

# THRIVE

30 INSPIRATIONAL **RAGS-TO-RICHES** STORIES



J A S O N   N A V A L L O

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30 Inspirational Rags-to-Riches Stories

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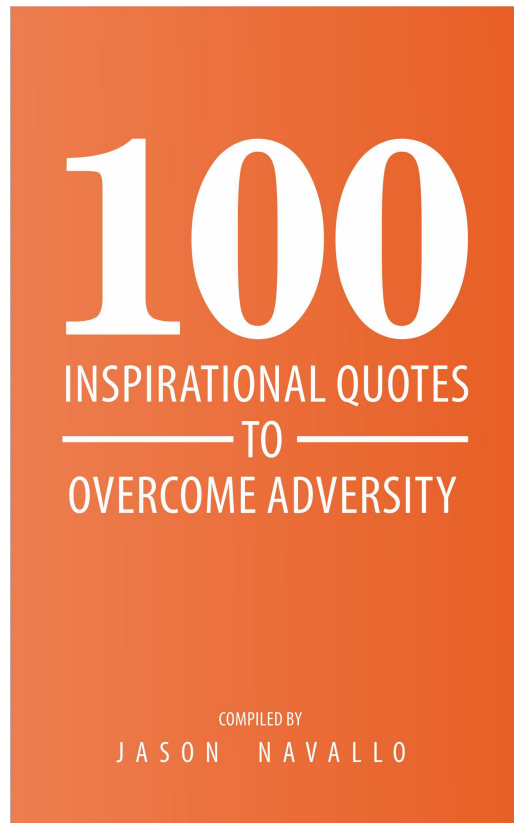


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# Introduction

Success is a lifelong pursuit. It is a journey that will take you through many ups and downs, twists and turns. If you are ambitious and want to achieve greatness, then this book is for you. Whether you're an entrepreneur promoting a product or service, an employee climbing the corporate ladder, or someone seeking motivation to reach new heights in your career and life, you are in the right place.

In this book, you will uncover the rags-to-riches stories of thirty wealthy entrepreneurs, innovative businessmen, and famous artists. Although society admires their successes, their struggles to initially establish and build their careers are often overlooked. The truth is that through sheer will and determination, these people transformed their visions into realities. Nothing was handed to them, and, more importantly, they never gave up.

This book will inspire you to achieve what you want in life, regardless of your age, occupation, or environment. It will inspire you to believe anything is possible and to believe there are always opportunities for you to succeed. It will give you hope when times are bleak and when you feel like giving up. Everything we desire is within reach, and these thirty people and their inspiring rags-to-riches stories serve as proof. So, read. Learn. Thrive.

# Jim Carrey

James “Jim” Carrey was born in Newmarket, Ontario, Canada. The youngest of four children, Jim’s father was an accountant and his mother was a homemaker. From an early age, Jim expressed an interest in comedy. By junior high school, he was labeled a class clown and arranged time at the end of each school day to perform in front of his classmates. At age fourteen, Jim attempted stand-up at a local comedy club called Yuk Yuk’s in Toronto, Canada, but was booed offstage.

Things took a turn for the worse when his father lost his accounting job, and his family was forced out of their home and moved into a farmhouse on factory grounds. His father found work as a security guard, and Jim and his siblings cleaned the plant at night. When his mother became ill and bedridden, Jim stayed home from school to care for her. His comedy grew tremendously, as Jim often performed to make his mother laugh. His family eventually abandoned the plant and was forced to live in a Volkswagen bus.

At age seventeen, Jim bravely returned to stand-up comedy at Yuk Yuk’s. This time, he was determined to overcome the hecklers, and he did. He quickly made a name for himself in the local Toronto comedy circuit, and in a giant leap of faith, Jim moved to Los Angeles, California to pursue his dream of becoming a successful comedian. Shortly after arriving, he wrote himself a check for ten million dollars, for “Acting Services Rendered,” later dating it Thanksgiving 1995, giving himself ten years to make it happen. He kept it in his wallet, determined he would be able to cash it one day.

