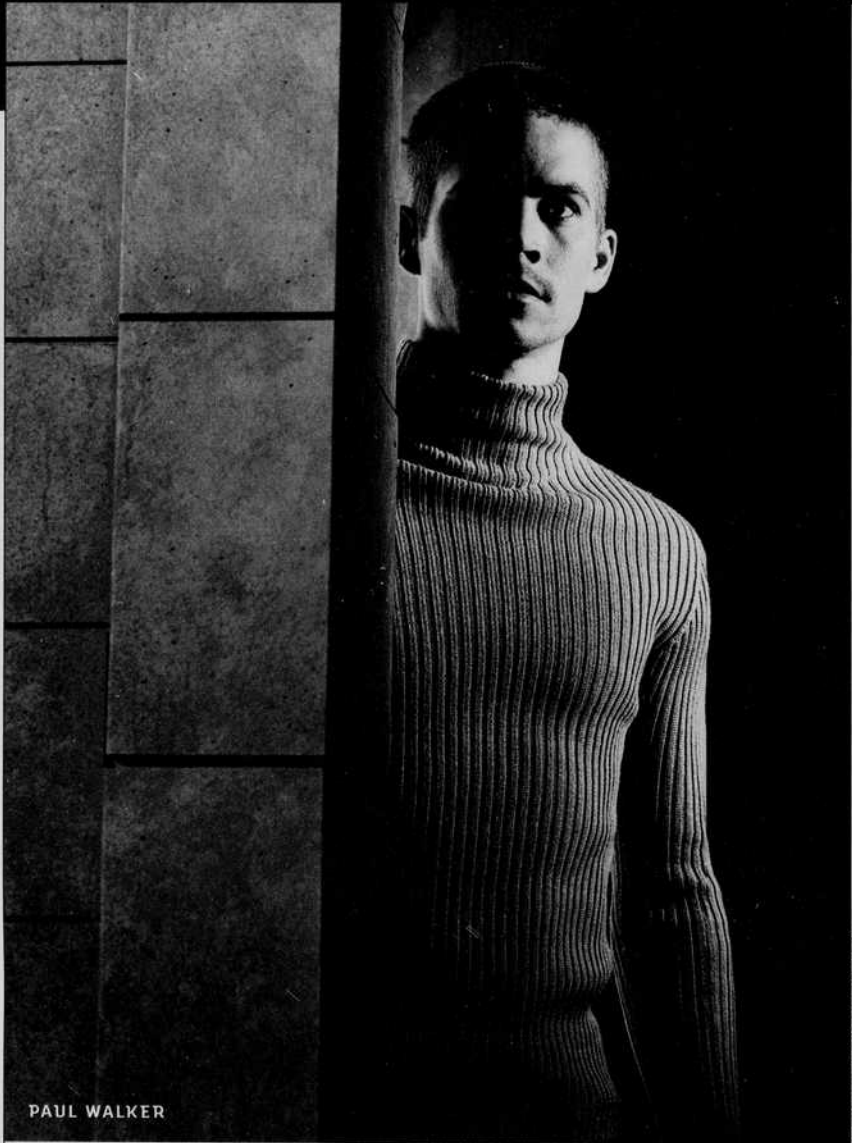


terone-heavy set was a shock for a graduate of an all-girls Catholic high school, but not necessarily a *bad* thing. "I was surrounded by beautiful boys—it's a no-brainer," she says. "I'm a bit of a tomboy, so I can hang with the guys—tell dirty jokes, do a shot of tequila."

And help ward off the girls hanging around for glimpses of Pacey? Jackson swears his *Dawson's Creek* fan base was never a distraction: "We're not talking about massive throngs of people," he demurs. "The scale is quite manageable." Bibb tells a slightly different story: "I look at Josh and say, 'These girls look at you like you're Andy Gibb. These girls look at you like you're Rob Lowe.'"

Cohen looks at Jackson with another actor in mind. "He has that likability—that Spencer Tracy quality," opines the director, who says Jackson was his first choice for the role. The deal was struck over a late-night pizza in Wilmington, N.C., after Cohen and writer-producer John Pogue (*U.S. Marshals*) landed at the *Dawson's Creek* set in the middle of a snowstorm. "[His] wisdom is not in every one of these young actors out there," says Cohen. "There are good-looking young men, and actors with good abilities as performers. But Josh carries with him an old-soul quality."

Such experience may come in handy if *The Skulls* raises any ire from its real-life Yale counterpart, Skull and Bones—a secret society that, like others in the Ivy League, graduates members to top power positions in business and government (presidential candidate Bush and his father are reportedly alums). Although Pogue says he intentionally kept the university in his screenplay generic, he drew on his own time at Yale. "I had both a repulsion and a perverse curiosity as to what actually goes on," says Pogue, who joined



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a secret society himself—although he won't say which one. "It's a little hypocritical on my part," he admits.

In the end, Pogue expects to hear few grumbles from any real secret society—he feels he actually polished their image. "I believe there are things that have gone down in real life a lot worse than anything in this movie," he says ominously. An impressive boast, considering the movie features sexual favors, dueling, and death—all, of course, in the name of a good time.

"It's a fun movie," Jackson says. "You have a bunch of people who are up-and-coming involved in this thing a

little bit above our station. We haven't had a chance to get jaded." And it's going to be followed by more work: Bibb's *Popular* is expected to be picked up for another season, Walker is reteaming with Cohen for next year's drag racing thriller *Racer X*, Harper is starring in CBS' *City of Angels*, and Jackson expects to spend another year on *Dawson's Creek*. In the meantime, he's keeping his star turn in perspective. "I gave myself the challenge of seeing whether I could survive carrying this movie from start to finish," he says. "Regardless of whether people like the film, I survived that test." ●●●