

## Knowing JT LeRoy

By Daniel G. Taylor

JT LeRoy minced onto the queer lit scene in 2001 with his debut novel, *Sarah*, strongly supported by author Dennis Cooper. Two more books and a film later and he looked set to reach levels of greatness uncommon for disadvantaged queer youth. Then an article in *New York* magazine last October posed the question: 'Who is JT LeRoy? The True Identity of A Great Literary Hustler.'

Reading the news of the expose in the local gay press, I struggled to process it. Dropping into Hares & Hyenas bookshop to discuss the news with proprietor Rowland Thomson, he asked if I felt betrayed. It was a question faced often over the coming days.

You see, I knew JT LeRoy. Well, I thought I did.

LeRoy wrote about his life - one so tragic you yearned for his success. Living with foster parents, LeRoy didn't meet his birth mother until he was five. Then when she claimed him, she pimped him out through the truck stops of West Virginia as a cross-dressing teenage prostitute.

This life ended when he befriended an outreach worker in San Francisco, who blurred professional boundaries, allowing him to move in with her and her partner. She introduced him to a psychologist, Dr Terrence Owens, who instructed LeRoy to write down his stories as a way of maintaining continuity between therapeutic sessions.

In 1994, LeRoy faxed queer lit bad boy, Dennis Cooper. LeRoy's writing and life were impressive, and Cooper became a supporter. LeRoy also built relationships with other writers Sharon Olds, Mary Karr, Mary Gaitskill, and his early writings targeted their interests perfectly. Later, LeRoy befriended a variety of celebrities including Gus Van Sant, Courtney Love, and Winona Ryder. LeRoy is perhaps best known in Australia through Garbage's song, *Cherry Lips (Go Baby, Go)*.

Following his debut novel a year later came the collection of short stories, *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, and in 2005, *Harold's End*, featuring artwork by 2002 Archibald Prize winner Cherry Hood. Everything he wrote was critically acclaimed. It seemed I wasn't the only person who desperately wanted this delicate, complex boy to succeed.

During the nineties, LeRoy avoided appearing in public, claiming first to be painfully shy (clearly a good trait in a prostitute), and later because of embarrassment over lesions from Kaposi's Sarcoma, a result of HIV. In 2001, LeRoy began making public appearances, disguised with wigs, sunglasses, and hats. When questions about his identity didn't stop, LeRoy played another card: he was transgendered, identity was fluid.

LeRoy's story evoked strong feelings in me because it echoed my own. As a child I was sexually abused; my early teen years were spent in an ultra-fundamentalist Christian church; my adult years have been marred by bipolar spectrum disorder. I know what it's like being disconnected from other people and reality.

Success also came at a young age: my professional writing career started when I was 18 and still at uni. Within 12 months of starting out I'd written for *The Age*, *Good Weekend*, and regularly contributed to *OutRage* and dozens of other titles.

As is my habit when something impresses me, I emailed LeRoy after reading *Sarah* in 2001. Within 24 hours, he responded telling me about his Yahoo! Group for fans. Joining the group and posting a review of *Sarah* won LeRoy's admiration: He liked the way I placed his

work in the tradition of coming-of-age novels. As the email exchange continued I was invited to join his hidden writers' group.

The Cherry Raft Writer's Guild was a critique group for talented, mostly queer writers, and most were from disadvantaged backgrounds. Belonging to the group felt special and gave me something to brag about to my literary friends, heck, to anyone who would listen.

Another response LeRoy made to my review was a list of nearly 500 publications that LeRoy wanted me to target about him, my first sense of him as a marketing-savvy megalomaniac. After all, what writer has a list of 500 publications (many obscure) from around the world that are likely to be interested in stories about them?

Of course, I wasn't the only one asking questions about JT LeRoy. Stephen Beachy was not only asking questions, he was seeking answers. And although he didn't claim to have them all, on 17 October 2005, in *New York* magazine, his article appeared that attempted to sort myth from fact about the elusive LeRoy.

