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Profile

## Who is the Real JT LeRoy?

A search for the true identity of a great literary hustler.

By Stephen Beachy



Laura Albert (a.k.a. Speedie or Emily Frasier), left, with JT LeRoy at an event he hosted at Deitch Projects last year. (Photo credit: Danielle Levitt)

In 2000, when JT LeRoy's novel *Sarah* was published, I attended his first reading in San Francisco, where local writers read in place of the pathologically shy author. Beforehand, Mark Ewert, who had helped organize the reading, shared rumors with me about LeRoy. Because almost no one had ever met him in person, some people thought novelist Dennis Cooper was actually the author, or maybe Ewert himself, Cooper's ex-boyfriend. Certainly LeRoy seemed suspiciously similar to the characters in Cooper's novels, fucked-up teenage boys in perpetual danger, or to the wise, otherworldly children in Ewert's Web film *Piki & Poko*.

JT, or Jeremy, LeRoy, or "Terminator" (as he was first known), was a teenage hustler who'd been pimped out as a cross-dressed prostitute by his mother at truck stops throughout the South, until he landed on the streets of San Francisco in the early-to-mid-nineties. At the time, Ewert himself was sure that LeRoy was more or less whom he claimed to be; he'd spent hours on the phone with LeRoy. He even spotted someone at the reading whom he believed to be JT, appearing incognito. Ewert reported his hunch to Dennis Cooper, who reported it to JT. Ewert had spotted him, JT confessed, and JT was highly upset.

The JT legend incorporated this anonymous, spectral presence into its mythology. Even if JT didn't show his face, we could still assume that anytime he had an event—and there were many—he was there, somewhere; we just couldn't see him. According to the official story, available in dozens of interviews LeRoy has conducted almost entirely by phone or e-mail, LeRoy was saved from his street life at the age of 13 or 14 by psychologist Dr. Terrence Owens. To give JT continuity between therapy sessions, Owens suggested that JT write down his stories, which Owens then gave to his neighbor, the editor Eric Wilinski, for feedback. JT

contacted Wilinski and, through him, JT's favorite poet, Sharon Olds. A John who liked to read Olds's work while having sex with JT had given him her books, JT once said—and Olds happened to have run the graduate program Wilinski attended. A later addition to JT's story has LeRoy found on the streets by Emily Frasier, an outreach worker who recommended him to Owens around 1993, when he was 13, and who lived with him in an intimate alternate family, along with her husband and their child.

Around the same time, JT also reached out to other literary figures by fax: In 1994, he got in touch with Dennis Cooper by faxing a request through Cooper's agent, Ira Silverberg. He struck up a telephone friendship with Cooper, who introduced him to the writer Bruce Benderson, through whom he contacted novelist Joel Rose, writer Laurie Stone, editor Karen Rinaldi, and agent Henry Dunow. By the age of 16, he was being published in *Nerve*, the *New York Press*, *Spin*, and various anthologies, and by 17, he had a book deal, brokered by Rinaldi and Dunow, at Crown. That novel, *Sarah*, was followed by a collection of stories in 2001 that was recently made into a film by Asia Argento. Still just in his twenties, JT had been translated into twenty languages, was making movie deals, and was writing the lyrics for a band, Thistle.

After the 2000 reading, I began to collect other pieces of the story. Ewert, Cooper, and Benderson had never seen him in person, and neither had his agent nor his editors. (When we spoke in May, Eric Wilinski did not mention having met JT before 2001, but during final edits of this article, he said he had met him earlier.) According to Dunow, he and Rinaldi discussed the idea of bringing JT to New York to meet other editors at Crown, but JT reacted to the idea with such anxiety that it became clear it was never going to happen. On a trip to San Francisco, Dunow arranged to meet JT in Washington Square Park, but JT didn't show up. Another editor, Panio Gianopoulos, worked with JT for years; in 2002, they met for the first time in San Francisco—on a street corner, through a car window. JT wore a wig, and his friend Emily did most of the talking.

We can never know for sure who's on the other end of a screen name or a phone line, and given that these were JT's two chosen media, the possibilities of his identity seemed endless. I didn't believe that he was either Ewert or Cooper, although it seemed reasonable that he wasn't exactly whom he claimed to be either. I spoke to the writer Brian Pera, who'd traveled the country on his own book tour in 2000. Everywhere he went, he'd met other writers who were in contact with JT by e-mail and phone; JT had bonded via extensive, often contradictory revelations, but was never able to meet these carefully cultivated confidants in public or in private.

