

The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things Study Guide

The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things by JT LeRoy

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Plot

Plot Summary

This collection of stories constitutes a novel that is loosely connected by time but tightly intertwined by the experiences of Jeremiah and his mother, Sarah. The true author of the book is Laura Albert, but for several years, the literary world wondered about the person who played J. T. LeRoy. Her real name is Savannah Knoop. For a long period of time, Savannah's work is deemed a hoax and fraudulent. However, within certain legal contexts, the literary value of Albert's work is universally accepted.

The stories follow the abusive childhood of Jeremiah from the age of four to an undetermined older age. His abusers include his mother, her men, and his grandfather. The unrelenting pressure and pain warp the boy sexually until he desires to be a girl and a prostitute like his mother. Meanwhile, his mother falls steadily into madness from drug addiction and her own need to be abused by her men.

Jeremiah starts out as a normal four-year-old, but once his mother claims him from Social Services, she immediately starts manipulating his mind and abusing his body until he hates his foster parents. Sarah, the mother, takes up with a cowboy who punishes Jeremiah severely for minor offenses because both he and Sarah believe the boy needs this in order to live a straight and honest life. Sarah tires of the cowboy, starts an argument and leaves him, taking Jeremiah with her. She moves from place to place and from man to man, sometimes abandoning her son but always coming back to him. Jeremiah watches his mother become a prostitute at truck stops, a methamphetamine addict, and a paranoid who fears that coal will destroy the world. Before she becomes too insane, she makes up Jeremiah's face and hair to look like her. After she leaves the trailer, Jeremiah dresses up as her and is raped by her boyfriend, which causes severe injuries. Social Services brings him to his grandfather's house, where he sees his young uncles severely punished by their fundamentalist preacher father. Jeremiah craves the punishment too, because he has confused pain with love from the frequent whippings from Sarah's men. Sarah comes and takes Jeremiah away.

Excited that a new beginning is about to happen, Sarah drives and Jeremiah navigates the roadmap to Las Vegas. They have a falling out, and Sarah abandons him. She later takes him to Death Valley, where she tries unsuccessfully to seduce a park ranger and nearly kills Jeremiah with a rock she calls a meteor. Jeremiah survives but has become entirely estranged from his male identity. He desires only to be a girl and a prostitute like his mother, and he fantasizes about someone cutting off his penis.

Plot Analysis

Not Applicable



Story 1: Disappearances

Story 1: Disappearances Summary

An eighteen-year-old mother retrieves her four-year-old son from social workers who have taken him from his foster parents. The boy misses his foster parents, considering them his real parents, and rejects his biological mother. The boy runs away in the night, falls and injures himself but not too badly. The police find him and call for the mother. She takes the boy home, and during the drive, she intimidates him physically and psychologically to obey her every command without complaint or the police would take him away and kill him.

The young boy starts wetting the bed, a problem that he had grown out of with his foster parents. The mother, who works as a waitress at a truck stop and has a nametag with Sarah on it, complains about her poor tips and how the boy neglected to turn off the lights before he went to bed. The social workers find out that the mother does not hire babysitters when she goes to work. Afraid that the social workers will take her son away, Sarah hurriedly packs their belongings into trash bags and drives away during the night. She is on her way to her father, a man who hates social workers enough to offer help but has otherwise rejected his grandson.

On the way, Sarah stops at a bar and lets a cowboy pick her up. Unknown to the cowboy, the boy hides in the back seat. While Sarah and the cowboy engage in sex within a small house, the boy awakens and rings the door buzzer. The cowboy answers, and with surprise and anger, announces the boy's presence to Sarah. She makes up an excuse that the boy had just been dropped off, and after making him a bed of pillows and a blanket in the bathtub, returns to the cowboy's bed. The boy hears their sexual activities and knows what they are doing. He fears that his mother will become one of the many pornographic posters the cowboy keeps on his walls.

In the morning, the cowboy discovers that the boy had wet his pillows. Very angry, he takes a belt and beats the boy, who is named Jeremiah, while Sarah watches on approvingly.

Story 1: Disappearances Analysis

This is a story about child abuse and how terribly helpless a four-year-old boy is when the adults around him become sadistic. Jeremiah's mother had become pregnant when fourteen, had grown up in a religious household, works sleazy truck stops for meager pay, and is sexually promiscuous. Her only concern is that her child obeys her without question, and to enforce this, she uses fear and pain. Meanwhile, Jeremiah learns about human sexual depravity, accepting it as just the way things are supposed to be, and falls further into a terrifying life that includes spirit-crushing torture at the hands of an angry, uneducated, and crude cowboy. The horror of the scene involves Sarah



calmly smoking a cigarette and encouraging the cowboy. Whether Jeremiah survives the beating is not revealed.