For many months, Jim performed for no pay and no preparation at The Comedy Store on Sunset Boulevard. He worked tirelessly on improving his impersonations routine. The hard work paid off when Rodney Dangerfield caught his show one night and signed him as an opener for an entire season of tour performances. Hollywood began to take notice of him, as Jim appeared on *An Evening at the Improv* and *The Tonight Show*. However, Jim grew wary of being boxed into a lounge act lifestyle, so he shifted his focus on achieving a successful career in television and movies. He auditioned to become a cast member on the American live television comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, but didn’t make the cut.

Every night, Jim drove up a hill overlooking Los Angeles and visualized himself as a successful comedian. He visualized himself landing big acting roles and receiving compliments on his work from actors and comedians he respected. Not only did this practice make him feel better, but it also assured him that everything he wanted was going to be in his life. After landing several minor acting roles in movies, and after a brief return to stand-up comedy, where he retired his impersonations routine, Jim landed a

role playing the alien Wiploc in *Earth Girls Are Easy* (1988). On set, he worked alongside fellow comedian and actor Damon Wayans, who was impressed with Jim's work. Wayans called his brothers to insist that Jim audition for their sketch comedy show, *In Living Color* (1990-1994). After a successful audition, Jim became a hit on the show, performing as a regular for four seasons, and successfully transformed his image from stand-up comedian to television genius.

Following his success on television, Jim started to receive leading roles in movie projects. He participated in rewriting the screenplay for *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), which he also starred in and which became a smash hit at the box office, grossing \$107 million worldwide. He followed with starring roles in *The Mask* (1994) and *Dumb & Dumber* (1995), earning enough money to be able to cash that \$10 million check in time for Thanksgiving 1995. At his father's funeral in 1994, Jim placed the check into his father's casket, signifying the fulfillment of both of their dreams. He became one of Hollywood's biggest stars, as well as the first actor in the history of cinema to receive \$20 million for a movie, which Jim was paid for his role in *The Cable Guy* (1996).

## Eminem

Marshall Bruce "Eminem" Mathers III was born in St. Louis, Missouri. His father abandoned the family when Marshall was an infant, and his mother never held down a job for more than several months at a time. Growing up, Marshall and his mother frequently moved between Missouri and Detroit, Michigan, before settling in Detroit during Marshall's early teenage years. In school, Marshall was often bullied. One bully beat him so hard that he suffered a severe head injury. Even after he recovered, the bullying continued.

Marshall was introduced to hip-hop at the age of nine by his Uncle Ronnie, who was not much older than Marshall. Later, Ronnie committed suicide after a devastating relationship breakup. Marshall started rapping at age fourteen under the pseudonym "M&M," which he later changed to "Eminem." After spending three years in the ninth grade due to truancy and poor grades, Marshall dropped out. He then held a variety of jobs to support his mother with paying the bills, while honing his rapping skills. One of his regular jobs was working as a cook for minimum wage at a local restaurant. Because he was a Caucasian rapper in a predominantly African-American industry and neighborhood, Marshall was, at first, not taken seriously. However, his strong rapping skills eventually won him the respect of the local underground hip-hop community.

As Marshall struggled to establish his rap career, his girlfriend, Kim Scott, gave birth to their daughter, Hailie. The birth forced Marshall to spend less time rapping and more time providing for his family. During this time, the couple and their newborn daughter lived in crack-infested neighborhoods and were often robbed. Under these poor conditions, Marshall began to assemble together his debut album, *Infinite* (1996). Topics on the album include his struggles raising his newborn daughter on limited funds and his strong desire to be wealthy. Unfortunately, the record failed to take off, and Marshall was fired from his cooking job five days before Christmas (which is also Hailie's birthday). His personal struggles with alcohol and drug abuse led to an unsuccessful suicide attempt.

Marshall and his new family then moved into a mobile home with his mother. Realizing he had to change his approach in order to become a successful rapper, he developed a dark alter ego named "Slim Shady" to voice all of his anger and frustrations in his music. He began work on his next album, *The Slim Shady EP* (1997), which features strong references to drug use, sexual acts, mental instability, and over-the-top violence. The album even makes personal attacks toward Kim and his own mother. It became a hit in the underground community, and Marshall was featured in hip-hop magazine *The Source's* "Unsigned Hype" column a few months after its release.

