

Damaged goods

JT Leroy has come a long way since his days as a drug-addicted, gender-bending prostitute and street kid. He's a fêted author; Hollywood loves him; famous women line up to mother him.

But is he still just a hustler at heart?
By Adam Higginbotham

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANA LIXENBERG

JLeroy says that he goes by numerous different names; he has no idea how many. Jeremy, Jeremiah, Babyhead, Terminator. 'They change all the time. I'm constantly changing,' he says. He reaches a tiny mitten hand beneath his atrocious blond wig and scratches at his scalp. Reluctantly, he admits he has perhaps 15 different aliases, with personas to match. With each, he changes his behaviour – sometimes the way he dresses; sometimes he'll try writing with his left hand. He'll adopt a new guise when he feels like it. 'Something in me seems tired,' he explains. 'That person inside is tired. It's all according to mood, really: fickle.'

Since his first novel was published five years ago, there have even been those who have suggested that JT Leroy doesn't actually exist. In fact, it's an idea that Leroy enjoys putting about himself. 'I like that,' he says. 'I get off on it. The idea of feeling like nobody has any idea who I am. I could be anybody.' Still, he insists that at least 'Leroy' is the name he was born with. 'It's a different spelling,' he says. 'But it's real.' Really? 'Really,' he assures me. But I'm still not sure I believe him.

For someone who doesn't necessarily exist JT Leroy is a writer with a surprisingly high profile. His stories and books, all drawing on a childhood spent as a cross-dressing hustler in the truck-stops of the American South, have made him a starlet in the bracing, relentlessly shocking world of transgressive fiction. He first attracted attention in 1997 when his story 'Baby Doll' appeared in an anthology of confessional essays, *Close to the Bone: Memoirs of Hurt, Rage and Desire*. Credited to a 17-year-old boy writing under the pseudonym of Terminator, the piece is arrestingly horrible: it is narrated by a child who superglues his penis between his legs and dresses in his mother's lingerie in order to seduce her boyfriend.

A book deal followed, resulting in his first novel, *Sarah* – a brief, magic-realist story of a gender-confused teenage boy adopting his mother's name to work as a 'lot lizard' (prostitute). This was followed by a book of short stories, *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*. The stories – apparently autobiographical tales of abuse at the hands of a whoring, drug-addict mother named Sarah – established Leroy as the last word in outsider cool for the alternative literature set. His work attracted endorsement from the film-maker Gus Van Sant and the sandpaper-voiced laureate of losers Tom Waits. Meanwhile, *Sarah* was reportedly the inspiration for fashion collections by designers from Costume National and Heatherette. More recently, Leroy has been adopted as friend and confidante by a coterie of famous admirers – mostly women, all infamously troubled – including Courtney Love, Tatum O'Neal, Shirley



Manson, Marianne Faithfull and Winona Ryder. A film version of *Sarah*, from the director of *Secretary*, Steven Shainberg, is currently in production, while the adaptation of *The Heart*, directed by and starring Leroy's friend, the Italian actress Asia Argento, is released in Britain this month.

Obtaining a personal audience with Leroy is far from straightforward. His preferred mode of communication is e-mail; he dislikes being interviewed and is never photographed without a disguise. He lives in San Francisco – in a converted squat, with his friends from the street, Emily Frasier, her boyfriend Astor and their seven-year-old son Thor – but doesn't feel comfortable being interviewed there. Instead, he arranges to stay with a member of his Hollywood circle, Carrie Fisher. We agree to meet at her house in Los Angeles.

