



This is

Laura Albert



in conversation with Alissa Bennett

Alissa Bennett: I think that we should start off by acknowledging that yesterday we did a 90-minute interview that did not record, which is kind of ironic given your history with recording phone calls.

Laura Albert: But when I did it, I used tape.

AB: Yeah, tape is more reliable.

LA: Well, it's also concretized, and that helps when you're talking to a stranger who you can see only in your head.

AB: We are going to get into your history with phone calls, but I want to first say how delighted I am to talk to you about your forthcoming memoir. I really love it so much.

LA: Thank you.

AB: I've been thinking a lot about how the new book addresses that you've always had fantasies of what it would mean to become someone else, whether it was through dieting, or calling teen crisis hotlines as a boy, or working as a phone-sex operator; it happens over and over, which feels significant in the

Laura Albert boax pantheon.

LA: I think the split came from sexual abuse, that's straight up dissociation, but the form it took naturally developed and articulated over time. Because I understood very early who is actually protected in our culture, and it wasn't a chubby girl in Brooklyn. My mother signed me up for Weight Watchers when I was five years old. It was all adults and me; they promised a penny for every pound I lost.

AB: And the classic rhetoric of the dieting industrial complex is that there's a skinny person trapped inside of you who is waiting to be liberated, a new person wandering around inside of your unacceptable body. To me, the idea of the nested self is the meta-narrative that winds its way throughout all your work.

LA: My parents used to make jokes about it. My mom would say "If you're fat, at least nobody's going to kidnap you! They'll steal the cute little skinny kid." I think it was her way of saying that there was an upside, but it also informed who I came to believe was worth protecting. I remember staring at pictures of people like Brooke Shields or Phoebe Cates in Seventeen Magazine, until finally I was like, "Why am I doing this to myself?" Because no matter what I



did, I was never going to look like that. In media and movies, girls like me—who were tall and overweight and not pretty, let alone cute—were *always* the joke, they deserved their trauma. Worse, it wasn't even considered trauma—they deserved humiliation. And if they were abused, they were getting attention and should consider themselves lucky! And of course they were unworthy of empathy. From the time I was very young, I was praying and wishing that I would just wake up and be a boy, that my body would change, and I would magically be a boy.

AB: And then you started calling crisis hotlines and pretending to be one...

LA: I started calling after my parents separated; it was really horrible, it was just a fucking mess. My mother became the teenager and I became the parent. She started just dating all these wild different guys, she was growing weed and going out to nightclubs, going out clubbing... She got a nose job and a chin job, and I remember her just weeping after, all bruised and bandaged and saying, "I thought I was going to be beautiful."

AB: This is a fantasy I really identify with. It's like getting a new job or moving into a new apartment and imagining that the container is going to make you a different person, as though your life is going to change because you're in a new place. So both you and your mom were thinking, "If only I could be in a different body, I could have a different life..."

LA: Yeah, and by then, I was also hanging out with kids on the street,

and I knew that even though there was a mythology of this kind of blonde-haired, blue-eyed, innocent kid, you had to be crafty as fuck to survive.

AB: You also worked as a professional phone-sex operator as a teenager, right?

LA: Yes, by 15, I was running the Mafia's phone sex line. They used to offer me jobs, like, "Hey, if you ever want to work in a club..." or say things like, "Wow, you sound really beautiful, I bet you're incredible..." It was important to me that the guy in charge thought I was pretty, but they never saw me in person because my mother would pick up my checks. One week I took a picture of myself that that was just half my face with my hands holding up my hair and had my mother hand it to my boss. I wanted to be sure that he didn't think I was a cliché.

AB: This is proto-Terminator also—in order to do the performance, you need to feel that there's desire, but the desire is always sort of mediated, right? It's never haptic, it's never person-to-person. It's always a fantasy of who you might be over the phone line...

LA: I thought that if they actually saw me, I would be rejected. But I was also really good.

AB: You were so good that they wanted you to train other operators, right?

LA: Yeah, I was training other women, but I was a girl, I was a kid.

The way I did a call was, I would truly listen and be able to kind of sound them out, I was testing them so that I knew how to fit and tailor the fantasy without ever having to explicitly ask them. They were often too steeped in shame to say it out loud, but if I could magically seem to know, without asking... That was what I would do. I had a way of asking them without them knowing.

AB: Which must have been satisfying in a way.

