

# THE TRUTH IS SOOOOO BORING

Words Rebecca Wallwork

The books of JT LeRoy describe a childhood wrecked by drugs and prostitution. Celebrity fans were quick to praise the author but were left looking stupid when his stories turned out to be a lot of lies written by someone else.

## This is the year of the busted author.

First there was James Frey, who was lambasted by Oprah Winfrey for bending the truth in his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. The same week as Frey's meltdown began, another member of the hip, young literati was taking fire for lying – in this case, about his entire identity. You probably won't see JT LeRoy on *Oprah*. His books are a little too scummy for daytime TV and, well, he doesn't exist.

Until earlier this year, however, JT LeRoy was quite real to a lot of people – from readers of his books to literary agents, authors, celebrities and fascinated bystanders. I was just one of them.

Ever since his first novel, *Sarah*, was published in 2000, rumours began to circulate about the authenticity of its author. LeRoy, so the bio went, was 20 years old and a former street kid/hustler whose therapy and subsequent writing saved him. In some versions of his story JT (it stands for "Jeremy Terminator") had HIV and was going through hormone treatment to become a woman. *Sarah*, though marketed as fiction, was apparently based on his life with an abusive mother who dressed him as a girl and took him hooking with her at truck stops in West Virginia. The book had a dark, gritty beauty and came packaged with raves from authors of

a similar ilk, including Dennis Cooper and Mary Gaitskill. But they weren't LeRoy's only fans. Word of his talent sped through the celebrity ranks and soon you wouldn't see his name mentioned in the press unaccompanied by those of his admirers: Madonna, Winona Ryder, Shirley Manson, Billy Corgan. Usually such alliances result in happy snaps in the social pages, but no such photos of LeRoy and his pals emerged.

In fact, LeRoy was somewhat of an enigma, only doing interviews via email or on the telephone and sending his star friends to do his readings for him. He claimed he was painfully







Specious creature: JT LeRoy sought the recognition of celebrities, including Courtney Love, Winona Ryder (top left) and Jennifer Hall (bottom left), an actress who replaced Laura Albert (above, with red hair) as singer in the band Thistle.



Duped: Australian artist Cherry Hood (at left, with JT LeRoy) was commissioned to illustrate *Harold's End*, a book by a writer she believed in.

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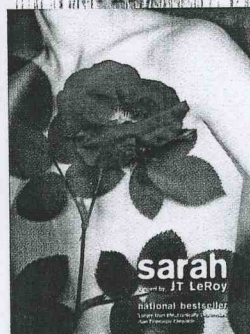
shy, yet he obviously possessed a knack for self-promotion. Cult followings do not grow on their own, and LeRoy spent a lot of time cultivating his circle of confidantes, celebrity or otherwise. His breakthrough came when he contacted his favourite poet, Sharon Olds, via fax – with some help from his therapist.

A pattern of chasing down his idols followed, with big names like Tom Waits and Gus Van Sant soon onboard. Van Sant, the director of *My Own Private Idaho*, in particular seemed like an artistic kindred spirit, so much so that there were rumours the director was in fact the author of LeRoy's work. It was not a rumour LeRoy was quick to dispel.

A book of short stories, *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, came out in 2001 and his work appeared in other journals and magazines. About that time LeRoy also appeared to conquer some of his public shyness and started to make occasional appearances, sporting what would become his signature blond wig and sunglasses. But even his closest allies noted the stark difference between the skittish in-person JT and the articulate if excitable JT they spoke to on the telephone. Back in 2001, Mary Gaitskill

expressed such thoughts to *The Village Voice*, and by the time *New York* magazine published a sprawling examination titled "Who is the Real JT LeRoy?" in October last year, it seemed like almost every associate, friend and editor who had worked with JT had a similar disconcerting tale of meeting him (except, notably, his celebrity mates, who for the most part kept quiet).

