
Winter's Bone' star Jennifer Lawrence draws on dark reserves for her dramatic roles

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Jennifer Lawrence grew up in a nice middle-class home, not a Missouri shack surrounded by meth cookers.

But she says she had no problem identifying with Ree Dolly, the Ozarks teen she plays in "Winter's Bone."

"Ree is incredibly stubborn and she's maternal ... and loyal," Lawrence, 19, said in a phone call from L.A. "Those are three of my biggest traits.

"Plus, I grew up in Louisville so I know something about the South, about that way of thinking. So it wasn't hard for me to meet these people in southern Missouri and get the hang of their talk."

Lawrence is best known for her three-year run as a sitcom suburban teen on TBS' "The Bill Engvall Show," but her film choices have been anything but lighthearted.

In "The Poker House" she played a girl growing up in a brothel; the character was raped by her mother's boyfriend.

In "The Burning Plain" she portrayed a defiant teen whose illicit love for a Mexican boy pushes the limits of her parents' tolerance.

And in the Sundance hit "Winter's Bone" she plays a girl infiltrating the Ozarks drug trade to discover the fate of her meth-cooking father.

"It's not like I have a plan to appear only in dark movies," Lawrence said. "I go out and audition for lots of movies. ... I just happened to get those roles. It's as much a mystery to me as it is to you. I seem to have this gloomy monster living inside me.

"But I will tell you I loved those movies. They weren't crappy, like a lot of the stuff I read. And I understood the characters very well.

"I'm really picky about the projects I do. I don't really like stories that don't take you anywhere. That's what a film is - it's a journey. I ask myself, 'What is this character like at the beginning and what must I do to get her to the end?'"

She may look like the fresh-scrubbed girl next door, but Lawrence is no pushover. At 14 she announced to her family that she was going to be an actress.

Her parents - who had no experience with show business - finally gave in on the condition that after moving to New York City with her mother, Jennifer would get her GED with a 3.9 grade point average.

"I schooled myself. I had the time because for a long period I sucked because I didn't know what I was doing. My mom would wake me up early, anyway. She'd say, 'This isn't a vacation. You're still in school.'

"It was the most miserable two years of my life. But then I started getting work - a few commercials, small parts on 'Medium' and 'Cold Case.'"

Three years ago Lawrence, who describes herself as "a black sheep," declared herself ready to go it alone.

"I thanked my parents for raising me and told them I'd take it from there. But we never stopped being a family, and they never stopped being parents.

"My mom worries about everything. When I have a night shoot she'll text me: 'Can someone follow you home?' With my dad it's always, 'Be sure to lock your garage.' It'll probably still be that way when I'm married and have a family."

The source of her fierce independent streak?

"I grew up around lots of boys. I've got two older brothers, but we're such a big family that there were never only two boys in the house. Lots of cousins and friends. We always had a football team over for dinner. That made me very competitive.

"If I see someone's fork being waved in the direction of my plate I eat really, really fast, almost as if the food was about to disappear. Because, when I was a kid, it would disappear. I still eat fast, because I'm afraid somebody will steal it off my plate."

Lawrence has been getting rave reviews for "Winter's Bone." She even finds herself for the first time being recognized in public.

"Problem is, I'm usually recognized when I'm doing something embarrassing. In a store I knocked over a display of like 300 necklaces. I'm screaming, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' And as soon as I start walking away someone says, 'Aren't you Jennifer Lawrence?'"

A somewhat happier encounter took place at a studio where the actress's path crossed that of director Steven Spielberg.

"He opened a door for me, then looks at me and says, 'Aren't you Jennifer Lawrence? Didn't I just see you in "Winter's Bone"?"

"I practically passed out. I talked with him for, like, 20 minutes. Then I got in my car and started crying because I didn't know what else to do.

"So I called my mom, who was in town. She said, 'That's great, Jen. What do you want for dinner?'"

Lawrence has never had an acting lesson.

"I can't explain how I do what I do - it's all instinctive. I don't do research. I just read the script and let the sets and costumes sink in. I've never wanted to go to acting classes because I don't want to learn how to act. I'd rather just be.

"Besides, why fix something that isn't broken?"