As his rap career gained traction, Marshall's personal life deteriorated. After a bitter breakup, Kim took Hailie and moved in with her mother, while Marshall moved in with some friends. The night before he was scheduled to compete in the 1997 Rap Olympics in Los Angeles, California, Marshall came home to a locked door and an eviction notice. With nowhere else to go, Marshall broke into the unheated apartment and slept on the floor. The following morning, he travelled to Los Angeles to compete.

At the freestyling competition, Marshall had his eyes on the grand prize of \$500 and a Rolex watch, knowing how much his family needed the money. He gave it his all, and after an intense series of rap battles, he placed second to a local rapper. Afterward, Marshall was approached by an audience member who requested a copy of his demo tape. Marshall gave it to him and thought nothing of it, not knowing that the man worked for Interscope Records, a leading hip-hop record label.

Marshall's demo tape landed in the hands of Interscope Record's CEO, Jimmy Levine, who played it for legendary hip-hop record producer Dr. Dre, who immediately responded, "Find him. Now." A speechless Marshall was flown back to California to meet with Dr. Dre, who he had idolized for many years. After a series of highly-productive recording sessions, Marshall signed to Dr. Dre's record label, Aftermath Entertainment. He introduced himself to the world with his debut, attention-grabbing single "My Name Is" on January 25, 1999, which he recorded in an hour's time with Dr.

Dre on their first day in the studio together. The response was overwhelming. He followed with his second studio album and first major release, *The Slim Shady LP* (1999), which has sold over 18 million copies worldwide. His third studio album, *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000), sold over 1.76 million copies in its first week and over 32 million copies worldwide.

Eminem is widely considered to be one of the greatest artists of all time, as well as the best-selling solo artist of the 2000s in the United States.

## Sam Walton

Samuel “Sam” Walton was born in Kingfisher, Oklahoma. His father held a variety of jobs, including banker, farmer, farm-loan appraiser, and insurance and real estate agent, while his mother was a homemaker. Growing up during the Great Depression, Sam performed many chores to help his family make ends meet, including milking the family cow and delivering milk bottles to customers after school.

After high school, Sam attended the University of Missouri, where he also played on the football team. As his parents could not afford to pay for his tuition, Sam paid his way through college on his own. He held various jobs, including waiting tables (in exchange for meals), working as a lifeguard, delivering newspapers, and selling magazine subscriptions. By the end of college, Sam had employees and was earning \$4,000 to \$5,000 per year, a respectable amount at the time. When Sam ran for student body president, he learned the secret to winning votes that would later serve him well working in retail: speak to people coming down the sidewalk before they speak to you. He went out of his way to get to know everyone on campus, and everyone thought of Sam as their friend. As a result, he was successful in being elected to every office he ran for.

When he graduated with a business degree, Sam planned on becoming an insurance salesman. However, after speaking with a couple of college recruiters from J.C. Penney and Sears Roebuck, Sam decided to pursue a career in retail. He accepted a job as a management trainee with J.C. Penney in Des Moines, Iowa for a starting salary of \$75 per month. He proved to be a good salesman, with one problem: his handwriting was terrible. Sam also couldn't stand making a customer wait while he was going through paperwork, which caused great confusion for the store's back office. “Walton, I'd fire you if you weren't such a good salesman. Maybe you're just not cut out for retail,” said his J.C. Penney regional manager, Phil Blake.

Sam quit his job at J.C. Penney after eighteen months to join the United States Armed Forces during World War II. However, he was turned down for combat due to a minor



heart irregularity. Since he already quit his job, Sam headed south to Tulsa, Oklahoma to find a job in the booming oil business. There, he met his wife, Helen Robson. Before the two could marry, Sam was called by the U.S. Army Intelligence Corps to serve, supervising security at aircraft plants and POW camps across the United States. He married Helen on Valentine's Day the following year.

