

JT LEROY

Laura Albert

Interviewed by [Eduardo Gión](#)
Portrait courtesy of [Donatien Veismann](#)



JT LeRoy is a beloved writer and a true 90's phenomenon, adored by the most modern influencers of that decade such as Asia Argento, Madonna, Gus Van Sant and Courtney Love. Here we spoke with Laura Albert, the person behind the myth who shares with us everything about her life, from her childhood and adolescence to her next book, her own biography that we hope will leave us breathless.

“Lick it up baby, lick it up.” Winona Ryder

“JT really brought gender fluidity into the conversation when it was still new”

At what age do you start writing?

There's a play my mother typed up in 1972 when I was six years old, a musical version of *Beauty and the Beast* – I would dictate and she would write. She was a playwright and songwriter, among other talents, and she would use a tape recorder to tape me singing songs I made up, and then she'd write them out. When I was in third grade, we were assigned to write a story for Mother's Day, and I wrote *The Flower That Grew Overnight*, about a boy, Sam, who takes his vitamins and buries them with the seeds he bought to try to get flowers to grow faster so he has a gift for his mother for Mother's Day. My teacher loved my story, and my mom asked me if I wanted to turn it into a play for *Plays Magazine*. I did, so she plugged in her electric typewriter and showed me how we rewrite it in a play format. She put it in an envelope, I kissed it, and we sent it off. A month or so later I got a letter from *Plays* saying yes they would take it and pay me \$60 for it. But I had to change the vitamins to orange juice because they didn't want Sam dealing with "drugs"! It appeared under my name in 1976, when I was ten years old.

You really wanted to write like a kid at school but they would not let you. It is true?

When I was attending Eugene Lang College, I had a creative-writing teacher who was incredibly supportive and one of the best teachers at Lang – but she would not let me write in a male voice. This was in the 1980s, and I'm sure she had read enough kids mangling the opposite gender in their attempt to write. I certainly had been in enough classes hearing freshman dudes trying to write in a female voice, so I could understand why a teacher might want to ban them for life from ever attempting to write in a female voice. But she didn't understand what it meant FOR ME to write as a boy. I am really grateful that has changed.

At the time, people really had very little understanding of what would come to be called 'gender fluidity.' It was still an unspoken concept when JT LeRoy began to live that idea – or ideal, if you like. JT really brought gender fluidity into the conversation when it was still new, especially for the literary scene at that time.

The documentary about its history begins with

a wonderful phrase by Fellini. Do you like cinema?

I was a child of the movies right from the start. I grew up with people constantly singing to me, “*Laura* – is the face in the misty light / Footsteps that you hear down the hall...” Not until years later, when I first saw Otto Preminger's classic film *Laura* on television, did I realize that I'd been named after a girl who didn't exist. I'd already been in movies by then: I'm there as a toddler with my mother at the Brooklyn Promenade, extras in a scene from the Sandy Dennis' film *Sweet November*. In elementary school, I was cast in an educational movie, which only made me all the more devoted to film. I am even in *Taxi Driver*, you can see me in my light blue overalls in the election scene. As my family began to disintegrate, I found my refuge in the movies and started existing more in the storytelling of films than I did at home. It wasn't safe for me there any more, so I'd spend my days in movie theaters, watching films. I saw them all, from the latest releases to black-and-white classics like *Ninotchka* and *The Philadelphia Story*. In my writing, I've always kept in my mind the shared immediacy that an audience experiences at the movies, and I've tried to re-create that. I've often thought that I didn't so much write Sarah as film it – I transcribed a film I saw in my head.

In your infancy we can see that you played with your Barbies, stripping them, lashing them. How did you create this parallel world of sadism and religion and why?

When I was a child I was sexually molested, and that molestation involved being spanked while being touched. For me, violence and sex became merged forever. I think I was reenacting to what had been done to me with my dolls. And I think I felt if I was a boy, this would have never happened to me. Or if it had, there would be a rescue. I felt as a female, I deserved it. It all became very mixed up in my head with body shame, dissociation – I told no one, I only knew I felt sinful, dirty, disgusting.

As a child in my mind at night I would hear and see stories of children in crisis, usually boys. Sometimes, they would go into my dreams, but most often this would happen before I would fall asleep. Sometimes, they'd keep me up, or they'd

wake me up, and I'd be crying. Sometimes, the kid would survive and sometimes he would die. And, in the daytime, I would play with my dolls and do scenes and situations that I had watched at night. School was awful, I was bullied and ridiculed, and that mistreatment from the real world made me all the more involved in the fantasy world of my dolls.