Imagery enhances the story's mood and is presented from the Jeremiah's viewpoint. He does not understand how his mind is being warped by his mother, and his senses of sight, hearing, taste, and smell heighten as the story progresses. He sees the mountains and storm clouds in metaphorical terms that foretell of disasters to come. His leaving the police station is cast into a scene of moving from relative safety to extreme danger, and expressed in terms that give him little hope of rescue. What he experiences at the end of the story may not be life-threatening, but the beating will likely change his outlook on life permanently. Ironically, both the cowboy and the boy's mother genuinely believe that this is good for him. What the adults are actually doing is instilling their depravity and sadism into the boy.



Story 2: The Heart Is Deceitful above All Things; Story 3: Toyboxed

Story 2: The Heart Is Deceitful above All Things; Story 3: Toyboxed Summary

In Story 2, Jeremiah narrates more of his story as his mother moves from one man to another. He notices that the men who beat her with their fists and him with their belts last longer than the ones who give him candy. His mother teaches Jeremiah how to shoplift food and beer, and if he is discovered, she spansks him hard and tells everyone that he has a big problem. If he is successful, she laughs and stays in a good mood. If not, she stays angry at him for days and says nothing.

Sarah marries a man, goes on their honeymoon to Atlantic City, and leaves Jeremiah to fend for himself. Days later when he is nearly out of food and still locked in the house, the man returns heartbroken. Jeremiah's mother had abandoned him after he ran out of money. Angry and grieving, the man takes it out on Jeremiah by brutally raping him, causing serious injuries. The man drives out of town in Jeremiah's mother's car and abandons him. Police find the boy, take him to a hospital, and a doctor stitches up his wounds. Jeremiah imagines red-winged crows consuming his body.

In Story 3 Jeremiah sits with a counselor in a children's hospital. She encourages him to talk about the rape by using two anatomically correct dolls - one of a man and the other a boy. He keeps silent in order not to reveal any crimes he might have committed, a lesson his mother had taught him, but the counselor keeps reminding him that he will not be given back his television privilege until he talks. Jeremiah finally says that the rape being shown with the dolls is not the boy doll's fault. At some later time, a woman claiming to be Jeremiah's grandmother takes him from the children's hospital to her home in the country. She has a habit of reciting psalms. An older boy on a horse rides up and takes a quick look at Jeremiah before riding off.

Story 2: The Heart Is Deceitful above All Things; Story 3: Toyboxed Analysis

In Story 2, Jeremiah quickly moves from being abused to learning how to steal. He wants to please his mother and tries not to fail in his missions to lift bologna and beer, but sometimes he is caught. This leads to more physical abuse and a silent treatment from his mother. Meanwhile, she takes advantage of every man she can along the way, displaying masochistic tendencies because she stays with the abusers longer than with the kind men. The kind men may also be detecting the sickness around her and how horrible she treats her son.



Jeremiah's next step into horror involves being raped by the man his mother had married. His brutal assault leaves Jeremiah torn apart, not only physically but mentally and emotionally. The red-winged crows symbolize the forces that tear him apart and are entirely beyond his control. His heart is deceitful because he still loves his mother despite the extreme abuse she causes directly and indirectly. The briefness of this story, just over five pages long, emphasizes the importance that the sexual assault will have in Jeremiah's life. The physical damage will heal but not the emotional.

In Story 3, the episode with the counselor is humorous and tragic at the same time. She moves the dolls frantically while trying to coax Jeremiah to talk about his brutal rape, and once he says that the boy doll is not at fault, she throws the dolls into the toy box and slams the lid. This is symbolic of how adults are dealing with Jeremiah's trauma. They only want him to admit that what happened was not his fault, and that terminates the subject. Meanwhile, Jeremiah had wanted to separate the dolls before the counselor slammed the lid shut, which means that the trauma is still there whether adults want to talk about it or not. His grandmother may or may not become a positive influence in his life, but the older boy on the horse presents a clear threat.



