

Avatar: JT Leroy and Laura Albert'

Afshan Shafi

Laura Albert won international acclaim writing fiction as JT LeRoy. She wrote works credited to Leroy, whom Albert described as an “avatar”, saying she was able to write things as Leroy that she could not have said as Laura Albert. She has also used the names Emily Frasier and Speedie. She was sued for fraud when she signed a film option contract with her pseudonym; a jury found against her. Her dissimulation has been called one of greatest hoaxes in literary history.

She is the author of the novels Sarah and The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things, reissued by HarperCollins, and the novella Harold’s End. She is also the subject of Jeff Feuerzeig’s feature documentary Author: The JT LeRoy Story and Lynn Hershman Leeson’s film The Ballad of JT LeRoy. Cinema Eye, the organization that recognizes outstanding craft and artistry in nonfiction filmmaking, cited Laura Albert in Author as one of its 2016 list of Unforgettables: the year’s most notable and significant nonfiction-film subjects.

Laura contributes to print and online publications internationally, in a career that includes the cover feature for Man About Town and articles for The New York Times, The Forward, The London Times, Spin, Film Comment, Filmmaker, Interview, I-D, Vogue, The Face, Dazed and Confused, and VESTOJ, the Platform for Critical Thinking on Fashion. She was a contributing editor to Black Book, I-D, SOMA, and 7×7 magazines and is currently an editor for Diane Pernet’s A Shaded View On Fashion and the Outpost section of psychoPEDIA.com. She has written for dot429, the world’s largest LGBTQ professional network, and been an invited speaker at their annual conferences in New York.

At first glance it hardly seems plausible that a teenage girl brought up in Lahore’s plush suburbs could have much in common with an American literary glamazon who started life in poverty, battling the horrors of emotional and sexual abuse. Yet, appearances can be deceptive. For at a certain time in my life, JT Leroy represented the beautiful and strange ravages of my own psyche, expressing in perfectly feverish prose the glittering horror of the child who survived.

Striking up a correspondence with him right before I started college in the mid 2000’s seemed particularly serendipitous. Though it was Laura Albert who was the creator of Leroy’s confounding world, and though a part of me was bereft that such a survivor did not walk the material world, broken yet brilliant, garbled yet famous, the regret didn’t last.

Leroy’s story haunted me. Half-memoir, scored with magic and grief, this was the story of impossible courage. A boy with an otherworldly girlish magnetism. A boy who cut himself. A boy who burnt himself. A boy who couldn’t distinguish pain from love. He drew me to him, a cracked mirror encompassing the deepest, weirdest light. He made the cover of Vanity Fair, in trademark JT fashion, contained yet scarred, brandishing a precious yet dark grace. He was



Photo credit: Lucas Celler

pathologically shy in real life, beseeching others to read on his behalf at book readings. His profound reticence enchanted me. JT's very presence, in the starry sphere he inhabited, provided a kind of warmth to multitudes of quiet freaks across the world.

Soon his fame rivaled that of literary luminaries like Truman Capote. Journalists were besotted with his fragility. I read articles where he was described as possessing an odd posture of incipient disappearance; best described as a wan, embarrassed embrace. In his free time he confessed the plangency of his childhood traumas in a weak drawl over the phone to the likes of Denis Cooper. In his interviews he spoke of Madonna sending him books on Kabbalah. He struck up intimate friendships with the best and the brightest, including the poet Sharon Olds. He used to sleep over at Carrie Fisher's place, expiated on his aesthetic to Courtney Love.

His touchingly floppy blond wigs, his trademark black sunglasses, his acute dissemblance to the raw light of the world, was genius. I understood his profound reluctance to dissemble; he too was always taut, pale, anxious. He was a child, but so elegantly affected, so particular yet so bleak. When New York Magazine revealed the true identity of Leroy, confirming that Laura Albert was in fact the voice behind JT, it was a shock. It all had seemed so brilliantly real! The expected crucifixion by the world press followed. The LeRoy saga was labeled the greatest literary hoax of recent times. But as is always the case, the dust settled and through it all the writing shone through. You couldn't camouflage the sincerity of Albert's words, she had a gift, it was transparent, a vindication!



I always cherished JT's generous responses to my emails and to my poems, which were too loud, too sad (as they are still). He's still around, as much a part of Laura as an arm or a leg. Connecting to Laura now, writing to her, feels like a hand across the darkness. I am not disheartened by the fact of Leroy's immateriality. I am grateful that he was brought forth, he made it okay to be earnest, mad, faceted! He shone a light on the bravery of countless children and this is all we need to remember.

My last email to you was when you were writing under the avatar of JT Leroy and it feels so uplifting somehow to write to you as Laura Albert! How did it feel to come out on your own?

Scary. I've often said that JT LeRoy was like a pair of asbestos gloves, enabling me to touch all the things I was incapable of handling directly. And by "all the things," I don't mean only the literary work. JT made it easier not just to write but to respond to everything else that comes at you as a writer – the business, the promotion, the attention, the criticism. I still had to deal with all that, but JT was my shield. Now people say yes or no to me, and that's different, it's harder. And the writing is harder too, it's more demanding. The metaphor of JT

gave my writing wings. Writing in my own voice about my own experiences is hard work, like going back into the mines each day. But it's a rich vein!

Leroy's story was both beautiful and painful and the fact that he was gender fluid served as a kind of eye opener for me. What do you think made Leroy so powerful for so many?