This is 2004, a year that led to the LeRoy book, and the public, usually, started out in a good



2002



2003



2003



2004



2005

### WIGS AND SUNGLASSES

Throughout the nineties, JT rarely appeared in public. Then in 2001, he began to attend

readings and events—almost always in disguise. (Photo credit: From top: Remo Casilli/Camera Press/Retna; Dimitrios Kambouris/Wireimage; Patrick McMullan; Rebecca Saap/Wireimage; Yui Mok/EPA/Newscom)

Johnson. Johnson was supposedly a teenager with AIDS who had endured an incredibly abusive childhood until he was adopted, at 11, by a “social worker” named Vicki. In the early nineties, he contacted the writer Paul Monette, who was himself dying of AIDS

In 2001, a person claiming to be LeRoy began appearing in public, usually decked out in wig and sunglasses. But the rumors persisted. Editor Ian Philips of Suspect Thoughts Press says, “Every time I’m alone with another San Francisco publisher, editor, author, reviewer, bookseller, I get asked one of three questions: Who does your distribution? What do you think of Dave Eggers? And who writes as JT LeRoy really? And no matter which question we start with, we always end up on the third—and the conspiracy theories fly.”

These suspicions were bolstered by the precociousness of both JT’s networking skills and his confessional fiction. LeRoy claimed to have bounced around truck stops, through youth shelters and rehab, and to be a junkie. In interviews, JT would claim to be spreading the rumors himself that Dennis Cooper or the director Gus Van Sant was the real JT LeRoy; he suggested that this was the defense mechanism of an abused child, a web of arrows pointing in multiple directions to protect the writer from public exposure. The one irrefutable aspect of his story was that he had an incredible knack for self-promotion.

Every other aspect, a mounting pile of evidence suggests, is part of an elaborately wrought fiction.

The literary hoax is an ancient form, dating back at least to the 1700s, when teenage poet Thomas Chatterton got his work published as that of a fifteenth-century monk. A good hoax is like a good con. Though a con liberates the mark from some of his material things, it also teaches him how easily he was tricked, how ready he was to believe certain stories. To “wizen the mark” is to send him back into the world a little less wide-eyed, a little more jaded, his vision now penetrating beyond the surfaces of things. But to enlighten us, a good hoax or a good con must eventually be revealed. In the early days, the mid-nineties, LeRoy built a core of literary supporters—Cooper and Benderson and Olds, Mary Karr and Mary Gaitskill, among others—engaging in lengthy, intimate phone conversations and correspondence with them. His biography seemed tailor-made for their interests. Like Olds, he had a strict family background; like Cooper’s characters, he was a boy who had fantasies of being beaten up; like Benderson’s characters, he was a hustler; like Gaitskill’s characters, he was involved in S&M and prostitution. Eventually, he moved on in his affections to music and movie stars. Those who spoke to him in the beginning affirm that he certainly came across as a disturbed teenager, and they didn’t doubt that aspect of the story. JT used to break into other personalities on the phone, Cooper says. Over time, his publishing friends experienced his transformation from a stammering, freaked-out child to a “cocky, sassy, ambition-driven megalomaniac,” as one literary contact put it. But how had a homeless teen developed both the writing skills and that endless ambition? How could somebody so pathologically shy be working as a prostitute? And how did he manage to send those faxes?

It seems LeRoy himself is keenly aware of the implausibility of some of his claims and in interviews goes to some pains to explain, for instance, how he picked up his literary tastes from his Polk Street johns. He explains how he was given a fax machine by a trick and how he managed to send faxes from public restrooms—the rare restrooms where junkies fix but that also have phone jacks hidden in the corners. His defenders have sometimes suggested that it is simply the inability to accept the disturbing truth of his stories that prompted some to call him a hoax, but there are other reasons. Apparently, along with his multiple personalities, the disfiguring Kaposi’s sarcoma he’d used as an excuse to stay hidden cleared up, and he stopped mentioning his HIV infection. And in both his interviews and his books he seems always to be suggesting that nothing he says should be believed.

*The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* is, after all, the title of his second book. In one interview, JT said, “When I wrote *Sarah*, I was male-identified, and now I’m not. I don’t know what I am. So it’s easier if people decide it’s not me, then I won’t be held down. So many people have claimed me as their own, so I guess the best thing is to confuse them all.” It might also confuse some of the people who were closest to him. Said Gaitskill in one interview, “It’s occurred to me that the whole thing with Jeremy is a hoax, but I felt that even if it turned out to be a hoax, it’s a very enjoyable one. And a hoax that exposes things about people, the confusion between love and art and publicity. A hoax that would be delightful and if people are made fools of, it would be okay—in fact, it would be useful.”