In *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* I quote proverbs, “Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die.” As a child, I had seen how my Christian friends, in homes with pictures of Jesus on the walls, were being beaten by their parents. Maintaining a patriarchal power structure requires not just the threat of violence, but violence itself. So people keep resorting to it, even though it doesn't work – it just makes each succeeding generation as confused and cruel as the last one was. It's no accident that the people who think they're the most like G-d are the people who are the quickest to harm others. Once someone thinks they have the high ground – morally or socially or just physically – they're more than ready to beat you with a rod. I learned that the hard way with the attacks I experienced after it was made public that I had written the JT LeRoy books. Certain people who had been very fond of JT really were savage in the way they lashed out. It was the same dynamic I had described in those books – which had made them weep. But once they believed they were better, they couldn't wait to swing a belt.

Why did you write your first books under the pseudonym JT LeRoy? There is much autobiography and fiction, the reader is warned on the back cover that it is Fiction.

These obsessive stories of abused boys led to my calling hotlines as a boy, a behavior that persisted into adulthood. When I began speaking to Dr. Owens, he encouraged the boy to whom he was talking to write down his experiences, and that was how JT LeRoy emerged, as an authorial voice, not just a voice on the phone. And in his prose I could begin to deal with my own trauma, only in metaphoric ways – my own experiences of abandonment and abuse and institutionalization were still too searing. JT was like the mechanical hands scientists use to manipulate radioactive materials that no human can touch directly and live.

A part of fashion - such as Calvin Klein - is interested in the figure and character of JT LeRoy. Are you a fashion lover?

Fashion is intriguing because it boils down to story. I'm very drawn to the steampunk look, *Mad Max* mixed with Victorian sensibilities. For me, it's a humorous mix of toughness and the feminine, playfulness and street survival. What I wear often attracts attention – and I enjoy that, it intrigues people, and they ask me about what I am wearing. They often ask if I made what I am wearing, because it looks very homemade.

I also like that people feel comfortable to approach me. For me, that willingness to approach is everything. Fashion is a way to generate points of connection among people who otherwise would ignore each other. Custo Barcelona gave us clothes when we were in Paris, and I still wear my boots and shirts from him. Fashion is a fast shorthand you use to send an immediate message. JT was all about a physical message, even though he was very withdrawn in his physical self; his clothing was very deconstructed, and fashion designers were drawn to that. It's been interesting to see how they expanded to include me in all my incarnations, to join in the telling and revealing of story, a combining of craft. I have heard that the draping of fabric is one of the hardest skills to master, and with the unveiling of all my characters in my art and lived life, more and more layers are revealed. It is the woven rich fabric of life, art and craft coming together in the expression of what we can call fashion.

Italy is one of the countries where the JT LeRoy books are sold the fastest. That is why Asia Argento, daughter of Dario Argento, takes to the cinema the book *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*. How was filming and working on it? Asia really wanted JT's input on the script and the casting, so there was a lot of collaboration, which I appreciated. I think her background in horror, from her father, loaned itself well to dealing fearlessly with the subject matter of *The Heart*. It was amazing to be on set and experience the created world of what in a sense had been created from a fever dream or almost a possession. The themes of *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* were Asia's themes, and they spoke very much to her. When I saw the last film she wrote and directed, *Misunderstood*, I was not surprised by how very similar it was to *The Heart*.

You wrote part of the script *Elephant* by Gus Van Sant. How did you come up with the idea? Having been a victim of cruel targeted bullying, I understood how this kind of rage could drive an event like that. I think girls in the US tend to take their pain out on themselves, internally, while boys are more likely to lash out externally.

With guns so readily available in the US, we have created an environment where violence is readily available as a solution. I wanted to explore this subject in a screenplay, and as soon as Gus proposed it to JT, I wrote the first scene that night. It's the one in the film where a homely girl in the library gets shot. I identified with the murdered girl and with the murderers.

Gus wanted JT to write something based on the Columbine shootings, and I wrote the original script for the film. JT LeRoy was credited as an associate producer for the film because I wound up working hard behind the scenes, with Gus and with Diane Keaton who was executive producer, to help Gus present the film the way he wanted it.

You write songs and even sing along with Geoff and write for various musical groups.

As I mentioned before, I was making songs be-

“Fashion is a way to generate points of connection among people who otherwise would ignore each other”

fore I could write them down, from the age of five or six. At nine, I sent songs I wrote to Peter Bogdanovich, when I heard was making a musical – which was *At Long Last Love*. He actually wrote me back, saying, “It was a hard decision, but in the end, Cole Porter won out.” Which was very sweet of him. As a teenager I was very into punk, the immediacy of the outlet of music was primary to me.