While serving, Sam kept his passion for the retail business, reading books to educate himself and studying retail businesses across the country. Sam's father-in-law was a prominent lawyer, banker, and rancher who recognized Sam's potential. After the war, Sam approached the Butler Brothers Company, which operated two chains of franchise retail stores: Federated Stores and Ben Franklin. The company offered twenty-seven-year-old Sam a Ben Franklin store of his own in Newport, Arkansas. Borrowing \$20,000 from his father-in-law and investing \$5,000 of his own money, Sam agreed to pay 5 percent of gross sales as rent and bought the store, which at the time grossed around \$72,000 in sales per year. As Sam believed in setting goals, he set a goal for this store: he wanted it to be the best, most profitable variety store in Arkansas within five years.

Sam succeeded in growing the store's sales figures. He tried a lot of promotional tactics to do so, even taking a \$1,800 loan from the bank to buy a soft ice cream machine for the front of the store, which ultimately became very profitable. Within three years, Sam grew sales from \$72,000 to \$175,000, and he was able to pay back his father-in-law. Sam also managed to take over the lease for the store adjacent to his competitor across the street, which prevented his competitor from expanding his store. After five years, Sam's store was turning over \$250,000 in gross sales per year, with \$40,000 in profits. Phil Blake, Sam's former manager at J.C. Penney, almost fell over when he heard of Sam's success. "It can't be the same one I knew in Des Moines," he said. "That fellow couldn't have amounted to anything."

Sam's eagerness to get started in business was so strong that he failed to negotiate a right-of-renewal clause in his lease. As a result, his landlord refused to renew the lease because he wanted to buy Sam's store for his own son. Sam had no other option but to sell his store and start somewhere else, taking everything he learned over the past five years. It was the lowest point of his business career. He became sick to his stomach, as he had to move his devastated family out of town. On the way out, however, Sam sold the lease to his competitor, which allowed him to finally expand.

At thirty-two years old, Sam found a small store to take over in Bentonville, Arkansas that was grossing roughly \$32,000 per year. He negotiated a ninety-nine-year lease on the store and the barber shop next to it. After reading a newspaper article about two Ben Franklin franchises in Minnesota who switched to "self-service," a new retail concept at the time, Sam rode the bus all night long to check out the two stores. He

liked what he saw and decided to create a large store around the “self-service” concept, calling it Walton’s Five and Dime, although it operated as a Ben Franklin franchise. He “just had a personality that drew people in. He would yell at you from a block away, you know. He would just yell at everyone he saw, and that’s the reason so many liked him and did business in the store. It was like he brought in business by his being so friendly,” said Inex Threet, a clerk who once worked at Walton’s Five and Dime.

Learning from the past, Sam knew not to put all of his eggs in one basket. He, along with his brother, reinvested their profits to open more Ben Franklin franchises in various locations. Sam had driven so much (between stores) that he bought a small used airplane in order to save time. Within fifteen years, Sam had become the largest independent variety store owner in the United States, with fifteen stores and a turnover of \$1.4 million per year. However, Sam felt the business was limited and the “volume was so little for each store that it really didn’t amount to that much.”

Sam noticed that “discounting” would become the new wave in the retail industry. He knew that large discount centers would devastate the variety store business. After travelling across the country studying the discounting concept, Sam knew he had to act. He approached the Butler Brothers and requested they back him on his new discounting venture. However, the brothers weren’t interested. Nobody wanted to gamble on the first Wal-Mart store in Rogers, Arkansas. Sam’s brother Bud contributed 3 percent of the costs and the new store manager, Don Whitaker, contributed 2 percent, while Sam and his wife, Helen, contributed 95 percent.

The first Wal-Mart opened its doors to a crowd of shoppers on July 2, 1962. However, not everyone was happy about the grand opening. A group of “officials” from Ben Franklin in Chicago paid Sam a visit and gave him an ultimatum to not open any more stores. The first Wal-Mart turned out to be moderately successful, eventually grossing over \$1 million per year, in a town with a population of less than 6,000 people. Here’s what Sam had to say about the opening:

“Once we opened that Wal-Mart in Springdale, I knew we were on to something. I knew in my bones it was going to work. But at the time, most folks—including my brother Bud—were pretty skeptical of the whole concept. They thought Wal-Mart was just another one of my crazy ideas. It was totally unproven at the time, but it was really just what we’d been doing all along: experimenting, trying to do something different, educating ourselves as to what was going on in the retail industry, and trying to stay ahead of those trends. This is a big contradiction in my makeup that I don’t completely understand to this day. In many of my core values I’m very conservative. But for some reason, in business I have always been driven to buck the system, to innovate, to take things beyond where they’ve been.”

