

VOGUE

MAGAZINE

The World According to Phoebe Waller-Bridge

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COVER LOOK

Phoebe Waller-Bridge wears a Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello dress. Dries Van Noten ring. Nikos Koulis bracelet. To get this look, try: Even Better Makeup Foundation in WN 16 Buff, Beyond Perfecting Foundation + Concealer CN 10 Alabaster, Stay-Matte Sheer Pressed Powder in Invisible Matte, Brow Keeper in Warm Brown, High Impact Mascara in Black/Brown, and Even Better Pop Lip Colour Foundation in 03 Romanced. All by Clinique. Hair, Orlando Pita; makeup, Aaron de Mey.

Fashion Editor: Tonne Goodman. Photographed by Ethan James Green, Vogue, December 2019

IT SEEMS FITTING to begin in the bathroom. A seminal scene of *Fleabag*—the show that Phoebe Waller-Bridge wrote, starred in, and blew all our minds with, winning an armload of Emmys in the process—takes place in one, with Waller-Bridge’s character cracking period jokes as her sister quietly miscarries in the toilet stall. Outside, in a dark, almost mobby restaurant, the rest of the family is enduring a god-awful dinner. The bathroom is the sanctum within the bunker, the place where secrets out and blood flows. So, at the end of lunch on recent October afternoon, when Waller-Bridge suggested a joint trip to the loo (“We can pee together!”), I couldn’t help but feel a little anxious. Everything was cheerful, though. “Are you still recording?” Waller-Bridge joked from the adjacent stall. Definitely not, but the line was memorably her: slightly dirty, very droll, heedless of the fourth wall (and the one that separated the toilets). “Anything I can sing or say?” she continued as she washed her hands. I finally had to kick her and her inhibitingly good banter out of the bathroom. “I’m going, I’m going! It would be creepy if I pretended to leave but didn’t, wouldn’t it?” she said, her posh, redolent voice lingering as the door swung shut.

We were at The Playwright, a midtown pub and restaurant that is a sentimental favorite of perhaps no one except Phoebe Waller-Bridge. She first went there in 2000, as a London teenager participating in a summer program at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. “It’s kind of mad because my

sister was 17 and I was 15 and so desperate to do some cool acting. We both auditioned and got in, and my parents let us come,” she recalled at the beginning of the meal. They lived in student housing near the Port Authority Bus Terminal. “We did a few hours of acting every day and then tore it up,” Waller-Bridge said. Their bar was The Playwright, chosen less for its booze-for-the-job-you-want vibe than for what Waller-Bridge remembered as a relaxed door policy. Their drink was a Cosmopolitan; their dinner, the crispy calamari. “I had a snog right there,” Waller-Bridge said at one point, indicating a dark corner of the bar. “And I thought he was gay!” Now, a couple of decades later, we stuck with water and vacillated about salads: Southwest, shrimp Caesar? “We could get both and share?” Waller-Bridge suggested.

Fleabag began in 2013, as a one-woman show at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Nominally, it’s about a 20-something woman—technically anonymous but widely known as Fleabag—who used to run a guinea pig-themed café with her best friend, and now runs it alone because her best friend died in a horrible way for which she is still trying to figure out her measure of responsibility. The stage version of *Fleabag* is starker and darker than the television one. When I saw Waller-Bridge perform it a few months ago, in London, a truly raunchy line involving a sandwich bun and a hairdresser had the crowd in shrieks. Channeling the toothy suitor known as Tube Rodent, she rearranged her face in a way that I would have thought impossible without the surgical removal of a jawbone. Last spring in New York, Hillary Clinton attended a performance and joined Waller-Bridge for a meal and a glass of wine afterward. “She was fantastic. I asked her if she could relate to the character,” Waller-Bridge recalled. “She said she didn’t personally, but she was very interested in the origins of the play and my perception of how women my age were feeling at the time I was writing it. I

was hyperaware that she was in the audience, principally because the guinea pig in the play is called Hilary, which obviously gave the whole performance a gripping frisson.”



