



# THE MEMOIRS OF A BEAUTIFUL BOY

by Robert Leleux

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## About the Author

For nearly thirty years, **Robert Leleux** has remained internationally unknown as a celebrated bon vivant, fashion icon, and man about town. Neither the best-selling author of *Highland Fling* (1931) or *Wigs on the Green* (1935), Mr. Leleux's work is in no way associated with that circle of Bright Young Things who illuminated the London social scene during the inter-war years. He is known not to have been portrayed by Julie Christie in John Schlesinger's Oscar-winning film *Darling*, and does not currently reside at Swinbrook House in the Cotswolds.



Credit: Michael Leleux



## A Few Words from Mother

*To the Readers of My Genius Son's Book,  
Everywhere I go with Robert, people ask me,  
"Don't you mind the things your son writes  
about you? The wigs, the plastic surgery, the  
vomit..." And my answer is no, it doesn't bother  
me that Robert writes about it, it bothers me  
that I had to live through it.*

*Most of the events Robert recounts in this book  
occurred during the most god-awful time. And  
though, in looking back, I can see that much of  
my behavior was, well, unusual, it all seemed so  
reasonable at the time. Which brings me to  
another thing people tend to ask me when I'm  
out with Robert:*

*"What have you learned from the experiences  
you've lived through?"*

*And my answer is "Nothing." "Nothing?"  
they repeat. "Well, I wouldn't shave my head  
again." Because that really wasn't a good idea.  
But again, at the time, it seemed entirely logical.  
Which tends to be the way with life. It seems  
you can operate with complete certainty, and  
still, in the long run, be completely wrong.  
Shit. Wrong and stubborn really is a terrible  
combination.*

*But of course, you don't know that until  
much later. Sometimes not until your son  
writes a book about it. And that, in its own*

*A Few Words  
from Mother*

*way, is a marvelous consolation, because at least something good and funny came out of the lousy times.*

*At least Robert can see the humor in the really terrible decisions I made, instead of just silently resenting me for them, like the children of every other woman in every other country club in America. As it turns out, I've had bad luck with all the men of my life, except my son. There hasn't been a single moment of his life when I haven't worshipped and adored Robert, and now there's a book to prove it. With a beautiful picture of us on the cover. Heavenly.*

*Much love,*

*Jessica Hiban (Mother)*



## A Conversation with Robert Leleux

*Excerpted from an interview conducted by  
Kelly Hewitt at [www.loadedquestions.blogspot.com](http://www.loadedquestions.blogspot.com)*

**Is there any part of your writing that you attribute to a life growing up in the Lone Star State?**

The Mouth of the South, my grandmother used to call me. And as for Texas, I dearly love it. Houston is home for me in a way that no other place ever will be. I might be alone in this, but I actually think it's a beautiful city, and every time I go back, something in me just sings. And I believe that East Texas is just about THE best place in America for a writer to come from—because it hasn't yet succumbed to that horrible homogenization of language that's stripped so much of America of its regional sounds. It seems to me that there's only a handful of places left that sound like themselves, and I think that maintaining that is so precious. Grace Paley said something like, "a writer has to listen to the world with two ears: one turned to the language of literature, and the other turned to the language of the street you grew up on." And it's so terrific to have been born to a place where the language is so charged and funny and off-kilter gorgeous.

**A few reviewers have warned readers that your book is "not for the faint of heart." Do you think that's a fair label?**

What's the expression? "Faint heart never won fair maiden." Something like that. Well, I don't know—practically everyone in Michael's family has a heart condition, and they all loved my book. And there have been a couple of completely lovely ladies who've written to say that they read my book in the hospital, and that they laughed so hard, their nurses thought they were having some sort of attack, and what do you know, laughter really is the best medicine. Which absolutely makes my life worthwhile—the opportunity to actually cheer up a person who

*A Conversation  
with Robert  
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really needs of a good laugh. Who could ask for anything more? I mean, the magical, miraculous thing about books is that you write them alone, in an empty room—a really private experience—and then, they venture out alone in the world. They enter rooms you'll never see, they meet people who'll forever be strangers to you. It's very moving to me—especially since my book's a memoir, and there are people out there I'll never know, with whom I'm having this very sort of intimate experience. VERY strange, and wonderful. But to answer your question—if you want Barbara Pym (AND I love Barbara Pym), I'm not Barbara Pym. Or as Joan Crawford said, "If you want the girl next door, go next door."