The discounting concept took off quickly, and Wal-Mart competed with other discount retailers, including Kmart, which established 250 stores with \$800 million in sales within five years. Wal-Mart, at the time, had just 19 stores with \$9 million in sales. Sam continued to be laser-focused on growth. He was committed to passing down savings to his customers and refused to markup products more than 30 percent. At the time, Sam knew the key to expanding his empire was to build a solid support structure with a close-knit management team and efficient distribution channels. At first, each manager ordered merchandise separately, which was delivered directly to the store from the manufacturer. However, Sam realized it was more efficient to have a centralized warehouse, which would allow him to secure a better price by buying in bulk.

To fund growth so far, Sam and his wife had borrowed money from almost every bank in Arkansas and Missouri. They were millions of dollars in debt, and Sam always worried that if all of their loans were called in at the same time, Wal-Mart would be forced out of business. The best thing to do, Sam realized, was to take his company public by having his company's shares listed on a stock exchange. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. went public on October 1, 1970, offering 300,000 shares at \$16.50, and freed Sam of his worries about debt. He focused on putting large discount stores into small towns. Within ten years, Wal-Mart's sales jumped from \$31 million to \$1.2 billion.

Fast forward to 2014, and Wal-Mart has over \$480 billion in sales and employs more than 2.2 million people that serve more than 200 million customers each week at more than 11,000 retail stores in 27 countries worldwide.

## **J.K. Rowling**

Joanne "J.K." Rowling was born in Yate, Gloucestershire, England. Her father was a Rolls-Royce aircraft engineer and her mother was a science technician. By the age of six, Joanne was writing fantasy stories and reading them aloud to her younger sister. She spent much of her teenage years depressed, due to her mother's deteriorating health and a strained relationship with her father. Having been rejected from attending Oxford University after high school, Joanne studied at the University of Exeter, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in French and Classics. After graduation, Joanne held jobs as a researcher and bilingual secretary for Amnesty International and the Manchester Chamber of Commerce.

At twenty-five years old, while waiting four hours during a train delay from Manchester to London, Joanne became inspired. In her mind, she could see so clearly a scrawny, black-haired, bespectacled boy who had no idea he was a wizard. She had never been this excited about an idea for a book before. Her mind flooded with details. Since she

didn't have a pen to write, all she could do for the next few hours was think until she returned to her flat. That very night, she began writing *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

Not long after she began writing her novel, Joanne lost her mother after ten years of suffering from multiple sclerosis. This dramatically affected her writing. Depressed and wanting to escape from England, Joanne moved to Portugal to work as an English teacher at a language institute. Her new working hours allowed her to write during the day, while teaching in the afternoons and evenings. She married a Portuguese man and gave birth to a daughter, Jessica. The marriage didn't last. Joanne is said to have suffered from domestic abuse, even having to obtain a restraining order against her husband after he threw her out of their apartment one evening.

After Portugal, Joanne and her daughter moved to Edinburgh, Scotland, and lived on welfare. Jobless with a baby daughter to take care of, Joanne felt like a failure. She even contemplated suicide. Despite all of her struggles, she continued writing, often in cafes after her daughter fell asleep. After five years of writing, she typed her final manuscript on an old manual typewriter and sent the first three chapters to literary agents. After a number of rejections, one literary agent, Christopher Little, asked for the full manuscript after an enthusiastic reader on his team highly recommended her work. Little later agreed to become her agent.

*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was originally submitted to twelve publishing houses, all of which rejected the manuscript. After a year of collecting dust, Joanne's manuscript was confirmed to be published by Bloomsbury, a publishing house in London, England. Barry Cunningham, an editor at Bloomsbury, gave the first chapter to his eight-year-old daughter, who loved it and asked to see the rest of it. Joanne was given an advance of £1,500 pounds from Bloomsbury, with a first printing of 500 copies. She was ecstatic. Joanne was going to become a published author, under the pen name J.K. Rowling, because Cunningham believed young boys did not like to read books written by women. Cunningham also advised Joanne to "get a day job, because there is very little chance of making money in children's books."