Story 4: Foolishness Is Bound in the Heart of a Child

Story 4: Foolishness Is Bound in the Heart of a Child Summary

Jeremiah meets his young uncles and his grandfather. Aaron, a boy not much older than him, encourages Jeremiah to sing lyrics he has learned from a punk rocker boyfriend of his mother's. The lyrics have to do with the anti-Christ and anarchy, and about being too drunk to make love. The songs come from the Sex Pistols and the Dead Kennedys. Aaron tells Jeremiah to sing the songs for his grandfather, who is a fundamentalist preacher. After taking a very hot bath during which one of his other uncles roughly scrubbed Jeremiah's genitals raw, Jeremiah's grandfather calls him into a study that contains a desk and bookshelves.

Jeremiah innocently sings the songs that Aaron has encouraged him to perform and complains about the heat of the tub, another of Aaron's suggestions. His grandfather determines that Aaron had put Jeremiah up to this display of disrespect and punishes Aaron harshly. Jeremiah feels jealous that Aaron is getting the attention and hopes his turn is next.

Story 4: Foolishness Is Bound in the Heart of a Child Analysis

The first brutal whipping that Jeremiah had experienced in an earlier chapter had been repeated often, with his mother's various boyfriends tending to the belts. While this is going on, his mother would fondle Jeremiah, and now he has equated the pain of torture with the pleasure of sex. Jeremiah is too young to know what is being done to him, and this is the tragic part of the story.

Humor comes in with Jeremiah's innocence when he sings disrespectful lyrics to his grandfather. As his grandfather beats Aaron with righteous brutality, the shock of realizing where the mistreatment of Jeremiah originated is exposed. Sarah must have been treated the same way, thereby warping her to associate pain with attention. Her association of pain with sex remains a mystery because Jeremiah's grandfather did not fondle Aaron while beating him.



Story 5: Lizards

Story 5: Lizards Summary

Jeremiah accompanies Aaron to a basement room where Aaron must perform his penance for having lied to his father, the fundamentalist preacher. The penance involves crawling into a small box and reciting a particular chapter in the Bible. Jeremiah follows along in the Bible as Aaron recites from memory, and Jeremiah's role is to count the mistakes Aaron makes. An hour of this goes by, and then Jeremiah's grandmother comes for them.

Sarah arrives and takes Jeremiah away from his grandparents. She shouts at her father as she brings Jeremiah to a semi-truck in which her most recent boyfriend, Kenny, waits. Jeremiah sleeps in the cab that is equipped with a toilet and refrigerator as they drive to a truck stop. Kenny and Sarah leave Jeremiah, who wakes up and leaves the truck but locks himself out. A lot lizard, which is a prostitute who solicits from the truckers, named Milkshake, helps the boy, who is barefoot and in his pajamas. She brings him to her mother's station wagon and starts the heater, gives him clothes to wear, and buys him food at the 24-hour diner. Two days go by before Kenny, Sarah, and Jeremiah leave. Jeremiah learns that his mother works as a lot lizard too and has no chance to bid Milkshake, who is only thirteen years old, goodbye.

Kenny and Sarah have a falling out, and Kenny abandons her and Jeremiah at another truck stop. Sarah takes up with another trucker who takes them to Orlando, Florida. There the trucker pays for a month's rent at a cheap motel and heads out to finish his run. By now Jeremiah has learned that his mother is shooting up drugs, probably heroine. She works in a nearby strip club, is arrested and detained for three days, and when she returns, she throws Jeremiah out of the motel. He sleeps in a clump of trees near the club.

Story 5: Lizards Analysis

Jeremiah starts to lose his sexual identity as a boy during this period. He argues with Milkshake that he is a girl and could turn tricks in the truck stop parking area as she does. Later he plays the role of a girl while with his mother and the last unnamed trucker who pays for the motel room. The trucker has designs on Jeremiah, and when Sarah finds out, she rejects him as being a pervert.

The experiences with his grandparents warp Jeremiah on the meanings of Christianity and spirituality. Sadism and masochism replace love and mercy as Jeremiah comes to crave the torture that he believes cleanses his soul. The author uses various sensory impressions and metaphors to emphasize this descent into depravity, among them insects such as a beetle-like bug in the basement of Jeremiah's grandparents' house



and ants while he talks with the perverted trucker over a pay phone. The masochism extends to his mother, who hurts him before throwing him out of the motel room.

Milkshake is a few years older than Jeremiah, and her character foreshadows his fate. She earns good money at prostitution, but her mother is a drug addict, and most of the money goes to her. As with Jeremiah, she cannot help but love her mother regardless of the situations. She and Jeremiah share the same entrapped condition of having mothers who are distant and abusive, and their lives will likely turn out the same. The only advantage Milkshake has, as far as is known, is not being confused about her sexual identity.



