RAISING THE GAME

Following a turbulent decade of overcoming mental illness, *Game of Thrones*
actress Sophie Turner's star turn in the latest *X-Men* instalment signals
a newly empowered chapter, writes Tiffany Bakker

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T
hroughout *Game of Thrones'* eight brutal and bloody seasons, Sophie Turner's Sansa Stark has endured more than pretty much anyone else still left standing. Her psychopathic husband ordered her father's execution, her mother and brother were slaughtered at a wedding, she married two of the worst men ever depicted on screen and somehow managed to survive a completely demented mother-in-law.

"Sansa has been through a bit," laughs the actress when we meet at a lavish downtown New York hotel where the candles smell expensive and no-one seems to talk above a whisper. Turner is quick to put those around her at ease, however – she's snappy, engaging company and there's an immediate levity to her that isn't readily apparent in her on-screen work and public persona. Dressed in a black hoodie and denim jeans, her hair returned to its natural blonde tone, she could be any other young woman traipsing the Manhattan streets outside, but the Louis Vuitton mink slippers – Turner is the current face of the label and muse to designer Nicolas Ghesquière – are a subtle reminder that she's a fixed member of the A-list.

Yet as we chat, it quickly becomes apparent that Turner's rise to fame has been far more challenging than just glossy high-fashion and champagne-soaked parties. Behind the scenes of her decade-long run on the medieval fantasy phenomenon, the 23-year-old British star was fighting a battle that she felt at times was almost as dark as Sansa Stark's reality.

"People are constantly telling you you're not good enough"

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ophie Turner grew up on a farm near a small town in Warwickshire, England, the same county where William Shakespeare was born. She describes a happy childhood: she and her two older brothers, James and Will, would muck around in pigsties and paddocks. Passionate about performing from an early age, she signed up with a local theatre group – "as much to give my mum the chance to have a cup of coffee for an hour as anything," she quips – but it was her school drama teacher who secured her audition for the show that would change her life.

Yet, while being cast in *GoT* – her first professional performance – at just 13 was an exhilarating dream come true, Turner reveals that growing up in front of the world left her with depression and anxiety.

The actress is refreshingly honest about the way her mental health was impacted by fame – particularly traversing her awkward teenage years in front of millions, many of whom were quick to let her know what they thought. "I have experienced mental illness firsthand and I've seen what it can do to the people around [the sufferers] as well," she says. "My metabolism suddenly decided to fall to the depths of the ocean and I started to get spotty and gain weight, and all of this was happening to me on camera."

Then came pressure from film and television studios to lose weight. How, as a young girl, did she cope with that? "Therapy," Turner says with a smile. "Everyone needs a therapist, especially when people are constantly telling you you're not good enough and you don't look good enough. I think it's necessary to have someone to talk to, and to help you through that."

During that period, she found social media particularly triggering, often sending her into a downward spiral. "It was bloody horrible. Social media is the worst, the absolute pits," she says. "People think they know you, so they think they can say these things willy-nilly. It's not OK, it's not right and it can really affect someone's mental health. It affected mine."

Still, for all her issues with social media, Turner understands the relevance of the medium and how it allows her to connect with her ever-expanding army of fans (she has more than 9.5 million Instagram followers). "I just put things on that make me feel happy," she says of her posts. But, for her own sanity, she never reads the comments. "You would never really be happy if you placed your value on being liked on ▷

Turner's role as Sansa Stark on hit fantasy drama series *Game of Thrones* brought her global recognition and, in turn, anxiety.

social media. But it's an ongoing struggle – it's crazy how much it can affect you."

As well as crediting her "very down-to-earth" family for helping her navigate fame – "two big brothers, they'll bring you right back to [reality]" – Turner says she got through the experience thanks to *GoT* co-star and BFF, Maisie Williams, who plays her on-screen sister, Arya. "Maisie and I did it together; thank God neither of us was alone." Dealing with the *Thrones* mania was a unique experience, which has bonded the actresses for life – literally – the pair got matching "07.08.09" tattoos on their forearms to mark the date they landed their roles. "On *Game of Thrones,* we were the only two girls of that age, so we were the only two people in the world who knew what the other was going through. So that was a very important relationship to have and that's why she's my best friend," explains Turner.