ROLE MODEL

Fleabag's second season won Waller- Bridge universal acclaim and a haul of Emmys. Alexander McQueen jacket and pants. Photographed by Ethan James Green, *Vogue*, December 2019

Waller-Bridge was in New York at the end of a monthlong stay in America. The trip had begun in Los Angeles, where she attended the Emmys. She had been the star of the night, taking home the awards for outstanding lead

actress in a comedy series and outstanding writing for a comedy series. *Killing Eve*, a voluptuous thriller that she created (her synopsis, “murder, murder, good hair,” is as good as any), also garnered nine nominations. “Well, this is just getting ridiculous!” Waller-Bridge said, from the stage, after *Fleabag* won for outstanding comedy series. “Phoebe celebrates women and writes them in their entirety,” said Jodie Comer, who won lead actress in a drama series for her role as Villanelle, *Killing Eve*’s insouciant assassin. “I think she is telling us that there are no rules, or at least not to play by them.”

This fall, Ian Griffiths, the Max Mara creative designer, sent models down the runway in tailored, secret agent-like separates that were inspired by *Killing Eve* and Waller-Bridge, who, he said, “has taken a genre and twisted it into something contemporary.” She is extremely interested in clothes, as far as her characters go (she wrote Villanelle’s genre-exploding pink tulle dress into the *Killing Eve* script), and says, “When you land on an outfit that you *love*, there’s no greater feeling” (a navy velvet suit by Bella Freud, for example). Still, she said, “I maintain the right to leave the house looking like shit, in my pajamas.” At lunch, she was wearing sneakers, with a Woody Woodpecker ringer tee and a pair of pleated pants the color of toffee. A Harris Tweed blazer sat on the back of her chair. “I find dressing really stressful, just that decision every day,” she said. “You want to just Steve Jobs it.”

I asked her what an English person does when confronted with raging success. “I think you probably have one too many gin-and-tonics and have all your friends take the piss out of you,” she said. The evidence, however—in the form of a picture of Waller-Bridge, taken at an Emmys after-party—suggests that she revels in the thrill of it all, tipping her head back with the undefended elation of someone who believes in the legitimacy of her accomplishment. The picture did not so much break the internet as it did

encourage the internet to take off its sweatpants, put on a shimmery Monique Lhuillier gown, and go hold court in a high-backed chair that looked like a throne while smoking a cigarette with one hand and balancing a cocktail in the other. “People describe Phoebe as really cool, but, I don’t know, I feel that she’s not cool,” said Andrew Scott, a longtime friend of Waller-Bridge, whom she cast as the “hot priest” in *Fleabag*. “Cool suggests detached and indifferent, and I think she’s actually the opposite of that, a boundless enthusiast for life.”



FACE THE CROWD

At 15, Waller-Bridge first came to New York to attend a summer dramatic-arts program, “so desperate to do some cool acting,” she says. Christopher Kane jacket and dress. A La Vieille Russie bracelet. Polo Ralph Laurentote bag (holding dog). Photographed by Ethan James Green, *Vogue*, December 2019

The morning after the ceremony, Waller-Bridge showed up at Scott’s hotel room for a hungover debrief. The after-party drink, for the record, had been a vodka gimlet. “The gimlet came into my life about a year and a half ago,” Waller-Bridge said. “I have really always wanted a cocktail that you order with

total confidence; you know, that thing that you order and everyone's like, Holy shit, she knows what she's doing with her entire life." Even if the picture was glorious, it wasn't exactly role-model material. I asked Waller-Bridge if she gave the friend who took it permission to post it on Instagram. "He always asks for approval," she said. "And I was like, Yes, fuck yes! Approved. So *approved.*"

