Culture Multure
The Author Isn't Dead, He's a Star

by Michael Larkin
illustration by Laurenn McCubbin

THE TASK I'd set for myself was patently impossible: In the aftermath of the JT Leroy brouhaha, could I read his/her first novel, *Sarah*, and come to my own reading exclusive of the hype that initially accompanied the book six years ago and exclusive of revelations that emerged late last year regarding the mysterious author's life?

Of course not. The context of the whole authorial imbroglio hung over my reading, just as I knew it would, but more on that in a moment. First, I still wanted to know whether the novel was any good. Which fiction had originally seduced readers: the carefully crafted author profile, the writing itself, or a little of both? Was the praise deserved? Questioning thusly, I toted the novel with me on several bus rides back and forth to work, and came to my verdict. You ready?

It depends.

The novel tells us, in first-person narration, about a boy prostitute who seeks the affection of his barely interested mother, herself a hooker, by trying to become the greatest boy-turned-girl "lot lizard" in the history of West Virginia truck stop whorehouses. The narrator embarks on a short journey from one truck stop bordello to a second one, where he endures manifold degradations and abuses before being saved by a pair of gun-toting prostitute pals who return him to the first bordello. The end.

The Appalachian mythic is at work in the world of the truck stops, particularly the first with its anomalous gourmet dinners and its hookers toting talismanic raccoon penis bones. The goofy fabulation continues when a glowing jackalope serves up sexual empowerment and when the narrator's fellow prostitutes view him as a reincarnated Biblical figure. But prostitution can only get played so far for laughs. A scene where the narrator indulges a kindly pedophile makes the skin crawl. Tricks are turned in matter-of-fact recounting that belies the nature of the transaction. These sharp descriptions signal the narrator's longing for connection and read as emotionally true. But after awhile, the colorful elocutions—"Damn, you've been busier than a cat covering crap on a marble floor"—start to

sound the way the simile-happy Dan Rather used to at election time. One scene blends into the next until the narrator is suddenly at the end: older, jaded, and sadder. I didn't want more, exactly, of the journey or the tricks or the desperation or even a happier ending, but the story did leave me wanting.

Which brings me back to context. Reactions to books are a subjective thing, colored by our tastes, by where and when we're reading something and for what purpose. I loathed *To Kill a Mockingbird* when I first read it in high school because my teacher forced us to summarize each chapter to prove we'd read it. Years later, when I came back to it, I had the space to have my own reaction without the authority of the teacher breathing down my neck, and the virtues of the book presented themselves. It also didn't hurt that I knew nothing about Harper Lee; the author, in Roland Barthes' famous, figurative phrasing, was dead.

My mixed reaction to *Sarah* may have been affected by the nausea-inducing experience of reading most of it while riding on gyrating buses. My reaction may have also been affected by the fact that I don't have any particular interest in West Virginia truck stop prostitutes, but then I don't have any special interest in gay Wyoming cowboys either, and Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" held me rapt.

My reaction may have been affected by all of the glowing blurbs from the likes of Mary Gaitskill, Chuck Palahniuk, Dennis Cooper, and... what's this? Lewis "Buddy" Nordan, one of my old teachers, saying that *Sarah* made "*Bastard Out of Carolina* seem like a day at the beach"? Et tu, Buddy?

And then there's that author, who wouldn't go away. On the title page of my copy of the book, a fawning inscription had been written, supposedly from JT Leroy to "Baz," as in Baz Luhrman. So, the director of *Romeo + Juliet* received this personally signed copy from JT Leroy and subsequently sold it to the used book store in Berkeley where I found it? Whatever the fakery (or not) of the note, the additional reminder of the author and his Hollywood admirers spelled trouble.

No matter what Barthes argued about the reader controlling meaning while the author ceases to exist, and no matter what the New Critics had to say about a text being made to be read as unified, exclusive of the circumstances of its creation or the personality of the writer, it's difficult to read a book these days without being at least somewhat aware of the author. In this case, I had so much authorial context beating me over the head with its blond wig and sunglasses before I'd even set eyes on *Sarah*'s

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first words that any hopes of an objective reading were lost.

If one reads *Sarah* as the semi-autobiographical work of a teenaged former prostitute, its flaws are forgivable, its accomplishments astonishing. It may not be the polished boy-wonder first-novel genius of a Jonathan Safran Foer or a Michael Chabon, but consider the circumstances. *Let's get this boy some support and nurture his talent*, folks are thinking, and why wouldn't they be?

But if you read it as the work of a 30-something writer, then *Sarah* starts to read like something more proficient than impressive. The writer has talent on display here, yes, but worthy of the hype? Well, no. Unless one considers that Laura Albert, if that's who JT Leroy really is, was presumably trying to write to the capabilities of a young, ex-hooker prodigy to maintain the authorial ruse. Then, maybe it's impressive again.

American readers seem to increasingly have need to lay hands on the author, to project the world of the book as the precise world of the author rather than letting the fiction speak for itself. *Did this really happen?* they want to know. *Are you really like this?* This may be a devaluing of fiction, and it may be something else. A few years ago, Don DeLillo gave a lecture in San Francisco, which was mostly remarkable for the Q&A afterward. Many of the audience's questions seemed to indicate they thought of DeLillo, based on the philosophical projections of his books, as some kind of seer: "Yes, um, hi... I love your work, and I'm wondering with the Internet and everything... like... what's going to happen in the future?" As he responded to these Questions For The Author As Guru, a bewildered-looking DeLillo seemed to want to board a plane for home and get back to just being a writer. How quaint. Surely he knows that the author who wants a career longer than one book these days has to be a celebrity, a savvy PR hound, a brand? "JT Leroy" did.

So what happens to reading? If the author encroaches on the story, if we become aware of her foibles, her prejudices, her *actuality*, then what happens to her fiction when we read it? The "single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)" that Barthes discussed as an impediment to the reader's own meaning-making is still there, just not in the way Barthes meant. The secular meaning, if you like, of the individual reader's interpretation of the text gets pre-empted by the author-celebrity. Perhaps we need some reader-celebrities to right the balance, but then we already have some, don't we? And we all know what happened to Oprah with her reading of James Frey.

In his book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the scholar Wayne Booth has this to say about the author's presence in novels: "A great work establishes the 'sincerity' of its implied author, regardless of how grossly the man who created that author may belie in his other forms of conduct the values embodied in his work. For all we know, the only sincere moments of his life may have been lived as he wrote his novel."

This rings true as a description of JT Leroy and *Sarah*, minus the "great" as descriptor. In the novel, the main character is known variously as Cherry Vanilla, Sarah, She-Ra, and Sam, none of which is his actual name. We can believe in the character's search for a true identity and find the "sincerity" of the implied author, but we know the actual author plays fast and loose with her own identity, positively begging us not to forget her when we're reading. If we're living in the age of the Cult of Celebrity, then perhaps that's the best way, if not the only one, for a writer to get her story heard. Too bad.

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Michael Larkin is a septuagenarian Ugandan-American bi-curious skate punk whose formative years were spent on a pirate ship in the Indian Ocean. His semi-autobiographical novel is forthcoming from Knopf, a fact which is emotionally if not actually true.