Joanne made an application to the Scottish Arts Council and received a generous grant of £8,000 pounds, which she used to focus on writing the next book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Little then organized an auction for the American publishing rights of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. One bidder, executive director Arthur A. Levine of Scholastic Books, was highly enthusiastic about the book and won the auction, offering \$105,000 for the rights. The book was published in the United States the following year, in 1998, and became a massive success, selling millions of copies worldwide.

J.K. Rowling has written seven books in the Harry Potter series, and, according to Guinness World Records, the series has sold over 400 million copies worldwide, with Joanne as the “first billion-dollar author” in history, having grossed over \$1 billion from her novels and other related earnings.

## Stephen King

Stephen Edwin King was born in Portland, Maine. When he was two years old, his father left the family under the pretense of “going to buy a pack of cigarettes,” but never returned. This left his mother, Nellie, all alone to raise Stephen and his older brother, David, under great financial strain. Nellie struggled to make ends meet for the family and often held two to three jobs at a time. Parts of Stephen’s childhood were spent with his father’s family in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in Stratford, Connecticut, and in Durham, Maine, where Nellie had taken care of her incapacitated parents.

From an early age, Stephen wanted to become a successful writer. He contributed articles to David's local newspaper, *David's Rag*. In high school, Stephen held a part-time job digging graves, which inspired him to write the short story, “I Was a Teenage Grave Robber,” a tale about an orphan boy who accepts a job digging up bodies for a mad scientist. Although he was not paid, *College Review* accepted the short story. After all of the rejection letters Stephen had received thus far, he was finally in print.

After high school, Stephen enrolled at the University of Maine. He wrote every day and received his first check for \$35 from *Startling Mystery Stories* for his short story, “The Glass Door,” during his freshman year. As one of his professors put it, “We had many students who had aspired to become writers. What made Stephen different, from the beginning, was that not only did he aspire to become a writer, but he just went ahead and did it.” He was active around campus in the antiwar movement and in student government, and starting from his sophomore year, Stephen wrote a weekly column for the student newspaper, *The Maine Campus*. However, writing was not earning him a living. To supplement the \$5 per week his mother sent him, which Stephen later found out meant his mother would often live without eating, he took a job at the university library, where he met his wife, Tabitha Spruce.

The same year he graduated from the University of Maine with a Bachelor of Arts in English, Stephen was married and about to become a father. Living in a trailer park with his wife and daughter, and struggling to find work as a teacher, Stephen worked at a gas station for minimum wage and in a laundromat for \$1.60 per hour. Tabitha worked nights at Dunkin’ Donuts. Times were so hard that his family often had their phone disconnected, as they could not afford to pay their bills.

A year later, at twenty-four years old, Stephen found work as an English teacher at the Hampden Academy, a public high school, earning \$4,600 per year. After their second child, Stephen took a job at the laundromat to supplement the income from his teaching job. After working all day, grading papers, and preparing lessons at home, Stephen retired to the trailer's furnace room to write for at least two hours each night. Earning around \$200 per story, he developed an outlet for publishing stories via men's magazines.

Although Stephen was writing stories as fast as he could, his financial obligations mounted up. He vented his frustrations by smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol at the local bar. He began writing a short story about Carrietta White, the daughter of an unstable religious fanatic, which he hoped to sell for a few hundred dollars to a magazine. However, Stephen felt he didn't know enough about teenage girls to be true to the character and threw his first draft in the trashcan. Tabitha found the draft, read it, and insisted he finish writing it. With his wife's help, Stephen finished *Carrie* (1974) in two weeks' time and sent it to an editor at Doubleday, who had previously accepted (and rejected) several of his manuscripts. The editor, pleased, asked him to make a few changes and resubmit his manuscript. Stephen did, and moved on with his writing and his life.

