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LAURA ALBERT FACES JT LEROY



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LITERATURE IS A FREEDOM MASK...
AND IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT THEN GO TO HELL.
(A CONVERSATION WITH LAURA ALBERT)
by Luna Miguel

Fifteen years ago nobody knew who Laura Albert was, yet thousands of readers bought, loved and devoured her books under the pen name JT Leroy. A travesty with a thug childhood had turned into one of contemporary literature's most known faces of the time, and by acknowledging that everything was based on a lie.

A lot of time passed before Laura Albert's name and trickery came into the spotlight, prompting people to question if someone could really create an identity so potent that it could even sell books. The real question should have been asked differently. It should have been asked: at this point, how can we seriously not perceive that literature is a mask to hide behind and that cheating is one of the most interesting mechanisms in existence when it comes to making a piece of art?

Now Laura Albert is coming out with a new book, although she spends most of her daily life between publishing fashion articles and short films. From what she told us at Ponytale, we won't have to wait any longer to get her new work, since this time around she will be signing under her real name.

In the meantime, we spoke with her over email and while online conversations are often chilly, we can assure you the essence of Laura Albert is warm and so hot it burns. Pay attention to these next lines because every word from Albert is a literary choice filled with a kind of majestic coherence and humanity.

Luna: When I heard about your case I was surprised that the people who judged your life as scandalous, were angry about the lack of "authenticity" in your signature. Seriously, they were like children, kicking and screaming because they had been "lied to." It could be compared to a kid finding out that Santa doesn't exist.

Laura: There's a lot of truth to that description. The real difference is that kids usually keep their presents, even if they came from Mommy instead of Santa, whereas all sorts of people were ready and eager to denounce the fiction they claimed to have loved so much. That was partly because the message in the fiction could be so disturbing that some folks jumped on the chance to dismiss it along with the messenger. There were also people who were simply looking

forward to getting something from JT LeRoy -- professionally, personally -- and they were angry when that possibility ended. But I think that many people had reached deep emotional places within themselves through JT and the books. They could mourn through him -- weep for him when they couldn't weep for themselves. For a lot of people, JT was their way of working out what had happened to them. He wasn't just my avatar, JT became an avatar for a lot of other people as well, living out what heights were possible for themselves, however damaged they may have been. And when the reveal came and JT "died," that part of them died. So they just amputated it and cauterized the wound, pulled out all the emotion and sealed it. I've discussed this with some who have struggled with their response after the reveal. I try to tell them that JT was a mirror, that all that pain and





suffering they felt so much for is theirs -- can you take it off of him and own what's yours?

Luna: But don't you think that all the individuals who spoke about scandal or fraud have no idea what art really is? Or what performance is? Or playing make believe with literature is for that matter?

Laura: For people to know what art really is and experience its true value, there has to be a culture supporting them, where art is experienced and cherished. We live in a corporate-based, consumer-driven society where the relationship between artist and audience is fundamentally skewed, to the detriment of both. The aesthetic experience is displaced by a commercial experience, so middlemen can scoop up money. In our society, artwork and artist are both commodities for purchase, and it's not surprising that a lot of buyers are capable of recognizing the commodities they've bought only when they look at them through the prism of commerce. So if the packaging changes, then the content must be different too. And it is perceived as being different, even though it's still the same.

Luna: Currently the editorial world is very heavy. I don't know if you'll agree with me, but the literary environment is stuck trying to sell outdated formulas for a whole new scene offered by the Internet. I wonder how your story would have turned out if it

had happened in a time like the one we live in now, with so many social platforms and blogs. What do you think might have happened if you had published your books today?

Laura: The JT LeRoy books came out almost fifteen years ago, and a lot of things have changed since then, including the developments you mention. The only thing that has not changed is people. So I don't think there'd be a lot of differences if JT arrived now instead of when he did. Now his ascent would be faster and higher and more people would be involved. The descent would be more extreme too. But that's the only difference I could see, really -- one of degree more than anything else.

Luna: It's funny how in the United States some of the "new voices" of movements such as Alt Lit sign with their pseudonyms. We don't know if they are women or men, and their works have such an intimate and brutal character. Maybe currently (in the era of overexposure) it's easier to hide?

Laura: Working as JT's assistant Speedie, I learned that the best place to hide was out in the open. Being overlooked is safer than being invisible: everyone stares if a plate floats away from the table, but no one notices a nobody who's sitting there eating. There's also a very long literary tradition of working pseudo-

nymously, for all sorts of reasons, especially in American literature. This country is the heart of corporate darkness, the place that people immigrate to just so they can sell out, and as a result it's also the home of some of the most extreme rejections of celebrity and commercialism by certain writers: some make themselves personally inaccessible, like Pynchon or Salinger; some hide their gender to penetrate sexist marketing, like Louisa May Alcott, who wrote lurid melodramas as A.M. Barnard -- just last year, J.K. Rowling hid her identity and published a detective novel as Robert Galbraith. I chose to be overlooked, and in order to be overlooked, people have to be looking at something else. It's like being a stage magician and making an elephant disappear: you create a diversion.

Luna: I'm guessing this is a very frequent question in your circle of friends, and that the press must have asked you it a zillion times...but can you tell us how it feels to be famous and recognized, and at the same time know that all the fans and people who bought your book had no knowledge of your real identity? What did you like the most during those years? And

what deceived you the most?

Laura: What I liked most then was seeing how people's enthusiasm for JT was leading them to their own creative solutions, encouraging new art, motivating social action -- above all, opening up new avenues of healing and understanding within themselves. All these sorts of things happened, and people did it themselves. JT was simply a catalyst. And of course the nature of a catalytic agent is that it does not change; it creates change in the solution, but it itself does not change. So if you like, that was the greatest deception that I was under -- that JT would not change. I saw no reason why things could not go on like that indefinitely. Having had change thrust upon me, I now have to engage people directly, as myself, whether it's readers who contact me or people who come to events like speaking at The Moth or the dot429 conferences or various literary gatherings or film screenings and festivals and so forth. But I'm ready for it now. I've reached a place in myself where I'm prepared to deal with people personally and make it as meaningful as I can. I am grateful for this interaction, it is a gift.