When Armistead Maupin’s *The Night Listener* came out in 2000, many noted the similarities between its story and that of JT LeRoy’s. *The Night Listener* was a fictionalized account of the case of Anthony Godby Johnson. Johnson was supposedly a teenager with AIDS who had endured an incredibly abusive childhood until he was adopted, at 11, by a “social worker” named Vicki. In the early nineties, he contacted the writer Paul Monette, who was himself dying of AIDS

and who connected Tony to editors. After reading Tony's memoir, Maupin asked to be put in touch with Tony and began a long telephone friendship. But nobody had ever met Tony in person, and it was noted how similar his voice was to that of his adoptive mother, Vicki, the only person who would claim to have seen him. Like LeRoy, Tony built a network of writers and celebrities, created a Website, and touched the hearts of an adoring public.

Although his editors and agents defended him, eventually people began to suspect he was a fraud. After Maupin's novel renewed interest in the case, the holes in Tony's story were made devastatingly clear in Tad Friend's 2001 *New Yorker* article "Virtual Love." Friend comes short of proving Tony never existed and eventually declares him to be the equivalent of Schrödinger's cat—"by eluding definitive observation, Tony remained perpetually real and perpetually imaginary," writes Friend.

The implication of the article, however, is that Tony was actually a Union City, New Jersey, woman named Vicki Friginals. "Tony was self-conscious about his voice," writes Friend, "which was airy and lilting; it had never broken, Tony told friends, because AIDS had forestalled his puberty." LeRoy's "feminine" voice has also remained changeless, according to phone contacts, and he has said that his own puberty was delayed. I wondered if LeRoy might be the same woman who, once she could no longer maintain the fiction of Anthony Godby Johnson, created a new persona; I was interested in the ways that stories of suffering might be used to mask other, less marketable stories of suffering. Some minor investigation, however, revealed that the dates didn't work out, and that LeRoy was clearly rooted in San Francisco—although the Johnson story might have served as inspiration, especially since a 1993 *Newsweek* article provided a detailed account of the hoax.

### **"JT was nervous about doing readings," the man said. "So he asked me if I would impersonate him."**

It has occurred to me that there are months or years of my own life that were so unwitnessed that I could make up as many outrageous stories as I wanted, and nobody could refute them. In 1986, hitchhiking across the Florida panhandle, I was picked up by a man who had breasts. He told me a series of fabulous lies before pulling over, letting me out, and revealing that his breasts weren't real, and so nothing he'd described—including a rape he'd survived—was true. He left me there feeling both disturbed and enlightened. This actually happened, but there's no way I could prove it.

With JT LeRoy, in contrast, there are several facts that can be checked out. Dr. Owens is a real psychologist, the head of the Adolescent Psychiatric Inpatient Program at St. Mary's McAuley Institute, which JT has raised money for. Dr. Owens, however, says that he cannot verify that he did or did not see such a patient. JT could empower Dr. Owens to go public with the information, but he hasn't done that. JT's mother and grandfather are said to have died. He won't reveal the names or locations of his other West Virginia relatives, or of his biological father, said by JT to be a famous theological writer. An uncle, somewhere in the Midwest, spoke on the phone with one of JT's publishing contacts, but he worked for the government in a secret capacity, he said, and was afraid any association with his nephew's writings could endanger his career.

There is also a "cousin," Jo Ann, who received JT's checks for him, at least for his first book. But despite references in his books to hustlers and street kids he'd befriended, his acknowledgments are largely to celebrities; it's as if he'd been born, out of thin air, somewhere around 1994.

The details in his fiction struck me as equally vague. I came away from reading *Sarah* knowing nothing about truck-stop prostitution in West Virginia or about West Virginia. This is less true of his book of stories, in which I could at least imagine that the author had been to Fairy Stone Park in Virginia and knew something about meth labs. The stories are full of clichéd white-trash characters and vague, nondenominational, child-whipping fundamentalists. And though I don't know much about truck-stop prostitution, I've never come across a single detail in LeRoy's work that evoked a world I do know: the world of Polk Street in the nineties—the setting of his most recent work, *Harold's End*. JT's work has always been marketed as thinly concealed memoir; that said, whether he is successful at making these experiences ring true doesn't refute or prove anything about his life.