Then, one day at school, Stephen was called into the main office from the loudspeaker for a call from his wife. As he made his way to the office, Stephen's heart was beating rapidly. One of two things must've happened. Either something was wrong with one of his children, or he published his book. As they had their phone disconnected, Tabitha received a telegram from the editor at Doubleday stating they were going to publish *Carrie* and pay Stephen an advance of \$2,500. Excited, Stephen and Tabitha spent the advance on a new car and moved into a small apartment.

Although life was better for his family, Stephen kept his day job of being an English teacher. He received a telephone call one day from the editor at Doubleday saying they sold the paperback rights for *Carrie* for \$400,000. Stephen was entitled to half, meaning he was to receive \$200,000, more money than he'd ever dreamed of. Upon hearing the news, Stephen dropped the phone and, as all of the strength had left his legs, slid down the wall behind him. Tabitha cried, and they embraced each other in their tiny apartment. *Carrie* sold over 1 million paperback copies within its first year and was also adapted into a major motion picture.

Stephen King has published more than fifty novels that have sold over 350 million copies worldwide. Many of his novels have also been adapted into feature films.

# Vin Diesel

Vin Diesel was born Mark Vincent in Manhattan, New York. He was raised in Westbeth, a tax-subsidized housing project for poor artists in Downtown Manhattan, by his mother, a retired astrologist, and his African-American stepfather, an acting instructor and theater manager. He has a younger brother and sister, as well as a fraternal twin, Paul. He never knew his biological father. At age seven, he and six other boys broke into an off-off Broadway house called the Theater for the New City near his home in Manhattan's Greenwich Village with the intent to vandalize it. When they were caught, Vin was scared, thinking Crystal Field, head of the resident drama company, would call the police. Instead, she offered him a job. He was handed a script and given a salary of \$20 per week. From that point on, Vin wanted to become a successful actor.

By age fifteen, Vin was breakdancing for coins and lifting weights. He did not get much acting work growing up, so very little gave him self-gratification besides bodybuilding and women. "I told myself that if I'm not a movie star by eighteen, I'll quit and get a job. Then I said it again when I was twenty-one, and again at twenty-four: 'I won't be like these poor people chasing a dream of happiness that don't come true,'" Vin said. "I danced on street corners for money," he continued, "bought clothes and kept the tags attached so I could get cash back to pay rent. But during all the years I was broke, sleeping on someone's couch, I knew I'd be a movie star. No one else believed it, but I was going to break the mold."

Vin supported himself for nine years in New York City working as a bouncer. He changed his name to Vin Diesel while working at the popular nightclub Tunnel. Vin is short for Vincent and Diesel was the nickname given to him by his friends who said he ran off of diesel fuel, referring to his nonstop energy. At the same time, Vin was enrolled as an English major at Hunter College, but dropped out after three years to move to Los Angeles, California to further his acting career. He was twenty-four years old.

After two years of struggling to find acting work and even to find an agent, Vin returned to New York. His mother gave him the book *Feature Films at Used Car Prices* by Rick Schmidt, which ultimately showed Vin that he could take control of his career and make his own movies. Inspired, Vin created his own film, *Multi-Facial* (1995), a twenty-minute short about a racially-indeterminate actor who cannot land a job because of ethnic stereotyping, which he wrote in five days and filmed in less than three days with a budget of only \$3,000. Later that year, *Multi-Facial* (1995) became a hit at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival, and people finally started to recognize Vin as an actor. The film was also noticed by filmmaker Steven Spielberg.

After the festival, Vin returned to Los Angeles and raised \$50,000 through his telemarketing job of selling tools to fund the making of his first feature film, *Strays* (1997). He had written the manuscript for *Strays* (1997) prior to *Multi-Facial* (1995), but couldn't afford to film it at the time. As Vin once said, "So what successful people know and what I learned was, if you can't do it all, do what you can," explaining his reasoning for filming *Multi-Facial* (1995) prior to *Strays* (1997). To kick the film off the ground, Vin surrounded himself with a team of people who believed in him. He rehearsed with his fellow actors on the subway, in a way that everyone around them would think they were having a real conversation. Vin also encouraged the actors to shine with him in his scenes because doing so would only make the film stronger. Filming was a struggle. Vin had to fire the director of photography (DP) on the first day. After a week, he could no longer afford catering, so Vin made big pots of pasta and French bread for everyone. He also ran out of money at one point, and had to change the movie script to complete filming the following day.