Story 6: Baby Doll

Story 6: Baby Doll Summary

The next place where Jeremiah finds himself with his mother is in Virginia, and the new boyfriend is named Jackson. Jeremiah hears the lovemaking between his mother and Jackson in a small trailer house, and he likes to call her Baby Doll. His mother plays along in the role of a pre-pubescent girl.

An episode in which his mother tortures Jeremiah with a car cigarette lighter held to his penis leads to a session in which Sarah applies makeup to Jeremiah's face. She curls his long blonde hair until they look alike in the bathroom mirror. Jeremiah later dresses up like his mother in a short nightgown and seduces Jackson. When Sarah finds out, she becomes insanely mad, and Jeremiah spends the night in an abandoned dog house. The next day, Sarah and Jackson take Jeremiah to a backwoods clinic that does not report the kinds of anal injuries that he suffers. Upon returning home, Sarah fights with Jackson and threatens to leave him.

Story 6: Baby Doll Analysis

The misdirection of Jeremiah's sexual orientation is completed during this time. His mother tortures him and tells him that he is evil while directing his hatred of self to his penis. Jeremiah responds by using Super Glue to bond his penis backwards and to the inside of his leg. She also encourages the misdirection by applying makeup and curling his long hair into an exact duplicate of her style. Earlier, when Jeremiah rebelled and wanted his hair cut, this prompted his mother to apply the cigarette lighter torture.

The story takes a turn into erotic horror as Jeremiah seduces Jackson. Jackson resists at first, but he succumbs and causes a great deal of trauma to Jeremiah's anus. Jackson then pleads with Sarah that he was confused and thought the boy was her, but Sarah rejects that excuse. Jeremiah meanwhile blames only himself for what had happened, even though his mother had unwittingly set the stage for disaster.



Story 7: Coal

Story 7: Coal Summary

Sarah has fallen into a paranoid delusion in which she believes the world will be destroyed by coal. She also thinks that the only non-poisonous foods are Pringles and Canada Dry Ginger Ale. She and Jeremiah attempt to purchase these food items from a supermarket, but when she detects that the wall had moved, they leave their cart and hurry to the parking lot. There she reveals that she is wearing nothing beneath her long black raincoat, and Jeremiah tries to cover for her insanity. She goes into a psychotic moment and hides in a clump of bushes, convinced that the coal is coming. He finally cajoles her back to their car. While she sleeps, Jeremiah dumpster dives for the garbage from a Burger King, and when Sarah discovers that he had eaten poison, she has him drink Ipecac, which invokes vomiting.

After this episode, they live in a shack in West Virginia with a man named Chester and who rides a Harley Davidson. He cooks methamphetamine in the basement. Other Harley Davidson riders help cook the meth, and when the work is done, Chester locks the basement. When he and Sarah run out arguing about money and a botched delivery of meth, they forget to lock the basement. Jeremiah investigates but does not understand what is going on. He tries to collect some coal for his stove, but the pile of coal scatters. Soon after a motorcyclist who has befriended him, Buddy, arrives and helps Jeremiah to cover up his presence in the basement. One day the meth lab blows up, sending motorcyclists engulfed in flames to the surface. Sarah and Jeremiah quickly jump into their car and drive away to a gas station. There they dye their hair black.

Story 7: Coal Analysis

Sarah's descent into madness draws Jeremiah into increasingly dangerous circumstances. Her obsession with coal as the destructor of the world, and her belief that looking like coal will save her and Jeremiah, are contradicted by Jeremiah's coal stove in the shack. Sarah never approaches it, and Chester supplies a few lumps of coal now and then. The desire for more coal prompts Jeremiah to explore the unlocked basement, but the coal seems to be working against him.

Buddy is not very smart, but he treats Jeremiah well. Buddy is the most positive male in Jeremiah's life and helps to cover for him before Chester and Sarah return home. At this point Jeremiah seems to have found stability in gender identification and sanity, since he must cover for his mother's flights of psychosis and constant paranoia. He plays along with the fear of coal, but the influences of his mother send him into a period of paranoia too, which illustrates the strong influence that Sarah still has over her son.



Story 8: Viva Las Vegas; Story 9: Meteors; Story 10: Natoma Street

Story 8: Viva Las Vegas; Story 9: Meteors; Story 10: Natoma Street Summary

In Story 8, Sarah drives toward Las Vegas with Jeremiah navigating the turns and giving her encouragement. Sarah starts acting insane, and Jeremiah soils his pants, which causes her to accuse him of always spoiling everything. She drops him off at a gas station so he can clean up, gives him ten dollars for food, and abandons him.