Still, if JT had really been a hustler, it occurred to me I might have seen him back in the day. I lived in the Polk until early 1993, had close friends in the neighborhood, and taught creative writing to homeless kids in the Tenderloin in 1995–96. I contacted long-term denizens of the Polk: johns, ex-hustlers, and outreach workers. One former hustler was a fixture on the street during just the years when Terminator is said to have been there, was also a junkie, was almost the same age, and knew everybody. But he'd never heard of Terminator. One john, who lived in the neighborhood and who was particularly attracted to smooth, young white boys, recognized neither the photos nor the moniker. And all agreed that a 14-to-16-year-old, five-foot-five, androgynous heroin-addicted hustler wouldn't have been the least conspicuous person on Polk Street.

I found no trace of a Jeremy LeRoy born—as JT says he was—on Halloween in 1980 or in West Virginia in accessible public records. What can be corroborated is that somebody calling himself LeRoy contacted Wilinski, Cooper, Olds, Benderson, Joel Rose, and others and spoke to them over a period of years on the telephone. Wilinski says that the idea that JT is a hoax is just

wrong. “You can draw me as part of a conspiracy,” he says, “but he definitely exists.”

LeRoy’s existence is also attested to by the presence of the person who began appearing in 2001—call him “Wigs and Sunglasses.” Whether Wigs and Sunglasses is the same person who made the phone calls and wrote the books is an open question, however. According to Brian Pera, JT tried to get somebody to impersonate him publicly in the past—a young man Pera knew who’d been one of JT’s phone friends. I tracked down the young man, who asked to remain anonymous. It was in 1999, right before *Sarah* came out, he told me. JT “was nervous about having to do readings,” he said. “So he asked me if I would impersonate him and do the readings for him. He recommended I rent *Bastard Out of Carolina* and study the accents. But I never did, and my attempt was halfhearted and weak. But then he came up with the idea of having celebrities do the readings for him.”

JT’s current agent, Ira Silverberg, says he’s met a person calling himself JT several times and that he certainly sounds like the same person he spoke to on the phone. “If it is all a big hustle, it’s a great hustle, and I applaud it,” he says. “If it’s true, it’s as Warholian as it gets.” Warren St. John, a reporter for the *New York Times*, interviewed JT in person and on the phone in 2004 and at the time believed he was speaking to the same person. The writer and editor Simon Dumenco (a *New York Magazine* contributor) edited an essay of JT’s over the phone and discussed it with him in person at a photo shoot by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. Many interviewers, however, have noted the difference between JT’s seductive phone presence and the almost silent persona he assumes in public. Lorelei Sharkey, a former editor at *Nerve* who had spoken with LeRoy many times, walked away from an in-person meeting last year convinced that he was not the same person. Dennis Cooper says that when they finally met there was something about JT’s demeanor that wasn’t right. “The voice was too weak, among other things,” Cooper says. “And his/her vague, disinterested behavior was just incongruous considering that we were supposedly finally meeting after being close friends for so many years.”

JT had long been concerned with providing physical evidence of his existence, and like Anthony Godby Johnson, he’d supplied photos to his friends. Recently, I had the opportunity to view these for myself, about a dozen different shots showing a cute blond boy with friends. The boy in the pictures is almost definitely not Wigs and Sunglasses—too tall, for one thing, and the pictures, supposedly taken in the mid-nineties, feature clothes and hairstyles that appear to be from the eighties. We know now that a different image he used for his book jacket in 2000 is not him. That photograph also graced Dennis Cooper’s novel *Period*, and in an interview with Void Books, Cooper explained that they were not pictures of LeRoy but photos of Cooper’s “great friend and muse” George Miles, taken in 1967, when he was 14 and Miles was 12.

Other than JT’s roommates, Speedie and Astor, there was only one confidante who definitely met JT before 2001. In JT’s versions of the meeting, it sounds as if he gazed into Mary Gaitskill’s eyes, eased out of his own self-consciousness by the pimple on her chin. But Gaitskill describes it differently. According to Gaitskill, she waited to meet him in a diner until a kid came in with two friends and handed her a package, which contained some of his work, a Sharon Olds book, chocolate, and a bottle of balsamic vinaigrette, said, “I’m Terminator,” and fled. “I probably saw him for a few seconds,” she says. Instead, JT’s friend, Speedie, sat down, and she and Gaitskill had a long conversation. “She struck me as very bright and very young,” recalls Gaitskill.

