





# The Auteur

A DIRECTOR SCRIPTS HIS OWN DESTINY  
WITH DETERMINATION, CREATIVITY,  
AND EMOTIVE STORIES

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It's a humid 73 degrees and soft gray clouds threaten rain in the distance. Photographer Amy Dickerson and I sit in Adirondack chairs atop a grassy hillside, taking in both the vista and the immediate view of a large field encircled by a muddy track. A three-story, woodsy home is to our right, a sizeable stable of horses to our far left. We're at Haviland Hollow Farm in upstate New York, where filmmaker Cary Fukunaga has asked us to meet him on this Saturday afternoon. Ever the director, he summons us to drive down to the farm's lower field where he advises it's far more aesthetically pleasing.

When we arrive at the field, we're caught a little off guard. Donning a striped button-up shirt, dark blue jeans, and a straw fedora, Cary's first order of business is handing us each a bottle of Corona along with some lime wedges. His horse, Pampa—one of two that he owns—hovers behind him with polo groom Milton. We're greeted next by Montana, a friend he's known since their snowboarding days, who's visiting from Chicago. Sam, the owner of the polo farm, pulls up in a classic VW camper van to join us. As I take a seat in the back of Cary's SUV and chat with the group, it instantly feels like we're tailgating with old friends.

While it's immediately clear that Cary has a very laid-back persona, I'm well aware that his work ethic is anything but. "It's the Asian thing in me I guess," he laughs. Since winning an Emmy in 2014 for directing the first season of *True Detective*, the hardworking director's name appears in the press often. Earlier this year, Netflix announced that it had bought the rights to his film *Beasts of No Nation* for \$12 million and he signed on to direct *The Alienist* for TNT.



*This page and opposite:* Director Cary Fukunaga and his polo pony, Pampa, in the fields at Haviland Hollow Farm. In the summer, Cary likes to spend his downtime at the polo farm in upstate New York.

To say Cary's life right now is unreal is an understatement, considering his humble beginnings. Born in Oakland, California, and raised in a peripatetic childhood, Cary shuffled around numerous towns in the Bay Area. Neither of his parents were in the arts nor did they have artistic inclinations—his mother, Gretchen, was a dental hygienist and his dad, Tony, owned a generator company then went on to work for UC Berkeley. One of four children, he admits that he always thought his older brother Jeremy, who is now a photographer, showed more artistic promise growing up. “He was better at drawing,” Cary mentions.

Technically speaking, Cary's film career began in middle school when he would make videos with his friends for fun. “The whole concept of making movies was because I enjoyed it. I'd never thought that it would be a career,” he says. “I never thought you could make movies as an actual job unless you were somehow related to someone in Hollywood. It wasn't as linear as say being an athlete. The chasm between what you enjoy doing and what people are getting paid to do seemed incomprehensible at the time.”

Thus he pursued sports—snowboarding in particular—and attended UC Santa Cruz, where he received a degree in history and also did a year at the Grenoble Institute of Political Studies. Though he competed actively for about four years, at age 23 he realized that he wasn't going to be picked up for “A or B teams” and so he ended his dreams of becoming a professional snowboarder.

Like any other college grad, he was thrust into the real world in need of a job. Despite having no experience, he started “crewing,” or taking production assistant gigs, in the Bay Area. “It's a good thing my family instilled a pretty strong work ethic in me,” he explains.



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“On my first job, I was hired to be one of the location scouts and it turned out that I was the only one turning in photographs that production would actually use. They made me location manager and I didn’t even know what that was.”

Eventually Los Angeles beckoned. Through a friend he scored a crewing gig for a music video—“Survivor” by Destiny’s Child to be exact. “It was pretty awesome. I went from doing really independent B-stuff in the Bay Area to suddenly being on a multi-million dollar music video set,” Cary remarks. He was tasked with everything from driving the camera truck to making tea for the camera team.

During his three years crewing he gained actual applicable experience and skills, including shooting stills and understanding lighting. Cary also met people who had crewed previously, gone to film school, only to return again to crewing after they graduated. He was determined not to follow that same path when he decided to pursue an MFA in filmmaking at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts in 2002. His plan? Work hard, naturally.

In his application to NYU, he was asked to describe a future script he would make. Pulling from his studies in history and political science—particularly on neocolonialism in post-colonial nation states—he outlined a story about child soldiers in West

Africa. Thirteen years later, that idea would manifest into a feature film: *Beasts of No Nation*.

