.

"Once I was able to reach that point and become the kind of woman I wanted to be, it's been

"IT WAS A PLEASURE TO BE ABLE TO APPROACH WOMEN WITH SUCH OUTSTANDING MATERIAL AND WATCH THEIR PERFORMANCES."

REESE WITHERSPOON

very important to me that the films I put out into the world are an extension of who I really am. I want to tell stories that are important. I want to tell stories that you want to discuss with your loved ones."

Turning 50 this March, Witherspoon shows no signs of relaxing her frantic pace as a producer. One of her prize projects is the Amazon MGM series *Elle*, a prequel to the original *Legally Blonde*, the 2001 film that launched Witherspoon's career, which sees her pass on the role of Elle Wood to Lexi Minetree.

Reese has also found time to ply her other trade — acting — on *The Morning Show*, which ranks as the most-watched series in the history of the Apple TV+ streaming platform. Season 4 sees her return as intrepid news anchor Bradley Jackson and continues the pattern of placing her in several extreme

situations that are par for the course in a melodramatic series that delights in shocking audiences with frequently over-the-top twists and turns.

Previously, in Season 3, Bradley found herself in the middle of the angry mob that stormed the Capitol during the Jan. 6 insurrection. She was filming the siege with her camera crew only to be stunned to run into her brother who is attacking a police officer alongside other rioters. In another episode, Bradley rockets into space in the company of her network CEO, Cory Ellison (Billy Crudup), and tech billionaire Paul Marks (Jon Hamm) on a private shuttle voyage.

This season, in which fellow Oscar-winners Jeremy Irons and Marion Cotillard join the cast, Witherspoon's character faces far greater peril. In the thrilling finale that pulls out all stops, Bradley

is arrested by airport customs agents in Belarus just as she was about to leave the country.

After being charged with espionage when her laptop is found to contain classified government secrets that she uncovered in the course of an investigative report, Bradley is imprisoned and tortured — but to her credit refuses to divulge her source. "Yeah. It gets worse [for Bradley]," Witherspoon explained.

"She can't stay out of trouble. It's a crazy ending to this season. Viewers are gonna be really surprised." ►

Above: Witherspoon at the Premiere of *Daisy Jones and The Six* at the TCL Chinese Theatre IMAX in 2023 **Bottom: Witherspoon with Alexander Skarsgard, Nicole Kidman, Zoe Kravitz and Laura Dern at the Emmy Awards in 2017**





A case can be made that the high point of Witherspoon's Hollywood sojourn came with *Big Little Lies*. Centered around a trio of struggling moms in the affluent seaside town of Monterey along the California coastline, the HBO series offered poignant insights into the issues affecting women and which have long been of vital concern to Witherspoon.

The story immediately caught her attention and she then enlisted her good friend Nicole Kidman to serve as co-producer and asked for her help in securing the rights to the 2014 novel by fellow Aussie Liane Moriarty.

"What was great about reading the novel for the first time is that I saw myself in different stages of motherhood all through my life. I was a mom at 22, I've been divorced, I've been re-married... The novel explored every spectrum and colour of a woman's life. I thought it was incredible to have so many parts for women in one piece of material."

Above: Witherspoon at the induction ceremony for Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame Ceremony on Hollywood Boulevard, Los Angeles in 2010
Right: Witherspoon in the press room after winning her first Academy Award – best actress in 2006 for her performance in *Walk The Line*

After Kidman sat down for lunch with Moriarty, the author agreed to sell the rights but "only if you and Reese play [central characters] Celeste and Madeline." To which Kidman replied, "Deal."

Then Reese persuaded her Wild director, Jean-Marc Vallée (also known for *Dallas Buyers' Club*) to helm the first season of episodes while signing up David E. Kelley (*Chicago Hope*) to write the scripts. She then went about assembling an elite cast: Shailene Woodley, Laura Dern, Zoë Kravitz Alexander Skarsgård, James Tupper, and Adam Scott.

Having suffered through the frustration of a dearth of intelligent roles for women in Hollywood, Witherspoon saw *Big Little Lies* as a golden opportunity to launch a unique, female-centric series

"It was a pleasure to be able to approach women with such outstanding material and watch their performances," Witherspoon said of her time on the series that set the tone for a new era of sophisticated dramas that have since become commonplace on the streaming platforms that are now in the process of overtaking the major studios.

"These are the kinds of things that shift consciousness... We need to create more series and movies that treat women in a realistic way and enable female audiences in particular

to be able to see themselves and identify with modern, complex female characters."

The series also gave Witherspoon one of the best and most complex roles of her career. As Madeline, the wife of successful IT developer (Adam Scott, now starring in *Severance*) she projects the confidence of a wealthy, ambitious woman on the cusp of middle age, but deep down she suffers from some of the fears and insecurities of her time as a single mom after her first husband Nathan (Tupper) abandoned her and their daughter.

"I was drawn to Madeline's struggles and how she was constantly searching for happiness and worried about the things she hadn't done which was an issue that was very close to me... I fixated on this idea that there's always someone within a group

of women who is 'perfect.' She seems to have everything organised and together, and then you realise, 'Oh! Madeleine's actually the most cracked of everyone.' I'm always wary of that person who is afraid to show vulnerability and in my own life I have always tried to be open to my friends about the things that trouble me."

Books remain an urgent theme of Witherspoon's world. Her Reese's Book Club is a cultural juggernaut, with the power to turn a novel, including many written by female authors, into an instant bestseller. Her love for storytelling recently led her to co-write a thriller, *Gone Before Goodbye*, about "a woman trapped in a deadly conspiracy," with Harlan Coben, long noted as a master of the genre and whose novels have frequently been adapted into films and TV series.

Moving forward, Witherspoon remains on a mission to give a greater voice to women's stories that have often been overlooked or given short shrift in her industry. "We're making up for lost time," she said.

Fulfilling the promise of her youthful alter ego, the enterprising, indefatigable Elle Wood, Reese has rewritten her own script and intends to do the same for generations of women to come. ■