When I asked Cooper about the George Miles photos, he explained that he’d sent LeRoy the pictures as a favor to a friend he believed was a terribly shy kid with a skin condition. He no longer believes that to be true. Brian Pera told me that shortly after Cooper gave JT the photos, he was at Cooper’s house when *Dazed and Confused* magazine called. “They were doing an article on Dennis because *Period* was coming out,” Pera recalls. “When JT found out about the article, he called them up, saying his book was a companion piece to *Period*, that *Period* was about him, that he was even on the cover. *Dazed and Confused* called Dennis and said, ‘Hey, we need more pictures of JT’—because at this time, JT was using only that one picture—and they told Dennis that JT had told them that Dennis had more. This was JT’s way of trying to get Dennis to let him use more of George’s pictures, but Dennis wouldn’t. It was after this that JT began to be photographed. But there was always a mask, a wig, dark sunglasses.”

## Every trail I followed led me to Laura.

If Wigs and Sunglasses is an actor—someone who might be recognized—it would explain the need for disguises better than the selective agoraphobia that kept JT from coffee dates with Cooper or Gaitskill but that allowed him to party with rock stars and Winona Ryder. (Of course, such shyness also allowed JT to avoid intimate conversations in person.) The disguise might also explain JT’s horror at being touched. Newspaper articles on LeRoy mentioned the rumors that he was “a girl masquerading as a boy masquerading as a girl.” Writer Joshua Lyon, a Southerner, began an intense e-mail relationship with LeRoy in 2001, when Lyon was working at *Jane* magazine. The first time he spoke to him on the phone, Lyon was left with the impression that he was speaking to a woman and that the southern accent was fake. He met JT twice, once in 2002 and once last year for an in-person interview. During the interview, the wig and sunglasses came off and Lyon was convinced he was speaking with a woman. JT explained that he was taking female hormones and that his transition was almost complete. Still, whether Wigs and Sunglasses is a man or a woman is almost certainly a red herring in this story.

All the mysteries surrounding JT LeRoy converge on the Larkin Street flat where LeRoy's "bandmates" in Thistle live. The story from promotional material has been that LeRoy writes the group's lyrics, lives with its members, and helps the married couple at its center raise their child.

But Thistle is not precisely a new band. Years before Thistle emerged around LeRoy, it had played around San Francisco as Daddy Don't Go. This history is never acknowledged in JT's interviews, stories in which he takes on a central role in the impetus to form a band. The members of Thistle themselves use pseudonyms: Astor is the stage name of the guitarist Geoffrey Knoop, and his wife, Laura Albert, goes by Speedie. She, however, is just the original Speedie, more recently replaced as singer by a new Speedie, Jennifer Hall, an actress who starred on HBO's *Unscripted*.

If you're confused already, it's probably intentional. It is the original Speedie, Laura Albert, who is referred to as "Emily Frasier" in the New York *Times* article about LeRoy, where she is described as an outreach worker "who survived the streets herself" and rescued him around 1993, when she found him wandering into traffic in a psychotic haze. She turned him over to Dr. Owens and, not having the best sense of boundaries for a social worker, invited him to live in her "converted squat." Although Eric Wilinski also knew Laura as Emily Frasier, the only other traces I could find of the name are reviews she left on Amazon.com. "We Demand a Sequel!" she says about *Sarah*. "This is the most extraordinary and lucid book I've read in a long time."

This is a group that delights in playing with identities. Although the band's Website claims Geoffrey is 30, he was born in 1966 and attended Lowell High. The only instance I could discover of Laura's using her real name was on an erotic audiotape, *Cyborgasm 2*, produced in 1994. Daddy Don't Go recorded one number, and another, "Vicious Panties," was performed by Laura and "Jeffrey Kaos." The scenario involves Laura calling Kaos her little girl, her little boy, a cock-tease, a whore, and suggesting she'll pimp him out, enacting a relationship so similar to JT's descriptions of his relationship with his mother, Sarah, that it is startling. As opposed to the "outreach worker" Emily Frasier, Laura says about herself in the bio: "Laura Victoria Albert, singer/songwriter for the San Francisco band Daddy Don't Go, is a published writer, actor, phone sex technician, Brooklyn girl, and not a waif." Of her partner, it says only that "Jeffrey Kaos likes wearing panties."