Why the long incubation? Despite doing research for the script in 2003, including spending a month in Sierra Leone meeting former combatants and displaced peoples, he could not write a script that worked for him. So he tabled the project to work on his short *Victoria Para Chino*, an honest, emotionally charged look into illegal immigration through the Mexican border. He submitted it to festivals and it won several awards, including a Student Academy Award when it screened at the Sundance Film Festival in 2005.

It wasn’t until a friend gave him the book *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala that his child soldier story began to solidify. While the book is more of an allegorical tale of a young African boy recruited into a guerilla unit, and not linked to any specific wars, he applied it to what he had learned about Sierra Leone and Liberia. He completed the screenplay in 2006, but as usual, other projects



Cary sits in his 1963 Ford 100 that he keeps at the farm. An eBay purchase, he had its engine rebuilt in New Orleans while he was filming *True Detective*.



demanded his attention. The Sundance Institute asked him to submit a screenplay and he opted for a feature-length version based on his short. It became the award-winning film *Sin Nombre*. Then he was hired to direct *Jane Eyre* and later, *True Detective*.

As soon as season one of *True Detective* finished, Cary headed off to Ghana to begin pre-production on *Beasts of No Nation*, finally.

Creating the film took a mental, emotional, and physical toll on him. “Filming in Ghana posed challenges that you never worry about when you’re filming in a country with a pre-existing film production infrastructure, or even a country with a thriving tourist industry. Hotels, restaurants, transportation companies—Ghana had almost none of this,” Cary says. “Our production team had to motivate the local industries, civil and state governments, military, to cooperate—often times with cash payouts. It’s a different way of doing business from standard film productions and caused a lot of stress and fears.”

In addition, casting was particularly difficult as traditional outreach methods for auditions failed to attract the right people. They took to the streets, hitting up schools, playgrounds, and football pitches to find kids who were charismatic, camera ready, and understood direction. Through this process they met the film’s lead child actor, Abraham Attah, who plays Agu.

Even though filming wrapped over a year ago, Cary still keeps in touch with a few of the kids in the film. In fact, Cary and his team put Abraham as well as two others, Justice Azudey and Emmanuel Nii Adom Quaye in boarding schools in Ghana (the latter two had been homeless). “We’re also tracking their grades,” Cary adds. “We want to make sure they’re working hard at school.”

*Beasts of No Nation* is set to stream on Netflix and debut in theaters on October 16. I asked

## ***CREATING THE FILM TOOK A MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL TOLL ON HIM.***



### ***BEASTS OF NO NATION***

Debuting online and in theaters in October, this is the first feature film released by Netflix.

*Clockwise:* Abraham Attah as Agu. Idris Elba as Commandant. The actor and Cary on the set of the film.



Cary learned to ride horses after filming *Jane Eyre*, and picked up polo thereafter. "I always thought polo was reserved for Saudi Arabian princes," he laughs.

***“IT’S ABOUT CHALLENGING AUDIENCES TO STILL GO TO THE CINEMA TO WATCH A MOVIE WHEN IT’S AVAILABLE ONLINE.”***

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Cary to explain himself: Why go the Netflix route and give people the choice to watch the film initially for a much smaller fee and on a much smaller screen?

“It’s about challenging audiences to still go to the cinema to watch a movie when it’s available online,” Cary states. “Challenging them to appreciate the experience of watching a film on the big screen, with the sound, with strangers in the dark, uninterrupted.

“It also benefits the movie by getting people to actually watch it. Netflix will make sure people see it. If this was a normal platform release, a film like *Beasts* with practically no stars in it and

mostly not in English would likely have a much smaller audience.”

If the Netflix gambit takes off, it could be a game-changer, ushering in alternate routes for movies to be released and leading the way for filmmakers to deliver their films in similar fashion. Giving viewers the option to choose between watching a premiere film at a theatre or on their personal device begs the question: *What will people actually do?* Cary and many others in the film industry are curious to find out. “It’s exciting, but nerve-racking,” he admits.

Cary’s come a long way from his on-set tea-making days. His ascent into filmmaking stardom rides almost exclusively on creative talent, hard work, emotive stories of the overlooked, and films with crazy integrity. It is an anomaly in Hollywood, where big breaks are built on connections and film narratives continually lapse into the all too predictable. It is not surprising then that, when I ask about his Emmy’s whereabouts, Cary says the award is kept hidden in a box in his closet.

As we turn our attention back to the landscape, Cary talks about how he likes the light upstate and hopes to buy a home in the area around the farm. “I don’t need it to be expansive,” he says. “I don’t want to be in the woods in a dark little hole. I want to be able to watch the sun go down and to be able to drink a beer with my friends on a porch.” ●