When I arrive I must first meet Emily, a woman with brightly dyed red hair, a tight smile that never reaches the eyes and a coquettish manner that might seem less painfully incongruous were she 20 years younger. 'You are going to be nice, aren't you?' she asks, helping herself to a bottle of water from Fisher's fridge. With her free hand, she reaches down to touch my crotch. 'Yes,' she says, as if this has provided her with the confirmation she needs. 'You'll be OK.' I ask why she feels the need to touch my groin. 'JT says I do it because I can,' she says, and giggles. 'If you're not nice,' she adds, 'I won't let you be on your own with JT.' Then she takes me to the bedroom she is sharing with Leroy and gives me a JT Leroy button badge, a box of past-their-sell-by-date chocolate caramels and a copy of a San Francisco magazine containing a story by Leroy about having laser treatment on his skin. She asks if I enjoyed the film of *The Heart*. I say that I prefer the book. At the earliest opportunity she tells Leroy that I hate the film.

Leroy himself says that there is much people get wrong about him. 'There's a lot of preconceptions about my gender. They think I'm gonna be real faggy, real difficult – a princess.' Now 25, he speaks in a high, girlish Southern voice, and so softly that sometimes I can barely hear what he is saying. His face is smooth and soft like that of a prepubescent boy. His 5ft 5in body is a peculiarly feminine pear shape. He's dressed in a loose, laced blouse and baggy three-quarter-length combat trousers, exposing his pale, depilated calves. Around his neck he wears a small, curved bone from a racoon's penis – a Southern lucky charm worn by characters in *Sarah* as a symbol of hustlers' solidarity. His black plastic Jackie O-style sunglasses and ill-fitting wig constitute the disguise he usually wears on the rare occasions he is interviewed in person.

When *Sarah* was first published, he says, he tried to have sex with every reporter who came to speak to him. 'Emotionally, I got real confused – I wasn't used to getting attention. I didn't know how to react to it. I had no idea what was going on. Then I realised, "I can't be around this – I don't know how to take attention." But I wanted it still.' Unsurprisingly, his strategy of attempting to sleep with journalists was not a success. 'It was a mess,' he admits. For a while he resolved to stop meeting people altogether, and would only consent to being interviewed by phone.

From the outset, the facts of JT Leroy's life have been difficult to separate from his fiction. What has become the accepted version of his

childhood is a patchwork of the distressing incidents described in his writing and the sometimes conflicting statements he makes about himself in interviews. Besides his name, questions have been asked about his age, sexuality and even gender.

Things are not helped by Leroy's own exploits in disinformation. In 2003 he telephoned the editor of the *New York Post*'s 'Page Six' gossip column to announce that he and Asia Argento were expecting a baby, and went so far as to call back with Argento on the line to confirm the news. Later, he said that he had only 'figuratively' 'knocked her up,' because they had just completed writing the script to *The Heart* together. When *Sarah* first appeared it was rumoured actually to have been written by the gay LA novelist Dennis Cooper. When *The Heart* was published it was said this was really the work of Gus Van Sant. Afterwards Leroy claimed to have started both these stories himself.

And while *Sarah* is quite clearly a work of the imagination – a black fairytale set in a world where truck-stop hookers have their trade blessed by the magic head of an antlered rabbit, the 'Holy Jackalope' – *The Heart* is a very different book. Leroy says he began to write these stories, including 'Baby Doll', at the age of 16, as part of his therapy with a child psychologist. The stories are written in a crude, repetitive, blank style. In the past he has described them as being like journal entries. They were 'going into the unconscious,' he

JT Leroy with Emily Frasier (left) and Winona Ryder at a reading of his work in New York in 2003



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says now, 'sorting everything out'. The narrative is one of relentless abuse, of a small boy taken away from caring foster parents by his speed-addled teenage mother who tortures him psychologically and physically, leaves him with a series of violent boyfriends,

and passes him off as a girl because it makes her thieving and prostitution easier. He is first raped at the age of five, is briefly subjected to a life of Christian fundamentalism by his grandparents, becomes a transvestite hustler before he reaches puberty, and has the end of his penis burnt by his mother with a car cigarette lighter. He eventually comes sadomasochistically to crave beatings as an eroticised form of the only attention his mother used to show him. The last story in the book – actually the first he wrote when he went into therapy – describes him paying a biker to beat him up and slash his genitals with a switchblade.