WALLER-BRIDGE'S sense of mischief comes from a place of security. She grew up in Ealing, a genteel suburb of London, with baronets and a member of Parliament in the family tree. ("Is Phoebe Waller-Bridge a Tory?" is one of the questions that comes up when you Google her. Her reply: "I've never seen that! What the hell! I don't know what's worse—the idea that people are writing that with hope or fear? No, I'm not a Tory. Proudly not a Tory.") The Waller-Bridge household was a hive of sociability. "There is and was always lots going on—music, chatting, laughing, people, and sharing bits of creative work with our parents and friends," Isobel Waller-Bridge, Phoebe's older sister, said. Her father, Michael, cofounded the first electronic stock market in Europe before moving into venture capital and reinventing himself as a portrait photographer. Her mother, Teresa, is an administrator at The Ironmongers' Company, a 700-year-old guild in London. (They divorced when Phoebe was in her early 20s.) Waller-Bridge, who also has a younger brother, Jasper, is extremely close with her siblings. Isobel, a composer, wrote the music for *Fleabag* and, more recently, for a runway show for Alexander McQueen. "We do a lot of talking, almost casually—waiting for a bus, walking to the shop, making cups of tea," Isobel said. "So it's always part of our consciousness, and then often we'll accidentally go down a rabbit hole for hours, and will usually come out the other side with something we're excited about."

For a while in her 20s, after graduating from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, Waller-Bridge had a guinea pig-themed café of an acting career. She was temping, auditioning, getting no roles. “I think I felt like the most important thing was how I looked—especially in your 20s, when everyone’s like, ‘Cash in on it now because you haven’t got a lot of time!’ ” Waller-Bridge recalled. “Hair was everything.” Obviously, Waller-Bridge, as a beautiful, privately educated white woman, had a lot, practically everything, going for her; she has acknowledged that it is “absolutely probably true” that she had opportunities others didn’t. Still, the need to appear perfect kept her from accessing deeper forms of expression. “I had to remember how to be free,” she continued. “I was always trying to please, to do the right kind of acting.”



POINT OF VIEW

With an Amazon production deal worth a reported \$20 million per year, Waller-Bridge is keen (and well equipped) to provoke: “I always want to be dangerous.” Alexander McQueen jacket, dress, and shoes. A La Vieille Russie earring. Photographed by Ethan James Green, *Vogue*, December 2019

Frustrated, even infuriated, by the experience, she began creating her own material, often working with her best friend, the writer and director Vicky Jones. Waller-Bridge had had a couple of romantic relationships that lasted a couple of years (“In the interims I’d go crazy,” she recalled), but Jones was her “first love,” the person who immediately *got* her, activating the say-anything vulnerability out of which creativity flows. They lived together for years, continuing to share a flat even after Jones met her fiancé and got pregnant. (Waller-Bridge is executive-producing and acting in Jones’s comedy-thriller *Run*, which will air on HBO next year.) Together they founded a theater company called DryWrite. “It was about writers being able to write anonymously so that they could be more fearless, and I was like, ‘Jesus, I was going on about that when I was 10!’” Waller-Bridge said. “You realize that these things come back that you’ve been banging on about for so long.”

A BBC executive who caught *Fleabag* at Edinburgh in 2013 called Waller-Bridge’s agent the next day and signed her to adapt it for television. Around the same time, she wrote *Crashing* for Channel 4, starring as Lulu, a sort of proto-Fleabag who wreaks havoc upon her roommates by forcing them to blurt out divisive truths while she strums a ukulele. After airing in the United Kingdom, *Fleabag* premiered on Amazon in 2016 and finished its second and final season earlier this year. At the end of November, Ballantine will publish *Fleabag: The Scriptures*, a completist’s dream of a book, including the show’s full scripts and Waller-Bridge’s commentary.