Several of JT's phone contacts assured me that they'd never even heard of Speedie and Astor until at least late 1996. But there's a scenario that would explain that: JT never mentioned Speedie and Astor because they, in fact, are him. Geoffrey and Laura's cross-dressing fantasy is reminiscent of JT's fiction; Laura's phone-sex skills might have been put to use in JT's lengthy, intimate telephone calls. The strong British accent Laura often uses may seem odd for a girl from Brooklyn, just as JT's breathy southern accent may seem curious for somebody who bounced all over the country and has been on the West Coast since he was 12 or 13. If it was actually Laura on the phone all those years, her fake British accent would serve more than to grant some phony punk authenticity; it would be a way to disguise a voice that otherwise might seem just a little too similar to JT's.

If it was Laura, under the name of Emily Frasier, who rescued JT from the streets, he was an incredibly lucky boy to have been randomly saved by a couple who shared his interest in cross-dressing and fake identities. In *Sarah*, the narrator takes on the name and gender of his mother. Laura, born in 1965, is approximately the same age as JT's mother would have been, the woman who bequeathed him her cultural interests.

And everywhere that JT would go, Speedie and Astor were sure to follow. Or vice versa. It was Speedie who "introduced" Dennis Cooper to the person calling himself JT the one time they met in person. "JT, this is Dennis," she said, according to Cooper. "Don't you want to meet Dennis?"—as if JT had to be cued to remember this person he'd been bombarding with faxes and phone calls for the past seven years. When *Jane* writer Joshua Lyon made his way past the velvet rope into the VIP area to meet JT for the first time, he introduced himself, but JT had no idea who he was, although he'd e-mailed him just the day before, and JT had written a blurb for his manuscript. A red-haired woman—Laura—was present when he interviewed JT last year at the Tribeca Grand in New York and answered all his questions.

The two friends who accompanied JT to his meeting with Gaitskill were Laura and Geoffrey, and when JT's New York editor, Karen Rinaldi, showed up at his "Mission squat," JT refused to see her—but Geoffrey took the groceries she'd brought him. JT has a deeply devoted assistant, Nancy Murdock, who lives in Boston (and who strongly believes this article is driven by jealousy on the part of myself and Dennis Cooper). When she first met Laura, she recalls, "it was so funny, she was saying a lot of the same phrases as JT! It's because they're together all the time. One completes the other."

But isn't this scenario, of actors or thirtysomething women portraying literary street kids, even more far-fetched than the official

story? It's certainly as elaborate. It is also precisely the story that a friend, or ex-friend, of Geoffrey and Laura, Steve O'Connor, told his friends consistently between 2003 and 2005. O'Connor said that Laura had told him she wrote the books, and that it was only recently that they'd found someone to play the part of JT in public. They were trying to use JT, O'Connor said, to help promote their band. O'Connor had been close to them but had never seen any sign of a street kid in their living room. O'Connor isn't the most reliable source—he's unstable and drug-addicted, according to reports—but he had been in a position to know if there'd been anyone sleeping in their living room.

Other friends of Geoffrey and Laura had never heard of JT until 2000, although he was supposed to have been living with them since 1997. One friend confirmed that he believed O'Connor's account and that it was certainly more plausible than the idea that they'd been hiding a real JT. An old friend from California, now living in New York, was flabbergasted to hear about JT at all: Although he had a long friendship with the couple dating back to 1992, he had no idea Laura and Geoffrey even knew the author and said he'd never heard of anyone else living at their house. "This is totally the kind of thing Laura might do," he mused. "She craved the limelight, but she didn't really want all the attention."

JT has said he received \$24,000 for each of his first two books. His income has risen quite a bit since then; there have been movie deals and translations. "JT LeRoy" is a reasonably profitable business, in operation now for a mind-boggling eleven years.

**B**ut how would a fictitious person get paid? JT regularly writes for 7x7 magazine, but it doesn't have a Social Security number on file for him. According to my publishing-industry source, the payee for JT's first book, his "cousin," was another Brooklyn girl: JoAnn Albert, Laura's sister. Since the first book, some of JT's checks have been sent to a business in Carson City, Nevada, Underdog Inc. The president of this company is Carolyn Albert, also of Brooklyn, Laura's mother. She's a theater critic, and her online bio brags about her daughters, one of them "a writer in California." Other checks were handled by Ira Silverberg. And who does Ira pay? "None of your business," he told me. Laura, Carolyn, and JoAnn Albert did not return repeated calls.