When I became music editor at *Interview* magazine in 2002, I had never heard of JT LeRoy, but I quickly brought myself up to speed when he was assigned as "celebrity interviewer" for a handful of the magazine's Q&A subjects. His passion for music and friendship with a bunch of musicians were parts of his literary persona that fit snugly with *Interview's* style. During our phone calls LeRoy sounded like a teenage fan and would overflow with opinions on bands, books and writers. Like others, I noticed his voice was quite feminine, but I was charmed by his Southern twang and habit of peppering conversation with words like "dang" and "y'all". His enthusiasm for music was somehow endearing. Even when he was dropping names, burbling about how he was



writing the liner notes for Billy Corgan's new band Zwan, he seemed like it was coming from a place of genuine excitement.

JT had a musical project of his own, too: a band called Thistle, for which he wrote the lyrics. The band featured two members of JT's unusual family – singer Laura Albert, who went by the moniker Speedie, and guitarist Astor, also known as Geoffrey Knoop. JT lived with Laura and Geoffrey in San Francisco and together the three of them were raising a son, Thor (believed to be Laura and Geoffrey's child). Despite a number of gigs in San Francisco and New York, Thistle has never really been taken seriously by critics, although the band's website features endorsements from Third Eye Blind's Stephan Jenkins and Madonna, who supplied this quote: "It's very cool and angry-sounding. I dug it." JT's promotion of the band – and its part in his whole story – probably did as much damage as it did good: Thistle is seen as a novelty band, a vanity project; just another creative outlet for one pretty weird dude.

What's most interesting about Thistle is that the band's performances shone the spotlight on a very central player in JT's life. In addition to being part of JT's family, singer Speedie, aka Laura, is said to have been an outreach worker who met JT during his teenage hustler days. She got him off the streets, into therapy, and invited him to live with her and her partner, Geoffrey Knoop. Laura (who has also been known as Emily Frasier) accompanied JT on almost all of his public appearances. She would remain close to him and often spoke for him when his nerves got the better of him.

When Thistle played an exclusive gig in New York in April 2003, I accepted JT's invitation to go along. As the band played, I spotted JT near me in the audience. He was wearing a wig but his sunglasses were off. I was intrigued to finally see him in person, and to see him watching Speedie/Laura on stage, seemingly enthralled.

Later, I bumped into Laura and JT as she was bustling him through the crowd (as he always seems to travel), presumably to some sort of VIP safety. I stopped them to introduce myself and was surprised when JT giggled in a high voice and simply repeated what I had said. Laura didn't hear my introduction over the din, although she seemed pleased when I complimented her performance. They were gone within seconds and I was left wondering if JT really had no clue who I was. That seemed odd, considering we'd been talking on the phone for months and had been in touch via email just days before.

I shook it off as another part of the bizarre world of JT LeRoy and thought little of it for the months to come, when our contact dwindled to an occasional email, usually JT letting me know about a new article he'd had published or some other project he wanted to spruik. I never mentioned the meeting.

It wasn't until the *New York* magazine article appeared in October last year that I discovered my experience was far from uncommon. I had



always known of JT's shyness and the ambiguities about his identity but in Steven Beachy's article several other editors who had worked with JT also reported meeting the author and coming away with a sense that he had no idea who they were, despite frequent phone and email contact. But the biggest bombshell in Beachy's piece was his own speculation about who JT really was: Laura Albert.

**By speaking with** former friends of Laura Albert and Geoffrey Knoop, as well as other writers associated with JT, Beachy found that all attempts to find the real JT led him to Laura. Could it be possible that a middle-aged woman had written JT's books and constructed an entirely fake author to go with them? What was her motive? If she wanted fame, why wouldn't she use her real name? Beachy put forth his own theories, among them that Laura and Geoffrey used JT and the books to promote their band, and that Laura likes fame but not attention. He ended his investigation with no hard proof of his suspicions and without conviction that any harm had been done if Laura was indeed the real JT.