In the transition from stage to screen, *Fleabag* gained some characters and lost one shocking plot twist. What remained is a structural rigor that separates the show from the looser, more oversharey work with which it is often categorized, mainly because its creator is a young woman. “I get asked

who inspired me as writers, and I realized I'd always been slightly embarrassed to admit it, because it seems so obvious, but, like, the Greek plays! Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare—all the ones you think you can't say because they're great. I'm now owning that," she told me. Waller-Bridge is almost architectural in her mapping of the public and private spaces of our psyches, the distances from front to core. She takes a wrecking ball to the collective unacknowledged, the unsayable desires and doubts that people think they are bearing alone. Her work feels like television in the first person. "One of the most amazing effects she's had on me is that she's made me have no fear as well," Jenny Robins, Waller-Bridge's story producer, said. "I used to ask myself, Do I say that? Is that funny? Is that a bit dark? Does anyone else feel that? But when I'm working with her, I would say anything and everything and never feel worried about it."

SOMEWHERE IN THE ETHER, there is a draft email that is worth as much as a small jet. It's titled "Funnies"; it is addressed to no one. Waller-Bridge, who recently signed what is reported to be a \$20 million-a-year deal with Amazon, has been adding to the draft for the past decade, accumulating material for future projects. "I could have a notebook, but I know I'd lose it, so I just write ideas down and bring them out every time I have a show," she said. The ideas go onto Post-it notes, which go onto a wall. Sometimes she'll build an entire episode to showcase a single joke, as she did with the *Fleabag* episode in which Fleabag's sister, Claire, gets a haircut that looks like a semicolon draped itself over her skull. Waller-Bridge likes to write in bed, often late at night, right up to the brink of a deadline. "Sometimes she'll write on her computer and then link to a TV screen in my house, so I can look at what she's typing as she's doing it," Robins said. (Imagine having a live feed of what is going on in Phoebe Waller-Bridge's head.)



DANCE FEVER

“I think at the moment, it is the happiest I’ve ever seen her,” says Waller-Bridge’s older sister (and *Fleabag* collaborator), Isobel. Waller-Bridge wears a Dries Van Noten top, skirt, jeans, and boots. Photographed by Ethan James Green, *Vogue*, December 2019

“I love a note; I love to pitch,” Waller-Bridge told me as we wandered through Central Park. We’d ended up there after lunch, taking Eighth Avenue and eating Peanut Butter M&Ms that she produced from her bag as we walked.

“Look at him, though, he’s so old,” she said, pointing out a retriever. “I like old dogs. Old dogs have stories to tell.”

“There are going to be a lot of them,” I said. “Get ready.”

“I know. You’re going to have to put me on a leash.”

Waller-Bridge really did not want to do a second season of *Fleabag*. Harry Bradbeer, who directed both seasons of the show, told me, “She was stumped, stumped, stumped—and depressed about it. She didn’t want to do something that wasn’t good enough.” By the time *Fleabag* became a hit, Waller-Bridge had been living with it for the better part of a decade and was solidly into her 30s. “It’s so hard because you change,” she said. “You’re trying to write authentically all the time. You have to write that change, and coming into the second season, it was like, you have to, you know, inverted commas, ‘give the people what they want.’”

“Yay!” she said suddenly. “My God.”

I turned to see a woman, at the edge of the path, feeding a squirrel out of the palm of her hand.

“I think it was a cashew,” Waller-Bridge concluded. “Pretty swanky for a squirrel.”

We were trying to get to the boathouse, but we weren’t really giving navigating our all. At one point, we rounded a corner, sure that we were about to arrive at a glimmering lake, only to dead-end at a bunch of dumpsters. “I love that we were both very much drawn to this part of the park,” Waller-Bridge said. “This is the nourishing, calming place we need to go.”

It wasn’t until Waller-Bridge realized that the second season of *Fleabag* had to be a love story—“an adult love story, but with teenaged feelings”—that her anxiety began to lift. (The feelings about the romance between her character and the hot priest were intense enough that, after the season premiere,

searches for the word *religious* on the site Pornhub spiked by a 162%.) On the subject of love: Waller-Bridge was married for three years to the documentary filmmaker Conor Woodman. After their divorce in 2017, she began dating the Irish–British playwright Martin McDonagh. Sensibly, she didn’t want to discuss either of them. “I’m much braver in my writing life,” she said.