I also found several phone numbers that JT had used as contact information in Dennis Cooper's archives at NYU. One number was from a fax dated February 1996. JT named the owner of this number, which he used on three separate occasions, as "Paul." Both that number and an address that JT used on an envelope belonged to Paul Falotico, who I discovered still lives in the Bay Area. Falotico didn't know any JT LeRoy, he said. He did know Laura Albert, however, although he thought it might have been under a different name—perhaps Lauren. It was definitely the same woman: Geoffrey Knoop's girlfriend and a member of Daddy Don't Go.

A janitor for the postal service, he'd met Laura through an Internet chat room when he lived in Phoenix and then became close friends with Laura and Geoffrey when he moved to San Francisco in early 1996. Before he moved, however, he did favors for Laura—she was very charming. For instance, because she owned no computer, she'd fax him schoolwork, and he'd retype it into his word processor, then fax it back. Laura had taken writing classes at City College, he said. She wrote for different publications, and she was always writing under aliases. "LeCrow," he suggested as one of those names. "LeRoy?" I asked. "Could be," he said.

When I mentioned the name Terminator, however, he knew it right away. Laura had a friend, a 16-year-old homeless boy, who used the name. Falotico had never met Terminator or spoken to him on the phone, but Laura had asked him to set up a message system on his voice mail so that Terminator could get his messages. I asked Falotico if Laura used his phone, if he ever heard her speaking in different accents. Yes, she'd done interviews on the phone, he said. He didn't remember a southern accent, although he had heard her do Asian, British, and African-American.

Laura was always very secretive, he told me, and she wrote about the darker side of life: pornography, homeless kids, prostitution. She'd let him read one story she wrote about a single mother traveling through Las Vegas with her 10-year-old boy. At the story's end, the mother abandoned her boy at a gas station. This could be an exact description of "Viva Las Vegas," a story that was published in JT's collection.

Even Falotico, whose voice-mail box JT was using, hadn't met him. Once again, in the space where JT should be, I had found Laura Albert. Every trail I followed led me to Laura. One central mystery remained: How had Dr. Owens become involved? I asked Falotico if Laura ever mentioned a Dr. Owens or talked about therapy. He hadn't heard of Owens, but he did know that Laura was the product of a divorced family and that she saw a therapist about that. Owens's role in the story remains unclear.

**O**n May 7, I attended the big JT event at Varnish Fine Art in San Francisco, an opening for the paintings from *Harold's End* with readings and a performance by Thistle. The official JT, wrapped in scarves, wig, and sunglasses, was hustled in from a taxi. JT then cowered away from the public on the upper balcony. Laura/Speedie/Emily was never far away, addressing the crowd in her British accent. Eric Wilinski introduced the reading, telling his story of having recognized, from a one-page sample, the signs of a real writer back when JT was 15. And the public was lapping it up, the stories of hustlers with pet snails, and needy teens being kept by professors.

It was time to speak to JT himself. When we talked on the phone a week later, I found him or her or them as oddly charming—and disturbing—as everybody said. Whatever Dr. Owens’s relationship to JT, he was definitely in contact with the household. Both he and Wilinski had already tipped JT off to my questions. “The rumors I’m talking about,” I said to JT, “would mean that I’m actually speaking to Speedie, and I find that fascinating.” JT wouldn’t confirm or deny it, although as we spoke for more than an hour, it felt to me that I was speaking to Laura, and it felt like both of us knew that, and that this was a novel and disturbing experience for us both. Whoever was on the other end of the phone was intelligent and articulate. JT espoused values I agreed with and effectively made me question my own investment in writing this story. S/he spoke about metaphorical truth, about purity of intent, and of a commitment to writing. I heard Geoffrey in the background, telling whomever was on the phone that they had to leave for an appointment. But JT kept talking. S/he seemed to be both justifying the performance and asking not to be exposed. S/he discussed the rumors s/he’d spread about fathering Asia Argento’s baby and how angry that had made some fans. But it was a metaphorical truth, s/he said, in terms of the movie Argento made of his book, and JT wondered where was the harm?

I have a certain respect for extreme answers to life’s questions; for shape-shifters and for any artist who can elevate a hustle into a decade-long joyride. But I suspect that part of the point of hiding is the inevitable pleasure of being found. When I spoke to JT a second time, however, our exchange didn’t begin so friendly. JT had been doing some research, s/he said, and found that I was a jealous and less successful writer. S/he’d discovered I had a book that came out the same year as *Sarah* now “selling for a nickel on Amazon.com.”