Beachy had reported an uneasiness in his last interview with JT, a shared awareness that both people on the line knew that Beachy knew he was speaking to Laura, and not a man in his twenties. When I interviewed JT in December last year for this story, I tried to ascertain if I could indeed be speaking to a 40-year-old woman. The voice was the same one from the conversations a couple of years earlier, although I sensed a maturity and weight that wasn't in those earlier phone calls. The voice was calmer, more resigned and subdued. The lead-up to this phone interview had been a little odd – while LeRoy agreed to an interview, I wasn't sure if he'd want to comment on the whole identity crisis and it was hard to peg him down to a time for our talk.

As well as discussing the *New York* magazine story, JT told me he had finished working on his next book, *Labor*, and that he was thrilled with Asia Argento's movie adaptation of his book *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* (due out this year). He was in Los Angeles writing an episode of *Deadwood*, in which his son would even appear as an extra. There were some awkward pauses and twice he asked me to hold and then call him back after he took another call (both times when discussing the question of his identity). I knew something was not right, but that had always been my experience of JT. What I was interested in was what he had to say about the rumours.

"Oh, it's totally true!" he said sarcastically. "I am a hoax. Everybody knows it. I'm a ghost." Then, seriously: "I don't know how the hell I'm writing on the set of *Deadwood* when I'm a ghost."

Even with the pressure on, the JT I spoke to was true to form: "I was over at Carrie Fisher's house," he started when I asked what the reaction to the *New York* story had been among his friends. "Sean Lennon was there. I was writing a song with Harper Simon [Paul Simon's son, and Fisher's stepson] and we were all just

laughing about it." Later, he offered: "You know, I was speaking to Billy the other day – Corgan – and I was like, 'Billy, you want to give me a quote for this thing?' and he was like, 'JT LeRoy is as real as I am.' I told him I don't know if that helps or hurts."

JT did admit that the *New York* story annoyed him because "the intent behind it was jealous and mean. It involved my family," but he also said, "People who know me – like Shirley Manson – they just laugh. They're like, 'Whatever.'"

Garbage singer Shirley Manson's publicist ignored my request for her comments on JT late last year, although JT's website does feature a

people were no longer interested in him now that he was not a young boy who idolised their work or someone they could fetishise. "I did a gender switch," he said. "I use the male pronoun but I now identify as a female." His taste in authors changed accordingly, he said, and his former idols resented what they saw as a betrayal.

He was keen to stress he had "purity of intent" and called the hoax debacle a "useful discussion about gender and identity, which to me is what punk rock is."

I had planned to finish this piece, like the *New York* writer did, without stating whether I believed JT was real or not. I was still intrigued

**"I was speaking to Billy the other day – Corgan – and I said, 'Billy, you want to give me a quote for this thing?'"**



Phoney call: JT LeRoy also wrote the lyrics for the band Thistle, with Geoffrey Knoop (second from left) and Jennifer Hall, who replaced Laura Albert on vocals. Madonna described their music as "cool and angry-sounding".

note attributed to her (among other celebrity supporters) that reads in part, "I hereby solemnly swear, with my hand upon my very own small but trusted heart, that our little bug is our little bug. I have held his little hand in mine, looked him in the eye and recognised him as a good person, both honest and true."

Australian artist Cherry Hood – who did the paintings that appear in JT's latest book, *Harold's End* – supported JT in a phone interview last December, calling the hoax theories unbelievable. "It's such bullshit because I've met him in the flesh, without disguises, heaps of times. There's no way any of that could be true. He's just really ordinary, nice... genuine. There's no way that Emily [Laura] is JT."

In our interview, JT had a theory for why authors such as Dennis Cooper – who had publicly turned from a supporter to a doubter – had suddenly soured on him. He believed such

by the whole production, however it had come about. If it was a hoax, I was impressed by its success and reach. (Others, including Cooper and JT's onetime agent Ira Silverberg, were not so laissez-faire and expressed concern that JT's fans – including abused kids who identified with him – would be hurt by a deception.)