Back together in Story 9, Sarah's paranoia has shifted to getting hit by meteors in the desert. She and Jeremiah stop at a tourist station in the middle of Death Valley, where Sarah talks with a park ranger who knows about meteors and shows her several. She prompts Jeremiah to put a few into his pocket while the ranger is not looking, and Sarah goes to the restroom to refresh her makeup and look alluring. She attempts to seduce the ranger, but he resists her. She goes into her paranoia about being hit by a meteor, but this time it is only to appeal to the ranger's instinct to protect women. This also fails, and Sarah starts to show signs of behaving violently. Jeremiah coaxes her to leave the station before anything bad occurs. That night she hits Jeremiah with a large rock until he loses consciousness.

The next morning Sarah attempts to convince the ranger she had tried to seduce the day before that Jeremiah had been hit by a meteor. She shows the ranger the meteor, but he correctly identifies it as an ordinary rock. Suspicious, he radios for help. Jeremiah wakes up with a doctor looking him over and testing for concussion. Sarah had left before he gained consciousness. The doctor calls Social Services.

The first scene of Story 10 involves Jeremiah in his early teens dealing with a Harley Davidson motorcyclist who has become his pimp. The setting is a bad district in San Francisco, and the pimp questions Jeremiah on his sexual desires. He keeps asking if Jeremiah has a safe word, and he either does not understand or truly does not require one. This impresses the pimp as he shows Jeremiah sexual equipment designed for sadists and masochists. Strapping him in, the pimp begins the torture.

The second scene is in a grocery store where Jeremiah has been caught shoplifting. Sarah goes into her part of the act when caught, accusing Jeremiah of having uncontrollable urges to steal, known as kleptomania. She convinces the manager to forgive the theft and seduces him. Three and a half months later, she steals all his cash and gold jewelry, and with Jeremiah, leaves him.



Story 8: Viva Las Vegas; Story 9: Meteors; Story 10: Natoma Street Analysis

In Story 8, Sarah is under the delusion that she can become a successful showgirl in Las Vegas and that Jeremiah constantly works against her. She strikes him repeatedly on his thigh with her fist, feigning that it's friendly but knowing she is hurting him. He responds passive-aggressively by purposefully letting go of his bowls, smiling all the while. She responds by tricking him into leaving the car so she could abandon him without much guilt, having given him money for food. The relationship has been set into this cycle of physical abuse, passive-aggressive response, abandonment and eventually starting all over again.

In Story 9, Sarah's attempts at seducing the park ranger have elements of humor mixed with her decidedly deranged state of mind. She tries all her tricks, but the ranger is too smart to fall into her trap. One failure leads to another until she is very angry and threatens to become violent. Jeremiah must talk to her in the crazy metaphors she has invented just so to calm her down. Then the horror begins when she starts throwing small stones, the actual meteorites that he had stolen, while he tries to sleep that night. Soon she strikes him unconscious with an ordinary large rock. Jeremiah once again ends up the victim of her sadism, and the strong implication is that he is sent to another foster home.

The first scene of Story 10 is a fantasy that engages Jeremiah's desire to be release from his male sexuality through castration. He has become dependent upon being severely abused in order to feel loved. The castration never takes place, but by the end of the story, he hopes that it eventually will happen.

Sarah's last victim has all the characteristics of her other conquests. He falls for her seduction, brings her and Jeremiah into his home, which is a small trailer, and ends up losing money and easily pawned small possessions. The patterns keep repeating in cyclical fashion as both Sarah and Jeremiah move closer to early deaths.



Characters

Jeremiah appears in All Stories

Jeremiah is the narrator of the stories and the primary protagonist and victim. He is only four years old when the stories begin, a child raised by foster parents who is claimed by his biological mother, Sarah, once she turns eighteen. His life turns almost immediately into one horror after another as first Sarah tortures him emotionally and then her boyfriend physically with a leather belt. He is injured repeatedly through sexual abuse, but his association with abuse and being loved leads him to crave the pain. He is transformed from a fairly normal boy into a masochist seeking sadists in a sexual world that usually has safe words to control the degree of pain. By the end of the stories, Jeremiah is so warped that he has no safe word and dreams of the day that a sadistic lover cuts off his penis. Along with this, he has become a master at passive aggressive behavior. His mother constantly accuses him of spoiling all her plans, but he knows she will never become anything but his primary childhood abuser, a user of foolish men, and a petty criminal.