**“We are a Von Trapp kind of family. We create together in many, many ways, and that is our right.”**

S/he believed that I had an agenda and was lacking in “purity of intent.” I asked JT to meet with me in person, to show me a Social Security card or a passport. “Why?” s/he asked. “This is your issue. I don’t have any burning desire to be proven to be real.” I asked if s/he was born in West Virginia. “I am not doing an interview with you,” s/he replied. S/he did ask me to be aware that there was a child involved. “I do have a child, and that I wanna protect.”

I asked to speak to Laura or Geoffrey, but my request was denied. “Astor and Speedie will not say that they are me,” s/he told me eventually. “We are a Von Trapp kind of family. We are a family and we create together in many, many ways, and that is our right. I reserve the right to grow and change my identity.” S/he spoke of JT as a kind of collective and mentioned Andy Warhol’s Factory. By the end of the interview, we were back on a less confrontational basis; s/he even suggested I could read at a “hoax reading” when my article came out. “I’m not sure hoax is exactly the word,” I said. “I think it’s more like a lifestyle.” S/he wondered if I’d seen Todd Solondz’s film *Palindromes*, in which the main character is played by seven different actresses and one actor. “I love *Palindromes*,” s/he said. “That is ideal to me.” S/he said, “I would like for this to be a door for other people to get heard.” On that point, at least, we had come to agreement.

So does it matter? Does it matter if “JT LeRoy” never lived in a squat, if he never tricked on Polk Street, never was a lot lizard, isn’t from West Virginia? Does it matter if he is, more or less, a 39-year-old mother named Laura Albert, originally from Brooklyn? Where’s the harm?

**A**s for Cooper, his emotions concerning JT are complicated. He’d been souring on JT for years already. Even when he believed JT was a boy, he had become disgusted with the fame-mongering. He believes my scenario, he says, but he couldn’t say he’s 100 percent convinced. He feels foolish, he says, but considers it his own fault, and he’s begun a process of reassessing. How good are those books, really? He does express anger, however, about how these revelations might affect JT’s fans. “I know how much this whole JT thing means to some kids,” he says. “He’s their idol. What makes me angry is they used this, played the whole abuse thing. Kids who really are abused, how shocked they’ll be.”

Joel Rose expresses a great deal of skepticism about my version of the JT story, but he says that if it is true, it was certainly a betrayal, not by JT as much as by Dr. Owens. “They took money from publishers under completely fabricated circumstances.” Rose tells me that he is confused and hopeful that his skepticism about my scenario is justified. “If it is the case,” he says, “I have deep mourning for someone who never existed.” Despite his own break with JT several years ago, Rose had felt he’d gained something for himself through participating in the formation of a talent. “I loved him in my own way,” he says. “I always will. Even if it is some sick figment of Laura’s imagination. I still loved that person who presented himself to me in that light.”

**T**here are writers I love who create intricate layers of stories that only imply an unstated psychological reality grounding the dizzying production of narrative; others self-consciously play with the boundary between fiction and non. LeRoy has written about the way prostitutes fulfill other people’s fantasies and about the way the literary world can seem like simply a different form of prostitution. In an early version of one of JT’s stories, he wrote that he sometimes felt like the emperor with no clothes. Maybe it’s

more accurate to say that it's the clothes that don't have an emperor; it's just a wig and sunglasses floating around a dizzying production of narrative.

And perhaps no other culture has valued the contrived happy ending as much as ours. For all its abuse and kinky sex, the JT story is really just another heartwarming rags-to-riches tale for the punk generation. But what if America isn't really the sort of place where a street urchin can charm his way to the top, through diligence and talent; what if instead it's the sort of place where heartwarming stories of abused children who triumph through adversity are made up and marketed?

And what happens next? In *The Night Listener*, when Armistead Maupin showed up at the door of the boy he'd befriended on the phone, the boy's mother told him he'd just died. But let's hope there's nothing so drastic in store for JT. During the past few months, as I interviewed people and tracked down clues, I sometimes began to believe there really was a lost child at the center of the maze, and I didn't want to hurt that child either. At the center of this story is either a dramatic absence or, at least, the image of a boy. Or maybe not even a boy—an androgynous trickster figure like one of those obscure alchemical emblems Carl Jung was so fond of. "Maybe I'm Astor and Speedie, or maybe I'm an amalgam of the universal unconscious," JT had told me. Or maybe JT's human after all. In the most touching scene from *Sarah*, the narrator wonders why his mother always comes back for him. "She slowly rolled her head to me, flopped an arm over the back of my neck, and pulled me closer as if she were pulling in won poker chips. 'Everybody needs someone to know who they really are,' she laughed and guided my head down to lie next to hers."

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