With *GoT* ending, she is well aware that she's at a pivotal moment in her career and her personal life. After the show wrapped in July last year, she took six months off "to do nothing" and re-evaluate what was next. "I didn't have that normal school or college experience, so I needed to figure out what I wanted to do." Turner credits fiancé Joe Jonas (of the Jonas Brothers), her partner of three years, for helping her through an "identity crisis" after she felt she'd lost who she was several years ago. "A lot of [my happiness now] is to do with being with the person I've fallen in love with, who loves me more than he loves himself," she said. The couple, who are said to be marrying in France in the coming months, try to stay out of the public eye. "It's nice to have some things for yourself," she says, politely but firmly.

Now, she's taking another massive step, making the transition to bona fide movie star. After appearing as character Jean Grey in 2016's *X-Men: Apocalypse,* Turner takes centrestage in *Dark Phoenix,* a major leap for the actress. Much like what *Logan* did for Hugh Jackman's *Wolverine, Dark Phoenix* puts the conflicted Jean Grey front and centre. In the film, Turner's Jean is almost killed during a rescue mission in space, before being hit by a cosmic blast that boosts her powers but also unleashes a monumental anger inside her. "There's a lot of pain and rage in Jean. A lot

FROM LEFT Turner with co-star and BFF Maisie Williams; and with fiancé Joe Jonas in March.

of turmoil, a lot of noise, a lot of frustration," Turner explains. To research the role, she studied schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder. She was given audio of what a person suffering schizophrenia experiences, and she'd walk around listening to it on headphones while doing everyday tasks. "It was difficult and frustrating and by the end of the day I just wanted to cry and scream," Turner says, adding that she wants the movie to open up discussions about mental illness.

And IRL, the nagging voices in her head still have to be contained. "I put huge pressure on myself," she says. "I'm honoured and thrilled to be out in front, but the pressure's on. What if [*Dark Phoenix*] is a failure? I can get very paranoid about my work." Finding an on-set ally and mentor in Oscar nominee Jessica Chastain has bolstered her confidence. "One of the biggest things she taught me was how to stand up for myself on set and to speak my mind," Turner says.

Active in the #MeToo movement, Turner explains that she wants to help younger actresses navigate the entertainment industry. "Female empowerment is a very important thing, as is having a mentor," she says. "I've spoken with other actresses about how when younger women are on set you always make sure you're there for them. You partner up and support each other, because it's how you feel safe and protected on a set, or just in the general world of Hollywood."

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She does, however, baulk at criticism that *GoT* glorified the abuse of women, insisting it's a feminist show. "It's an accurate depiction of how women were treated in Tudor times, which the books were loosely based on; however, *Game of Thrones* lets these women rule," Turner states. "By the end of season seven, all of us are basically the biggest boss bitches there are! All the men are afraid of us. As they should be."

Not surprisingly, she's found it difficult to let go of her alter ego female warrior as the series comes to an end. "I don't think it's hit me that it's over. It feels like a death – I'll miss Sansa a lot." Still, there are things she won't pine for, notably the bitter cold of Northern Ireland, where most of her scenes were filmed. "God, I won't miss the mud," she laughs. "And I definitely won't miss the corsets."

What she will miss, however, could fill a novel, but boils down to this: "The fact is that I won't see all those incredible people for six months every day so, at some point, it's going to hit hard. But I'm just kind of rolling with the punches," Turner says, with a smile. Somehow we think she's going to be just fine.

Dark Phoenix *is in cinemas June 6.*

Turner as Jean Grey in a scene from her 2016 film, *X-Men: Apocalypse.*