Sarah appears in All Stories

Sarah is Jeremiah's mother. She gave birth to him at fourteen, and being under age, Social Services took the baby away from her. Her father never forgave her for having sinned in such a grievous, in his eyes, manner. When she reaches the age of eighteen, she claims Jeremiah and immediately shows signs of having developed serious mental health problems. Her attitude is that she owns Jeremiah and can do anything she wants to him. She descends steadily into madness, with illegal drugs helping her along the way. Her selections in men tend to be those who enjoy performing rough sex with her and punishing Jeremiah severely with leather belts. She lives off the men for a period of time and then leaves them, usually with their vehicles and money. Her general method involves starting a big fight before leaving. By the last few stories, she has gone out of her mind almost to the point of being catatonic, but she pulls back to her old tricks and nearly kills Jeremiah.

Jeremiah's Foster Family appears in Story 1: Disappearances

For the first four years of his life, Jeremiah enjoyed a truly nurturing environment. His foster parents disciplined him without becoming overly violent, gave him toys, and won his heart by the time Sarah shows up to jerk him away from them. Jeremiah's desire to go back to his foster home becomes the first major conflict between him and his biological mother.



Milkshake appears in Story 5: Lizards

Milkshake is a thirteen-year old lot lizard, a prostitute who solicits from truckers at truck stops. She helps Jeremiah when he becomes locked out of the truck cab in which he had been sleeping, and continues to care for him for two days. Milkshake is one of the few people who treat Jeremiah well, outside of foster parents and health professionals.

Buddy appears in Story 7: Coal

Buddy also treats Jeremiah well and enjoys watching cartoons with him. Buddy always brings a box of Fiddle Faddle with him and plays with the boy as if an older brother. When Jeremiah is almost discovered in the basement, Buddy helps him clean up and covers for him afterward.

Sarah's Father appears in Story 4: Foolishness Is Bound in the Heart of a Child

Sarah's father is a successful fundamentalist preacher with a weekly radio show. He employs severe corporal punishment to keep his children in line. His use of a leather belt to whip the children probably led to Sarah's need for rough sex and her attitude that Jeremiah needed whipping after whipping. Jeremiah meets his grandfather and is disappointed when he does not get his whipping.

Sarah's Mother appears in Story 3: Toyboxed

Sarah's mother supports her father in all ways. She monitors punishments outside the whippings, such as administering hot baths in bleach water and bringing children to and from a box punishment in the basement.

Jeremiah's Uncles appears in Story 4: Foolishness Is Bound in the Heart of a Child

Jeremiah's uncles are not much older than he is. One named Aaron tries to set him up for a whipping, but instead Aaron's father detects the deception and punishes Aaron instead.

Sarah's Men appears in All Stories

The men that Sarah tries to ensnare are usually big, physically strong, and stupid. She makes a few exceptions for those who are merely stupid but who have money and a need to give some to her. She also takes up with truckers for a period.



Park Ranger appears in Story 9: Meteors

The park ranger does not fall for Sarah's tricks. He becomes very suspicious of her and calls for help, which causes Sarah to run away.

Health Care Workers appears in Stories 2, 6, 9

Jeremiah visits health care workers often, due to the injuries he incurs from anal sex with adult men or the abuse his mother gives him.

Jeremiah's Pimp appears in Story 10: Natoma Street

Jeremiah's pimp is likely a fantasy tied into his masochism and desire to lose his penis. He runs a sadist-masochist sex shop in a bad part of San Francisco.



Objects/Places

Leather Belts appears in Stories 2 and 4

The men who beat Jeremiah use leather belts that inflict great pain and cause serious tissue damage.

Vehicles appears in All Stories

Jeremiah and Sarah spend a great deal of their time in cars, vans, and trucks. Sarah often makes off with her men's vehicles.

Trailer Houses appears in Stories 6 and 10

Most of Sarah's men live in small trailer houses, a strong symbol of transience.

Coal appears in Story 7: Coal

When Sarah becomes paranoid, she fears that coal will destroy the world.

Pringles and Ginger Ale appears in Story 7: Coal

A part of Sarah's paranoia is that all food is poison except Pringles and Canadian Club Ginger Ale.

Strip Club appears in Story 5: Lizards

Sara spends part of her time working at a strip club.

West Virginia appears in Story 7: Coal

While Jeremiah and Sara are in West Virginia, a methamphetamine lab in the basement of a shack explodes.

Las Vegas appears in Story 8: Viva Las Vegas

Sarah believes she can turn her life around in Las Vegas but never reaches the destination or fails if she did.