I loved making and performing songs with Geoff. He had studied with the jazz greats Tuck & Patti and had gone to jazz camp and studied music and theory in school, and he told me that I did organically what he needed years of studying to do. That was because I had absorbed the rules from being around my mom. It was a natural process for my writing and the music world to intersect, and it happened very quickly. I prefer music to

writing, there is so much more emotion I can put into a song, I miss that outlet deeply. Geoff was also in punk bands, but our music ended up being edgy melodic pop. I explored what I wrote about in my fiction. But being on stage was scary for me, I was not ready for it.

We had a band called Daddy Don't Go, and then we became Thistle. We recorded with a few top producers like Jerry Harrison (Talking Heads, Modern Lovers) and Dennis Herring (The Hives, Elvis Costello, Counting Crows, Modest Mouse). It was joyous when musicians put their love of my writing into their music. Shirley Manson of Garbage wrote the songs *Cherry Lips* and *Bleed Like Me*, about JT and even Speedie. Billy Corgan wrote a song for me, which we recorded with Dennis Herring. Musicians hired JT to tell their stories, and I wrote liner notes for record releases for everyone from Conor Oberst to Nancy Sinatra.

The public readings of the books have been made by artists like Winona Rider or Lou Reed, among others. What do you think about this?

I do not read JT's work. I hear him in my head, but it is not my voice. What was wonderful about the public readings was how people loaned their voices to this being – who in fact had no fixed voice. It became a felt sense of community, and everyone brought something magically unique to their reading. They would pick a story that had meant something to them, and they would become JT. All the voices, in a sense, sang JT into being. And, at the end of the day, isn't that what fiction does at its best?

With the readings, to paraphrase Warhol, everyone could have their 15 minutes of being JT LeRoy. JT had been my way to release my pain, but he wound up having a life in the world, with others being part of his existence – literally giving him a voice. I felt relieved of my burden and no longer alone. The JT readings were celebrations, a joyous coming together. Some people who read did not feel all that comfortable reading, but because the work spoke so deeply to them, they were able to do so. I remember singer/producer Linda Perry (4 Non Blondes, Pink) reading, and she was not comfortable, but she joined in and it was transcendent.

When you meet Billy Corgan from Smashing Pumpkins there was a very strong union and you told him about who JT LeRoy really was. Why do you feel the need to tell him? Was it a release for you?

I think it was because I realized that he was capable of hearing it from me and accepting it. Billy was not the only person who knew – I had told

others. And I told them not so much as a release for myself, but to simplify whatever involvement they had with me or JT. But Billy was the one who stayed involved directly with both me and JT. His temperament is very open to the notion of a transmigration of spirit – which was so much of what JT was about for me. Also, he appreciates that there are ALTERNATIVE realms and is not held to dimensions of normal, to following just one narrow path. And he understands abuse as well, and the coping mechanisms that arise from it.

In *Sarah*, you write a chapter where one of the characters runs through a forest as a metaphor of *Frankenstein*. Do you think that chapter was a real final premonitory for you?

In that scene in *Sarah*, the narrator is naked and being hunted, he is running for his life because

it has been discovered that he is not whom they wanted him to be – whom he wanted to be. Pooh finds him and asks him, "Did you forget what you really are?", and his response to her is, "I don't know how all this happened. I couldn't stop it. Any of it." When I wrote that scene, I remember very clearly that I was weeping, because I knew that I was writing the future – and that there was nothing I could do to stop it or change it. There is also the sense that I brought JT to life, but when he moved into Savannah's body, I had no control over what he then did. The behavior was often very painful for me, I often felt like Dr. Frankenstein, but I loved him and would do everything to protect his living in the world, even if he hated me.

What will it be the next thing we will read by Laura Albert? I'm writing my memoir now, everything that has



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come before has allowed me to be ready to do this work, to go in and fearlessly face my story. I could not do it earlier, but now it is very liberating – and like putting together a puzzle. I am often shocked and amused to discover how events that happened to me turn up in my fiction. Freud would be laughing his ass off! I think readers will be intrigued to connect the dots – how things in my life are expressed in the fiction of JT. It is ALL there in that dream-state! I discover more every day, the process is exactly what Picasso described: “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.” And I will leave you with these words – words I agree with – from the poet Fernando Pessoa, who frequently wrote under what he called heteronyms: "Lying is simply the soul's ideal language."