**In January, however,** the hoax theory gathered steam when a *New York Times* reporter revealed the true identity of "Wig & Sunglasses", the person who had been appearing as JT in public. That person was Savannah Knoop, who is the sister of Geoffrey Knoop, aka Astor. Aka the father of JT's "son". Aka the partner of Laura Albert. There was silence from Camp JT, although quite a few embarrassed editors and literary types showed up on websites such as Salon.com and various blogs to vent their anger at being duped. No



bold-faced celebrity names have yet come forward with comment.

Given this new development, Cherry Hood said in an email, "I know Emily [Laura Albert] is the muse, mother, nurturer, manager, even the instigator, but she would be some sort of miracle woman if she has the headspace left after all that to create such masterpieces – to be able to manage all that goes with JT and create art as well."

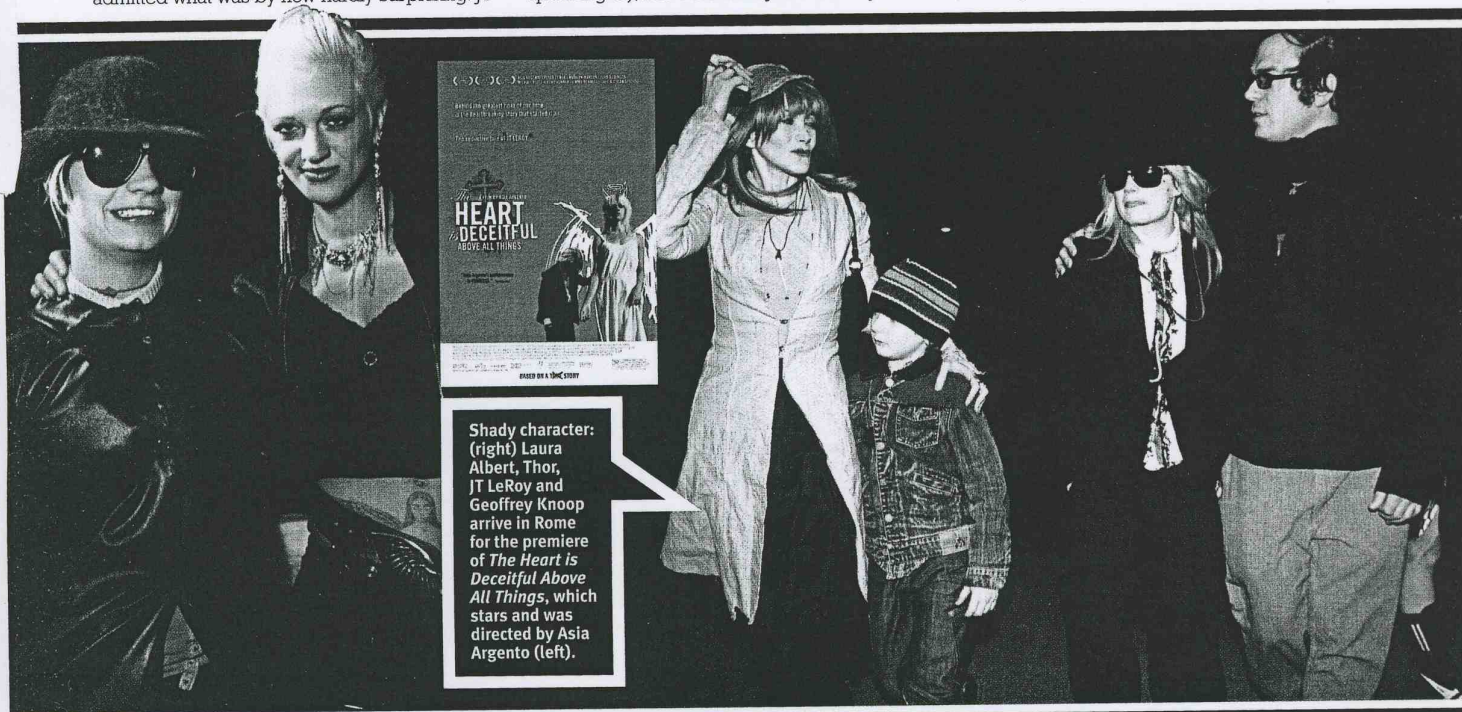
The key to that miracle was revealed in a *New York Times* story published on February 7, when Geoffrey Knoop revealed it was he who handled much of the day-to-day communications of JT LeRoy and Laura Albert who wrote the novels. Finally, after a decade of deception, someone admitted what was by now hardly surprising: JT