We got to talking, in general terms, about a kind of withdrawal between friends that can happen in your 30s.

“It’s so true, isn’t it? We used to share so freely,” Waller-Bridge said as we discussed the lockdown that ensues when people start pairing off and nobody wants to admit what’s going on inside their relationships. Drama in your love life doesn’t feel like failure when you’re young, she said. “Because the stakes are so low. But then you choose someone who is in some ways going to define your life, and is probably defining or molding who you grow to be because you’re with him all the time. And you want the best. You want the best possible, so you’re not going to—”

Someone interrupted to ask for a selfie, which Waller-Bridge warmly obliged.

“I think the first half of your life, you’re trying to find out who you are, and you’re kind of knocking yourself against things, and testing things the whole time, to help kind of sculpt yourself,” she said, picking up the thread. “Then later, when you’ve got as close to sculpted as possible, you’re like, Don’t touch anything, in case it changes me.”

“It’s a much more protective way of moving through the world,” I said.

“Yeah—someone might just knock the nose off the sculpture,” Waller-Bridge

replied. She added, self-deprecatingly, “To be fair, I wouldn’t mind a little centimeter or two.”

Waller-Bridge could not get enough of the animal kingdom of Central Park. At one point a puppy walked by, and she exclaimed, “That is what my mom would call a snack!” The first thing she wanted to do when she got back to London, she said, was to adopt a rescue dog. She thought maybe she’d actually name it Snack. I had resolved not to ask Waller-Bridge about her maternal desires, or lack thereof. But she wanted to know how I felt about having kids, and at a certain point it felt ungenerous not to reciprocate. “I don’t know,” she said. “It’s weird. I love kids. No, I feel like there’s so much happening. I guess I’ve become quite a see-what-life-throws-at-you kind of person. I think I would like to. I love hanging out with kids—you know, good ones.”



BELLWEBHER

"Sometimes you feel it's braver to say something outrageous, and it's not always. Sometimes it's braver to say the vulnerable thing." Balenciaga dress. Cartier ring. Photographed by Ethan James Green, *Vogue*, December 2019

We were absolutely sure we were getting close to the boathouse. Waller-Bridge was talking about how one of the most poignant things in the world is seeing the banal little moments of bravery—a haircut, a quip, a trendy hat—that people venture in an effort to connect. “I feel like making a joke is a risk in any situation, which is why I love people that try,” she said. She went on, “When you meet someone, for me anyway, working out what makes them laugh is one of the things that helps you figure out who they are. You know those things that humans can do that are just totally free? Like, outside of what clothes you wear, or what restaurant you’re at, or what your upbringing was, or anything. It’s just like sex is two naked people, a thing that people do, that happens everywhere all over the world. And what’s glorious is that you realize that you’re completely naked and you’ve used nothing, you’ve just used each other. And that’s beautiful.”

WALLER-BRIDGE has quickly gathered as much momentum as one could hope to have in Hollywood. There are the Emmys, the role in *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, the fact that Daniel Craig recruited her to punch up the script of *No Time to Die*, the forthcoming James Bond movie. She was chary about the financial details of the Amazon deal, while making it clear, in an understated fashion, that it had not left her wanting. When I asked about equal pay, she replied, “My agents are very hot on that, and then they know that I feel really strongly about it. So, yeah, all those conversations happened.” She is writing a feature film, which she wants to direct, based on an idea that hit her one morning, like a “bolt out of the blue,” just after she finished *Fleabag*. Exactly what it’s about is a closely-guarded secret, but Waller-Bridge let slip that it will involve a close collaboration with her sister. “I’ve always loved the idea of starting with a sound and working backward,” she said. “A lot of times, I’ll write something and go to her and say, ‘Can you

score it?’ and with this one, she and I have been talking about the score before I’ve even finished the movie.”