Death Valley appears in Story 9: Meteors

Sarah hits Jeremiah hard with a rock in Death Valley, where she believes that meteors will hit them.

Natoma Street appears in Chapter 10: Natoma Street

Natoma Street is located in a bad part of San Francisco, and this is where Jeremiah's fantasy places him and his pimp.



Themes

Child Abuse Runs in Families

Jeremiah is born into an abusive family. His mother was abused by her father, and she abuses him because she believes this is the only way to control children. The entire series of stories chronicles this abuse, but for now all Jeremiah can do is fight back with passive aggression. Most of Sarah's men had come from families with the same kind of attitude that physical punishment will straighten out children, but all that happens is that the children become abusive adults. The abuse warps the children rather than helping them.

The stories end while Jeremiah is still a juvenile. His reactions to abuse involve mixing love with pain, a masochistic sexuality. He desires more abuse, as does his mother, and this tends to perpetuate child abuse in families. Jeremiah offers no solution to the problem because to him this is normal human behavior. He cannot imagine any other way of life, but he does for a period remember how he was treated by his foster parents. His mother quickly turns him against them through emotional and physical abuse. It is unclear whether Jeremiah will also turn into an abusive adult, but he has mastered passive aggression. His mother had used

Sadistic Mothers Cause Sexual Disorientation in Sons

Sarah takes a particular delight in emotionally manipulating and physically abusing Jeremiah. She has little control over this, but the result is that Jeremiah starts thinking of himself as a girl who should be able to prostitute herself as her mother does. The direct attack on Jeremiah's penis with a red-hot car cigarette lighter seems to bring the whole idea to the turning point. After that Jeremiah wants someone to cut his penis off, which he fantasizes about in a passage toward the end of Story 10. The author does not equate this to male homosexuality being caused by domineering mothers, but there is an implied connection when Sarah makes up Jeremiah to look exactly like her. However, the transformation comes later and could not have happened without all the preceding abuse. The mother needs to be both domineering and sadistic to bring about the confused sexual orientation that Jeremiah develops. Additionally, the mother needs to choose sadistic men likely to whip and rape the child.

Spare the Rod to Save the Child

The horrors that Jeremiah endures evoke a strong sense of sympathy and cast the perpetrators of the horrors into a very dark place. His grandfather's philosophy comes from the Biblical admonition that sparing the rod spoils the child, which means if corporal punishment is withheld, the child will become defiant and incorrigible. Whipping with a belt is considered the best method of administering corporal punishment in the stories, and this is thought to be for the child's best interests. The results contradict this



philosophy, which strongly implies that mild corporal punishment judiciously used is the better way of guiding children into good behaviors. The way that the foster parents raised Jeremiah during his first four years stands as the example. Sarah also illustrates the folly of heavy punishment, and her father could do nothing more than reject her while not taking responsibility for his actions that led up to her extreme rebellion. He thinks that he was doing right by his god, and that is all that mattered to him. What he is actually doing amounts to placing his need for salvation above his children's need for firm but compassionate parental control.

Illusions of Freedom

Jeremiah has no illusions of freedom, being dependent on Sarah for survival, but Sara does. Her primary illusion is that she is free to do whatever she wants, but in reality she has fallen into a cyclical trap of repeated behaviors that never turn out well. She is not climbing out of her problems but circling around them and escaping them through drugs and sex. Primary in her illusion is her ability to manipulate men. When she cannot control the park ranger, she becomes enraged. another part of her illusion is that moving from one place to another equates with freedom, but since she only changes for the worse with each move, she is merely deepening her problems until she goes into her deep paranoia about coal. Somehow recovered from that, she heads to Las Vegas to begin a new life, but she does not even come close to changing. All she has accomplished is a level of functional sanity but has lost all hope of ever becoming truly free.

Style

Point of View

All the stories are told from Jeremiah's point of view. As narrator, he colors the scenes with his subjective senses of comfort, terror, confusion, physical pain, and emotional suffering. This is a general characteristic of the first-person point of view, and without it, the stories would have lost literary value. Since the claimed author has been shown to be a hoax, the impact of the point of view has diminished because it was once believed that an actual human being had gone through what Jeremiah suffered. However, as time expands between the expose and fresh readership, the stories still stand as strong possibilities. Someone like Jeremiah probably exists but cannot tell the stories as well as a seasoned author, who claims she was also abused as a child. This is the inherent strength of first person narrative because it draws the reader directly into the narrator's experiences.