*Strays* (1997) was accepted into the 1997 Sundance Film Festival, and although it received a good reputation, it didn't sell as well as he had hoped. Yet again, Vin returned to New York disappointed, only this time to receive a dream phone call. Steven Spielberg was impressed by *Multi-Facial* (1995) and wanted to meet Vin, eventually casting him in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), starring Tom Hanks. The film was a huge success, grossing \$481 million in the box office worldwide. *Multi-Facial* (1995) earned Vin even more work, when the director for *The Iron Giant* (1999) saw it and decided to cast Vin for the title role. Vin's acting career took off, and he starred in *Boiler Room* (2000), *Pitch Black* (2000), and the film that catapulted him into stardom, *The Fast and the Furious* (2001).

## **Arnold Schwarzenegger**

Arnold Alois Schwarzenegger was born and raised in Thal, Austria. His father was a police chief and his mother was a homemaker. Arnold grew up in a stone-and-brick building that had no plumbing, shower, or flushing toilet. Their water supply was a well they walked to a quarter of a mile away, so the family used as little water as possible. They all took showers using the same water, starting with his mother and father, followed by Arnold and his brother.

Growing up in a poor and strict household during the Cold War, Arnold, like most of the boys in his town, was often beaten by his father, who pulled his hair and whipped him with a belt, to serve as punishment for his wrongdoings. The discipline at school was no different from home, with the teachers hitting as hard as the parents. One of his friends was hit by a math teacher in the back of the head so hard that his face bounced on the



desk, which broke his two front teeth. Hardships were routine, but Arnold never forgot how to withstand physical punishment.

Starting from an early age, Arnold had his eyes set on America. He believed he would go there one day. His vision was different from most childhood dreams. It was almost like a revelation to him. He told everyone about it: his parents, brother, friends, and even strangers on the street. "I'm going to America!" Arnold would often say. Although he didn't know how he was going to get there, he just knew he was going to do it. The people around him weren't convinced, but Arnold was, and he never stopped believing.

A history teacher assigned Arnold to an essay-writing assignment on Kurt Marnul, then-Mr. Austria, who had set a record in the bench press: 190 kilograms. Arnold was impressed by Marnul's achievement, but at the time, he didn't believe weightlifting had anything to do with him. During the summers, Arnold made friends with boxers, wrestlers, and other athletes at a popular summer hangout called Thalersee. He developed a close friendship with one of the lifeguards, Willi Richter, who was into weightlifting and brought Arnold along to train and to attend the World Weightlifting Championship with a few other guys in Vienna.

It wasn't until Arnold was fourteen years old when his vision became clearer. He wanted to become strong and muscular after watching the movie *Hercules and the Captive Women* (1961). Arnold was impressed with Hercules's body, portrayed by Reg Park, then-Mr. Universe. He also met Kurt Marnul, who was friends with Willi. Arnold was inspired when he saw Marnul's body, as well as all of the beautiful women who came with him. He wanted to be just like him. Arnold started training with Marnul, studying his entire workout schedule, as well as his techniques for pursuing women.

Although Arnold tried a lot of other sports, the gym totally consumed him. It was all he thought about. He even broke into a gym one Sunday when it was closed so he could train in the freezing cold. He had to wrap his hands in towels to prevent them from sticking to the metal bars. "Kurt Marnul can win Mr. Austria," he thought, "and he's already told me that I could too if I train hard, so that's what I'm going to do." Arnold's inspiration grew when he picked up a copy of *Muscle Builder* magazine and read the life story of Reg Park, growing up poor in England, to becoming Mr. Universe, to playing Hercules and living in "Muscle Beach," Santa Monica, California. He was sure that Park was a millionaire and always had beautiful women around him.

Suddenly, Arnold's dreams made sense. He refined his vision to become very specific. He was going to become another Reg Park. He was going to win the Mr. Universe title and break records in powerlifting. Then he was going to Hollywood, California. The vision had become so clear in his mind, it felt like it had to happen. There was no other

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