The *Fleabag* director Bradbeer told me that Waller-Bridge takes a “tickle, tickle, slap” approach to her work, seducing the audience with laughter and then hitting them square in the face with something shocking. Even if she is known for an inward-focused, intimate kind of comedy, her jokes can have a sly political edge. Two weeks after the Emmys, she hosted *Saturday Night Live* for the first time. In her monologue, she observed that women are becoming franker than ever about their sex lives. “Whereas straight men, these days, you are allowed one fantasy,” she said, holding up a schoolmarmish finger. “If you’re looking up anything other than a woman in her 30s in the missionary position, you are a pervert.” It was especially interesting as a poke at the pieties of the post-#MeToo era—a nibble on the hand of the industry that has just begun to feed her so extravagantly. “The moment I know something is politically correct is the moment I want to be a little rebel,” Waller-Bridge told me. She added, “If you don’t go and fuck something up at least a little bit, then what’s the point?”

Eventually we made it to the boathouse. The lake looked perfect, a no-filter fall wonder of leaf and light. We got in line to rent a rowboat. In front of us, a man was holding a boathouse-provided metal container with his female companion’s purse inside.

“I won’t carry a handbag, so I will carry it in a box,” Waller-Bridge said, perfectly channeling a Central Park romance bro.



FUNNY BUSINESS

Marc Jacobs dress. A La Vieille Russie ring. In this story: hair, Orlando Pita; makeup, Aaron de Mey. Photographed by Ethan James Green, *Vogue*, December 2019

We got the boat and pushed off. Unsurprisingly, Waller-Bridge is a big larks-and-diversions person. (Current favorite: the card game Dobble.) She was a natural, lifting and dipping the oars as though she were pedaling a bicycle with her hands. She seemed thrilled to be breathing fresh air. New York had been a blur of rehearsal rooms. In her little bit of free time, she'd gone to see *Joker*, which she thought was “absolutely brilliant.” “I think the reason people got so uncomfortable is because it feels too true, too raw,” she said. “I was watching it and thinking to myself, God, if this came out a year into Obama’s time in office, I don’t think we’d be feeling as worried about it.

“Turtle Ibiza!” Waller-Bridge said, steering toward a rock on which dozens and dozens of turtles were splayed out in the dwindling sun.

We rowed and rowed. At one point, Waller-Bridge, a buoyant conversationalist, told me about how the novelist Patricia Highsmith used to smuggle snails through customs in her bra. As the sky clouded over, her head-girl merriment faded and she relaxed into a quiet seriousness. “I always want to be dangerous,” she’d told me at lunch. I asked what she wanted to do with all the power she was accumulating, what taboos were calling her name now.

She said that there were “much harder jokes about America” that she’d toyed around with for the *SNL* monologue and ultimately left out, feeling that they were inappropriate. Like what? “Just about the abortion laws, the kind of stuff you can’t get your head around. The fact that the world has gone backward in this way, and actually in some frightening sense, in so many ways, women have a louder voice, are more empowered these days, and then in these other really insidious ways, blatant ways, we’re being marginalized again. How do you fight that? Because if you rant and rave, if you try and make a noise, you’ll be labeled noisy. You have to be careful of that. You have to find ways to protest. I’d really like to write something about that. I don’t know what it is yet.” She continued, “Sometimes you feel it’s braver to say something outrageous, and it’s not always. Sometimes it’s braver to say the vulnerable thing.”

She had stopped rowing. We were in the middle of the lake, where it was silent and still.

“I feel like I might scale up a bit,” she said a few seconds later. “I’ll scale up in terms of gradually getting bigger with my themes and stuff, and I feel maybe I want to start thinking more politically, more globally. I don’t know, but I can feel something bubbling.