By the time he found his way to Dr Terrence Owens, the director of the adolescent psychiatric programme at the McAuley Institute of St Mary's Medical Center in San Francisco, Leroy was a heroin addict living on the street, turning tricks for money. Writing the stories was a means of confronting his past as well as an aid to helping him off heroin. 'I couldn't write when I was high,' he explains. The stories were, he says, never intended for publication. Even now he hasn't sat and read the whole thing from cover to cover – it's too painful. 'I didn't follow the steps of the book deal. I thought, "Well, I have all this stuff." I hadn't thought it out, that this was going to be in people's hands.'

It upsets him when people ask him if the events described in *The Heart* are true. When, a few years ago, a famous rock star e-mailed him and asked if his mother had really burnt his penis, he was outraged. 'People

like to ask these questions that have nothing to do with the writing craft. I mean, what do you f—ing care? I'm not asking you if you raped anyone, or if your mom did this to you. We're not playing skeletons in the closet, and I don't have to be held by those questions.' For someone who has now apparently revealed so many intimate details of himself in public, Leroy remains oddly reluctant to talk about the specifics of his background. 'It bothers me,' he says. 'Because I feel I have to be held to it.'

Leroy was born in Virginia in 1980. He says that he knows who and where his father is, but has never met him. 'He's a professor of theology. I tried to contact him, and he didn't want to talk to me. I guess that was when I was 16, 17.' In the past he's said that his father was 'a pig who seduced my mother when she was a little girl', but to me, he says, 'I don't know how they got together, to be honest. I guess she hooked him somehow, ha ha! She told me his name and called him a lot of dirty names, but she didn't know him that well.'

He hasn't seen his mother since he was 14. 'It was in San Francisco. She was living there and I would go off, or she would go off, and then I'd find her again – and finally she just took off.' In 1999, when he was 19, he heard from an aunt that Sarah was dead. He's no longer in touch with any of his family, and says he has no interest in reaching them.

Leroy says he never completed any kind of schooling, and the longest period of continuous formal education he had was two years, between the ages of six and eight. 'But I would say I've had a lot of education – from the writers I contacted.' When he was living on the streets he sent well-known writers whose work he admired samples of his own efforts, and got their advice on where he was going wrong. It's a story he's fond of telling – how he dragged a fax machine everywhere he went, plugging it in and sending people scraps of his writing. 'I got a trick to buy it for me,' he says. 'I'd go into the public bathroom and use their plug outlets.'

After he tells me this we talk for a while about other things, and then I belatedly realise how unlikely the tale of the fax machine seems. Phone sockets in public toilets? Really? That doesn't sound right. 'Mmm, no,' he agrees, and giggles. It is, he admits, just something he likes to say.

Leroy does not find writing easy, but he now thinks that he's addicted to it. 'If I don't have it, after a while I'm not myself.' Finally, four years after the publication of *Sarah*, he's just completed his second novel. 'It's based in the desert. And it's like *Sarah* – kind of a more magical and surreal storyline. It's a little bit of a quest for my father. That's all I'm going to tell you,' he says.

At one point in our conversation I ask Leroy if there is any lesson he learnt as a hustler that he still uses now. 'Oh yeah, on a daily basis. Whatever interaction

I have with someone, it never is, I think, pure. Maybe somebody's doing me a favour, but they need something in return. That's why I always give gifts and things. I mean, it's definitely a different form of hustling now, ha ha ha! Much more innocent. But there always has to be an exchange.'

Later that night I join Leroy and his extensive entourage for dinner at a costly sushi restaurant downtown. Out in public, he dispenses with his wig and sunglasses, revealing short, mousey brown hair – and puts on lipstick and eyeliner. Midway through the meal, Emily leans down the table towards me. 'For every question you asked,' she says, with a nasty smile, 'we're ordering another dish. For every time you asked "Why?" we're ordering another sake.' At the end of the night, as Leroy's friends and hangers-on begin to leave, some of them stop by to thank me for my hospitality. Leroy has left me to pay the entire bill. ●

'The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things' is released on Friday

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