Because people loved the writing. The avatar of JT LeRoy described the possibility not just of survival but of self-definition and self-transformation; he had journeyed through suffering and loss and abuse, and had arrived somewhere beyond a fixed gender or identity, into an existence of creativity and possibilities and joy and excitement. And the reason people knew and cared and were inspired by all that was because they loved the books. And that's still what's happening.

You've spoken in interviews about how since you were a child you had 'boys' voices coming through you. How did that feel? Do you think the trans community now has adequate support and tools for their experience?

Taking the second question first, the trans community here in the States most plainly does not have adequate support and tools for their experience. Right now they're on a government Hit List, along with other queer people and Muslims and immigrants and Latinos and Blacks and women and the poor. That list is getting longer too.

As for the first question, when I was 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'd 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.

What was the most fulfilling aspect of writing under an avatar? Do you think that the Instagram generation is more at ease with the notion of avatars and disparate identities?

Oscar Wilde summed it up – give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth. Nothing is more fulfilling than to be free of the feeling that you have to lie in order to protect yourself. Putting on the mask may hide some of the facts from other people, but it enables a person to reveal the truth about their own self – which is not only a fact but also the only fact anyone ever really needs to know.

In Interview magazine, Adam Langer said I had anticipated the reliance on avatars throughout social media, and it's certainly the case that everyone seems to use avatars nowadays – that's why younger people who are now discovering

JT LeRoy are always so baffled by the extreme hostility I faced from some people after they learned that I had written the JT LeRoy Books.

The uproar when you first revealed your identity was almost frightening. Why do you think people felt so outraged?

You have to realize that not everyone reacted that way – even before the reveal there were a number of people who already knew I was the writer. They had my back, and they included David Milch and Billy Corgan. I had even tried to tell Asia Argento, only she wouldn't believe me. As for the people who weren't in the know, the reaction was not as severe as the press likes to tell it. There were JT admirers who saw the reveal as a chance to understand a deeper story behind JT's. I'm thinking now of Steph Burt, Nathaniel Rich, Robert Wilson, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Shirley Manson, and Diane Pernet, to name just a few.

Among the people who did react badly, most of them did so because the press told them to be frightened and angry; the media told them that they had been punked. The newspapers didn't say, "What is this story all about? Why did things happen this way?" Certainly none of them asked me! They just told the simplest story they knew. That's why there was such a big audience for Jeff Feuerzeig's documentary *Author: The JT LeRoy Story*, because people around the world wanted to know what had actually happened, and why.

Do you think all writers have this sense to hide? I keep on thinking of Salinger and his hermitude. Do you think all artists experience a certain fear and fascination with the pressures of 'persona'?

I think all people want to hide – or at least have had some experience of wanting to hide themselves. It's very hard now to grow up in any consumer society without internalizing a great deal of shame and self-hatred.

And when it comes to writers, you have to remember that writing is a solitary act. Even if you're collaborating with someone else, or working in a writers' room, it's still a solitary process. My sense is that the people who are most focused on their writing, they really don't want attention – what they want is for their writing to attract attention. Which was exactly what happened to me, my writing was passed around by other writers until people approached me about publishing it.

Which contemporary writer moves you?

I'm a great admirer of Sheila Heti. Her books *Motherhood* and *How Should a Person Be?* remind me of the endless possibilities that are available to a writer. She is a real inspiration for me.

What do you miss about writing under a nom de plume? Do you miss that kind of cult adoration? Do you think Leroy will always be a part of you?



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When Billy Wilder was told that some of his films had won the adoration of a cult, he said, “One of these days I will take them to Guyana...” Out of all the forms of adoration, nothing is more suffocating and fatal for the adored than a cult. Because a cult approves of everything – even their trip to Guyana.

There’s nothing about anyone else’s attention to me, which has altered my relationship with JT LeRoy. If anything, he feels closer than ever. I let him tell his story, and now he’s letting me tell mine.

I found that JT Leroy was postmodern performance art in a way. It somehow brought the nature of fiction itself into sharp relief. Do you think the latter is true?

A lot of people feel that way. And while JT LeRoy was not the same as what Lynn Hershman Leeson did with her performance-art persona Roberta Breitmore, she was still one of the first to see the parallels. She even made a film about it, *The Ballad of JT LeRoy* in 2014. The Deitch Gallery built an exhibition around JT in 2004, and Jeffrey Deitch later told me that he considers the JT LeRoy story “one of the most interesting contributions to art and literature of the past 20 years.” And of course Robert Wilson made his VROOM video portrait of JT LeRoy, arranged by his producer Noah Khoshbin, knowing full well I was the writer. When Jeff Feuerzeig used that portrait at the end of his film *Author: The JT LeRoy Story*, it seemed to me a celebration of the performance-art aspects of JT. So this art connection is plainly there.

At the end of the day, what I see is the importance of the story-telling impulse itself – not so much as a form of self-expression but rather as an effort toward self-healing and self-realization. And that also implies communication, doesn’t it? Because someone or something else has to recognize that self you’re healing and realizing – we’re not alone, no matter how lonely things may sometimes get. And if the story-telling impulse really is what’s fundamental, then the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction become secondary, because the imaginary is just as informative as the factual – sometimes more so. The result is renewed thought and discussion about how we understand both fiction and non-fiction.

What was the most unforgettable aspect of the JT Leroy saga for you?

The fact that JT LeRoy does not exist, but he lives – which is what a famous film historian said about Bugs Bunny.

What’s next for you? What inspires you at the moment?

Right now I’m writing my memoir, which will soon be published. The writing process is very difficult, but it’s also very freeing.