LA: Yeah, but I still was stuck in my body. I was monetizing something that I was not. I could not do what many of my friends were doing, getting attention using their physical body. I would have these moments of deeply needing to be someone else, but not this gorgeous girl. I wanted to be a boy, and I'd call hotlines as a boy. There were all kinds of different boys, all kinds of different stories, and some of those relationships ended up lasting months on the phone, like I'd meet someone, and we'd have a really long relationship. Usually the responses on calls were like, "I'll pray for you" or "Just go home and make amends and take your beating" or they wanted to jerk off and would steer the call into a phone-sex call. Back in the '80s it was too easy to find pedophiles working helplines. And I would accommodate them, it was expected, but of course I was feeling, you sick fuck. But for that moment, I got to be a desired boy. But once in a while, there would be someone on that other end of the phone who would actually truly listen and didn't want to save my soul or insist I come in for treatment or want to get off, someone who would listen, which is really what I wanted. It was also a trap, it

was like being an alcoholic because there was no satiation.

AB: Right, which kind of leads into the birth of JT...

LA: Well, eventually I discovered that the only thing that really helped with that feeling of loneliness was writing stories; writing helped move it out. You know about phantom limb syndrome?

AB: Yes...

LA: Well, this guy, Ramachandran, solved the syndrome. Apparently, physiologically what is going on is that the nerve endings from the amputated extremity travel and become trapped, so the nervous system receives the message that there is pain: Ramachandran used mirrors...

AB: Yes, I've written about those actually, the mirrored boxes that let the patient see the limb intact.

LA: That's exactly right. I feel that's what I needed to do, and I knew that my brain looked different on JT. When I was younger I would send out photos I'd taken of other kids and pretend they were me, and it was like playing with a doll, where you will yourself into that doll. I needed to will JT into existence to abate that phantom limb pain, and once he was out walking amongst us, it was like I was able to lose weight and move into my body. It was very bizarre.





AB: I mean, it's also like once the person who was inside you materialized in the world, then all of those layers of protection dissolved and you became a different person.

LA: But what's interesting is that I learned to be an advocate when I had my son. When he was born I realized, "My God, if somebody touched him, I would kill them." Once I had that boy, I learned how to be an advocate, and then Speedie was an advocate for Terminator, for JT.

AB: Did you perform Speedie in the same way you performed Terminator?

LA: No, there wasn't a performance. When I was JT, I felt him in my body. There was no performative aspect. I literally felt him. It didn't surprise me when Savannah's body changed and kind of moved into his; Savannah stopped menstruating, got more facial hair. Now Savannah's pronouns are they/them. I think that was already inside Savannah.

AB: Do you believe that there are psychic frequencies that roam around and look for a host?

LA: No. I mean, I've had people tell me, "You were actually channeling," but the thing is, it doesn't matter whether you're tapping into a collective unconscious. What if I wrote someone's story that actually happened, someone who lived and died and whatever? It doesn't matter, it's all the fucking same.

AB: It is all the fucking same, and when I went back to the JT novels after it was revealed that Laura Albert had authored them, I read them with this new understanding, and I thought they were better, I thought they were made more interesting by the backstory of how they were conceived and constructed and disseminated into the world. I hope very much that when people read your new book, that they are able to look at the fiction and the memoir as companions, because there is a plumb line that goes through all of the work and connects it together.

LA: Thank you for saying that, I appreciate that very much.

AB: I love the chapter that tells the story of young Laura collecting assorted pills in a plastic bag, hiding them in your room, and touching them like they were a train ticket to blast off if you wanted to cash them in.

LA: Right, exactly, and that's straight out of *Balloons*, "my greens, my blues, flying off the terrace, and collecting all these pills made holy..."

AB: I hope that people can understand that the stories in this memoir and the fiction are all one organism. It's two different perspectives of one organism, which is why I think it's extra galling that people wanted to sort of reduce JT's work to like the province of total fantasy. A lot of it is directly from your life.

LA: I didn't grow up in West Virginia, and I know there are things that happened to JT that absolutely did not happen to me, but I was living with kids who those things did happen to. I think JT was also

a way of examining who is allowed to get empathy. He was mischievous as fuck, but he invited empathy despite not being the cliché of an abused kid at all. He was blonde and blue-eyed and cute, and that got past the gate. To take folks along with me, I had to meet at least that hurdle.

AB: In one of my favorite chapters, you recount being a punk rock teenager and going with a group of punk rock friends to see Martin Bell's documentary *Streetwise*. Walking into the theater, you initially feel like your collective transgression represents some kind of threat to society, but when you watch the film, you suddenly understand what other people actually see when they look at you.

LA: They weren't scared of us, they weren't threatened; they felt pity. What I saw in the movie was a dead end.

AB: Right. Worst possible scenario. And you were living in a group home then; how many other kids were there?

LA: There were seven other girls, and I entered when I was 17, so I made it in just under the wire. It's funny because I made JT 15 years younger than me, which is kind of where I "stopped." I think that's common with people with trauma, that you get frozen at a certain age, and I saw all of it reflected back at me watching *Streetwise*.