Setting

The settings change from story to story, but most involve impoverished conditions, illegal activities, perverted sexual activities, and torture. Vehicles change as Sarah changes men, and a good portion of Jeremiah's life is spent in them. Jeremiah's grandparents' house starts out as a place of safety but quickly turns into its own form of torture with exceedingly hot baths and extreme corporal punishments. The desert settings in Nevada and California's Death Valley bring symbolic parallels with Jeremiah's and Sarah's lives: dry and barren, beyond redemption. The setting of the shack in West Virginia where methamphetamine is cooked in the basement has climactic senses of impending danger followed by a big explosion.

Language and Meaning

The real author of these stories, Laura Albert, attempts to emulate the language of a youngster without much formal training, a boy who learned to read and write largely on his own. The language is kept simple until the author simply cannot avoid using unlikely words, which helped give away the true nature of J. T. LeRoy. Another clue is the artful use of sensory narrative to build horror and disgust throughout, mixed with absurd comedy and beauty within squalor. The language carries powerful meanings, which is why the stories are still popular without the mythology of the fraudulent author. Albert has claimed that she needed the myth to do the writing, and when the subject matter is considered, this was probably true.

Structure

The book consists of 10 stories with sections indicated by blank lines rather than subtitles. Unlike a novel, the stories are very loosely connected by chronological order. Many events might have happened between one story and another, and the aging of Jeremiah from four years old to perhaps his early teens indicates this. The time jumps are implied rather than explicitly defined, as they usually are in novels. Flashbacks are occasionally used in the forms of Jeremiah's memories and fantasies, and Sarah telling him stories about her childhood.



Quotes

"I stand there leaning against the cot, staring at it all: the dark wet patch on my red Superman pajamas, the orange swirly-patterned linoleum lumpy and bubbled like little turtles are living beneath it, the whitish brown cottage-cheese stuff in the ceiling corners, the ABC books I'd outgrown six months ago buried in the crates" (Story 1, p. 7).

"The ones that buy me candy don't last long. The ones that slap her last longer, but not as long as the ones that beat her with their fists and me with their belt [sic]" (Story 2, p. 44).

"I follow her to the elevator and look around, and cough loudly, hoping that everyone will see me leaving with somebody" (Story 3, p. 55).

"The beating has ended, and now I hope it's my turn, before he holds Aaron and forgets about me and my turn" (Story 4, p. 73).

"I move to her heavily, like I'm walking through peanut butter" (Story 5, p. 96).

"If he sees Sarah walking from the club back to the room, a cigarette dangling from her red, shimmering lips, he runs out of his stale, fart-smelling office where he sits all day blasting soccer games in Spanish, ringing the service bell on his counter when his team scores" (Story 5, p. 113).

"I see all the faces laughing and jeering, and the Horned One clutching his blood-soaked pitchfork. And I'm alone, and I deserve it all, and there is no one to take it away" (Story 6, p. 123).

"Bleach is the true holy water, and I know salvation is near" (Story 6, p. 136).

"My mom's not taking me to the local hospital; instead we're going on a long drive to the backwoods clinic in the Virginia mountains with all the retired doctors that don't like to do paperwork" (Story 6, p. 151-152).

"My mother doesn't talk to me much. Her eyes, like Chester's, are ringed red like someone drew marker circles around them" (Story 7, p. 170).

"The retching returns with an unbelievable force, like a facial tick that just won't stop. My



whole body gathers up and jousts forward as if every limb and organ were trying to collapse itself and be born again up through my stomach, throat, and mouth" (Story 7, p. 188).

"Along the deserted topaz-colored mountains, under the crowding of trees, our car cruises in its separate world. No lights from bars or clubs penetrate or distract, there's just thick, unbroken wilderness" (Story 8, p. 201).

"He carried on about meteorites, even as the children who had crowded up front dropped their meteorites and started running around, screaming about dead pioneers' bones" (Story 9, p. 212).

"Each split second of contact with the frozen metal is like a jolt trying to wake or stop me, but all that's racing in my blood is too old and too known and too mechanical to be turned back" (Story 10, p. 229-230).

"I pray during my punishment. I pray so hard, I drown out the horrible whipping sound. I pray that God, or Satan, or whoever, won't let them see how sinful and repulsive and bad I truly am" (Story 10, p. 246).

Topics for Discussion

How does Jeremiah react after Sarah takes him from his foster parents?

What are the characteristics of the men that Sarah keeps the longest?

What is a lot lizard?

What significance does coal have to Sarah?

How does Jeremiah get back at his mother?

Describe Jeremiah's grandfather.

What has the author done with her prose to promote the illusion that an amateur writer composed the stories?