impersonating JT and went on a book tour. Knoop told the *New York Times* the elaborate con began to affect his relationship with Laura, who refused to listen when he tried to convince her to own up and take the credit for the work. He also said he didn't believe she would ever do so. "For her, it's very personal. It's not a hoax. It's a part of her."

**The fraud's end** will no doubt open up a Pandora's box of debate in the literary world but I can only imagine that such discussion might please Laura Albert. As JT, she was always keen to express her opinions about literature and its purpose. When we spoke in December (as it was obviously Laura I was speaking to), she defended JT's celebrity fan

"A hoax is not four books. They say Shakespeare is written by a group of people, you know? But when they talk about the authenticity of Shakespeare they don't call it a hoax."

Reached after the Knoop revelation, Cherry Hood sums up what many people swept into this experience must be feeling: "It's an existential mind game for me. I'm blown away." While she admitted it was bizarre, she maintained the awe for Laura's achievements that she had expressed earlier. It's a sentiment I have to agree with. Aside from the legal and personal ramifications (Geoffrey and Laura are said to be separating and fighting for custody of their son) and the effect on naive young readers of JT LeRoy's work, is this whole exercise nothing if not creative? Does it really matter if



Shady character: (right) Laura Albert, Thor, JT LeRoy and Geoffrey Knoop arrive in Rome for the premiere of *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*, which stars and was directed by Asia Argento (left).

LeRoy, the former truck-stop hustler turned literary star, was a big fat flaming fake.

"The jig is up," Knoop told the paper. "I do want to apologise to people who were hurt. It got to a level I didn't expect." Laura Albert did not return the reporter's calls for comment.

Many suspicions surrounding JT were confirmed by Knoop in the piece. He admitted the charade began in 1996 when Laura called author Dennis Cooper. She thought the gay writer might have no interest in talking to a woman in her thirties, so she adopted the voice and persona of a troubled teenager from the streets. It stuck. The motivation for the marketable boy-wonder writer came from Laura wanting a larger audience for her writing and Knoop likewise for his music.

Once "JT LeRoy" was successfully published, Knoop enlisted his sister to don a disguise and appear as JT on German television. It was meant to be a one-off, a validation, but Laura wanted more appearances, so Savannah kept

## Laura thought the gay author Dennis Cooper might have no interest in talking to a woman in her thirties, so she adopted the persona of a troubled teenager

club: "Bono talks about my book in *Rolling Stone* – what a wonderful thing. I'm not selling a religion. I'm not selling fucking handbags. I'm a writer and nobody reads, so it's a gift these people are giving me. If someone goes and reads it because Bono or Madonna talked about it, that's a wonderful fucking thing."

A few other parts of that conversation with "JT" take on more resonance now the curtain has been lifted. "The whole JT LeRoy thing has always been there," he/she had told me. "It's not something that was suddenly sprung on people. It's kind of like the joke where you put an elephant in the room and you take three blind men and they feel it and each find something else that they insist it is. I think that's more useful than saying, 'No, this is what it really is.'" And this:

the author of these books was not, in fact, a young man but a middle-aged woman with a canny knowledge of the market and how to navigate it? After all, JT LeRoy's works were always sold as fiction, even though the press created the impression that they were more akin to thinly veiled memoir.

Is this a literary crime or a staggering display of imagination? If Laura Albert is JT LeRoy then she deserves all the accolades he received, despite not having the cool cachet of being a troubled young man. What she does is what JT supposedly did: make stuff up.

Or, as Laura as JT said herself: "I'm a fucking writer. I'm not Enron; I haven't committed any major sins – other than trying to write books that move people." +

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