Beachy verified what he could. Dr Owens was real, but refused to confirm or deny LeRoy's existence (LeRoy had raised funds for his clinic). Beachy had lived on Polk St – San Francisco's equivalent of Sydney's The Wall, or Melbourne's Shakespeare Grove – during the time LeRoy is supposed to have worked there, but neither rent boys or their clients knew LeRoy.

While not finding LeRoy, Beachy kept finding someone: Laura Albert – writer, singer, phone sex operator. The outreach worker who rescued LeRoy was Laura Albert using a different name. Albert and her partner Geoffrey Knoop were known for identity bending. Beachy pointed out that LeRoy was very lucky to 'have been randomly saved by a couple who shared his interest in cross-dressing and fake identities.'

Several friends of the couple denied having seen evidence of LeRoy living in their apartment. Beachy also uncovered that the woman who received the cheques for the first book was Albert's sister, and that subsequent cheques have been received by a company Albert's mother presides over.

Beachy concluded that while there may be a real, vulnerable boy at the centre of his search, every avenue he pursued led only to Laura Albert.

On reading the Beachy article, I didn't want to give up the idea LeRoy was real. (After all, I'd made a jackass of myself boasting about knowing him for years.) Also I understood why someone would want to bend identities.

See, in 1997, I did my own bout of identity bending. Feeling desperately old at 21, I lied about my age, telling people I was 17, making a new circle of teenage friends. It was a way of coping with a reality I didn't like, dealing with the fallout of my first manic episode of bipolar. During that year I flitted across identities, as many as seven, and often believed I was telling the truth. Couldn't LeRoy be doing the same?

Apparently not. Following the expose, a succession of articles solved other clues in the mystery. The public LeRoy was exposed as Savannah Knoop, Geoffrey's sister. And the jackpot came in February this year, when Geoffrey Knoop revealed in an interview in *The New York Times* that he and Albert had created JT LeRoy to promote his music and her writing.

So what does it matter whether JT LeRoy is a hoax? Doesn't it all come down to the quality of the writing? Hans Eisenbeis, an American writer wrote, 'I don't know what all the fuss is about. In the business, it's called a pseudonym, and the fact that J.T. LeRoy has been writing and publishing under that name for more than a decade ought to be track record enough to establish his (or her) credentials...'

But Mr Eisenbeis is wrong. A pseudonym is not the same as a literary hoax; a pseudonym does no damage whereas a hoax does.

When the memoir, *The Best Little Boy in the World* was published in 1973, the author chose to use the pseudonym John Reid because he wasn't prepared to accept the consequences of coming out to everyone. But by 1999's sequel, *The Best Little Boy in the World Grows Up*, Andrew Tobias wrote under his own name.

But Anthony Godby Johnson published *Rock and a Hard Place: One Boy's Triumphant Story* in 1993 supposedly as a HIV-positive 11-year-old who had survived an abusive childhood on par with the worst life could toss at you. He duped literary great Paul Monette and the hoax was exposed when Armistead Maupin revisited the story in 2001's *The Night Listener*.

Taking on a pseudonym protects a writer from revealing their identity, it's not a licence to create an identity to enlist supporters and help the writer succeed. It's morally reprehensible to abuse reader trust and supporter sympathies through claiming experience as a HIV-infected person, as someone struggling with gender identity, as someone from a horribly disadvantaged background, and as someone who, despite all these things, manages to overcome the odds and become a smashing success.

I suspect many people connected to JT LeRoy for the same reason I did: He was a classic rags-to-riches story.

And so how has that story changed now the hoax is exposed? Apart from some magazines killing a few articles, and a parting of ways with his agent, it seems nothing is slowing down the LeRoy production line. A visit to [jtleroy.com](http://jtleroy.com) shows the intimate nature of the site has been replaced with slick, no-nonsense marketing boasting of an impressive list of credentials.

But the question isn't about writing ability, rather are we prepared to forgive JT LeRoy his sins?