AB: But this even sort of segues back into JT, because I think people like to bear witness to someone else's trauma. There's something exciting about bearing how bad life can be.

LA: Yeah, but you know, *Sarah* came out first and *Sarah* was inspired more by Isabel Allende than by any misery-lit book or any child-abuse book like *A Child Called "It"* or any of that shit, which I couldn't even read because that was what seemed so fake to me. I don't care if a zebra wrote it, it just wasn't real. It was just *obviously* not the lived experience of a kid that was going through abuse.

AB: But at the same time, people wanted JT's world to be real, which is I think just a pure construct of language, where you identify yourself based on somebody else's horrible life. I think the important thing with this new book that you have coming out is that all of the stories inside are the real-life shadow of what you wrote about as JT.

LA: When I was a kid, there was a book about shadows coexisting with the bodies that cast them, and the shadows are able to kind of participate in life, so if the body has cake and the cake has a shadow, the shadow has cake too...

AB: I mean, this is exactly what it is, "I want to taste the trauma cake."

LA: But I think also there was a way that people weren't allowed to speak about things unless there was a lie agreed upon, that it was like, unless you look a certain way, you can't talk about it. So unless you've been raped by wolves, a satanic cult, you aren't "entitled" to the level of dysfunction or the suffering you are experiencing. So, you're going and binging on fucking ice cream, you can't stop eating because someone diddled you when you were little. And what I very much absorbed, what was communicated was, "Ha ha, you're disgusting and gross."

AB: Right. But the limb in your mind found a way for you to be able to talk about it.

LA: Right. And I also told it in a way that wasn't cliché. It's like, I take you through it, where I don't demonize any of them. If you read *Sarah* carefully, it's like, I'm not like Lymon, but if you watch that scene—because I film it for you—I'm letting you have whatever

experience. I'm not making him this cliché demonic person. He's abusing a kid. Which to *me* is demonic, but I have people who are pedophiles who didn't see that part. I leave it kind of... I ask you to have compassion, to understand what it all comes from. And even the characters who are pedophiles in *Sarah*, they do get punished. It doesn't work out well for them. But you can also overlook it. I ask you to have compassion for *everyone*. And it's not this over the top, like the kid, Sarah, he fucking knows he's hustling. He's not the abused innocent. He's performing this sainthood.

AB: Viewing these characters as having agency was what was so revolutionary. I think that it hadn't been done before.

LA: Well, at the time we didn't have the word for gender fluid.

AB: Yeah.

LA: And later, some people were saying, "Laura Albert pretended to be trans," but when JT was speaking or writing or being interviewed, he never identified as trans. Savannah was just clearly a girl dressing up as a boy, but it was read that way because there was just such a need for it, because language hadn't adapted to the world yet.

AB: It was a lot of the public projecting their fantasies onto this open signifier; a lot of the discourse and criticism that came out was pure projection.

LA: And once it becomes part of the discourse, it's almost impossible to untangle it, and that's why I felt I needed to write about what JT was born out of, writing my life in this memoir. I mean, I had so many offers, "Strike while the iron's hot!" I mean, I had this really high-powered agent at one point who told me, "Nobody's going to care about you in seven months." And I said, "Nobody cared about me seven months ago, so what do I lose?" I needed to unlayer it first myself, and as you know, I've been extremely lucky and hashtag blessed to have a beyond patient, supportive agent who gets this on every fucking level.

AB: Well, I'm going to ask one last question, a big important question that I've asked you several times, and I'm going to ask you again. Do you care if people read this memoir and come back and say none of this is true?

LA: Whether or not someone believes what I'm writing is a non-issue for me. As a writer, I'm not looking for believers. When people read *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, they're not concerned with whether or not they believe Gertrude Stein; they're concerned with the insight they gain into an era, a creative milieu, an artistic sensibility. People read my JT LeRoy books, which are all labeled "fiction," because those books lead them to a deeper understanding of themselves. The value of art is that it shocks the mind awake. It strips away the conditioned responses and returns you to your own authenticity, your own realness. You learn something you hadn't clearly understood, you recognize something meaningful which you hadn't been able to articulate. With entertainment, you always know when you're supposed to laugh and when you're supposed to cry; with art, you're not always sure—you laugh and cry and don't even always know why. That's because something authentic in yourself is resonating with the work of art, and that's the only experience I hope people find in my work.

Laura Albert has won international acclaim for her fiction. Writing as JT LeRoy, she is the author of the best-selling novels *Sarah* and *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* – both now released also as audiobooks – and the novella *Harold's End*. She is the subject of Jeff Feuerzeig's feature documentary *Author: The JT LeRoy Story* and Lynn Herschman Leeson's film *The Ballad of JT LeRoy*. www.LauraAlbert.org