**What was it like doing your book tour with your mother?**

Well, I maintain that it's a real marker of virile masculinity, traveling with your mother. How many brawny He-Men would even attempt it? It [was] a total blast. If anyone out there ever contemplates a tour of any sort, I recommend taking someone with you. Because your job, out on the road, is to meet lovely strangers who've been kind enough to care enough to come out and say hello to you, and to be very, very present—and it's enormously helpful to have a person, like your mother, guiding your arm, and keeping an eye on the task at hand. ALSO, I would recommend taking MY mother with you. Because she's very funny, and it never hurts to have a gorgeous, glamorous woman with you, even if she does happen to be your mother.

The whole thing started off as a joke—in a marketing meeting with my publisher, I said, "Maybe I should bring my mother with me!" And no one laughed. Which taught me a real lesson. Namely, don't make jokes in marketing meetings, because they have a tendency to become PR strategies. So then, I called Mother, and said, "What do you think of the notion of heading off on the road with me?"



And she said, "I'll call you later, I'm going shopping." Which is my mother's means of preparation. So she got some gorgeous new suits, and adventure ensued. It was very much like that Erik Preminger book about being on the road with his mother, Gypsy Rose Lee. I kept looking around, and there Mother was, sitting cross-legged on the Vuitton suitcases, smoking, and looking very glamorous and world-weary.

**When do you think your mother will write a book about you?**

I only wish my mother would write a book about ANYTHING! I'd be first in line to buy it—I feel like my job in life is just to follow the genius, brassy women in my family around with a pen, and write down everything they say. My grandfather and I look at each other all the time, and say, "How lucky are we to be in the same room with these ladies!"

**What are you working on now?**

Well, I've got several pots on the stove. It looks like a little picture book I did might be coming to fruition... and I'm working on a sequel to my book. And I have what I think is the most adorable idea for a young adult series. But you know, there's that great line about somebody saying to Baudelaire, "Mr. Baudelaire, I have the most TERRIFIC idea for a sonnet," and Baudelaire says, "Sonnets, sir, are not made of ideas." And brother, you can say that again. Sonnets, and anything like them, are made of hard, slaving work. And as you know, hard work never gets any easier. It's that awful, awful Zen thing about writing—how every time you sit down with blank paper, you're beginning again. VERY humbling. Because blank paper is no respecter of worldly success. And you just have to keep returning to that desk every day, and sometimes it's like going in for A Day of Beauty at Elizabeth Arden, and sometimes, it's like going to the salt mines.

*A Conversation  
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Leleux*

*When I was sixteen, my mother offered me fifteen hundred dollars if I swore never, ever to read her another poem I hadn't written. I cashed her check, but I've cheated once or twice. And the only time it's ever ended happily was when I discovered this poem, written by my super-hot friend Victoria Redel, from her book Swoon. Mother says that more than anything she's ever encountered, this poem expresses the way she felt raising a gay son. It's very lovely, and I hope readers will love it, too.*

"Bedecked" by Victoria Redel

Tell me it's wrong the scarlet nails my son sports or  
the toy store rings he clusters  
four jewels to each finger.

He's bedecked. I see the other mothers looking at the  
star choker, the rhinestone  
strand he fastens over a sock.

Sometimes I help him find sparkle clip-ons when he  
says sticker earrings  
look too fake.

Tell me I should teach him it's wrong to love the  
glitter that a boy's only a boy  
who'd love a truck with a remote that revs,  
battery slamming into corners or Hot Wheels  
loop-de-looping off tracks  
into the tub.





Then tell me it's fine—really—maybe even a good  
thing—a boy who's got some girl  
to him,  
and I'm right for the days he wears a pink shirt on  
the seesaw in the park.

Tell me what you need to tell me but keep far away  
from my son who still loves  
a beautiful thing not for what it means—  
this way or that—but for the way facets set off  
prisms and prisms spin up  
everywhere  
and from his own jeweled body he's cast rainbows—  
made every shining true color.

Now try to tell me—man or woman—your heart was  
ever once that brave.

Excerpted from *Swoon* by Victoria Redel.  
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*"Bedecked"*



## Recommended Reading

Dearly Beloveds!

I tend to favor authors I'd like to have lunch with, so here's a whole party of good-time gals (and one great gay guy) for you to go raise hell and drink some margaritas with. Have fun, and write me at [janeastentexas@gmail.com](mailto:janeastentexas@gmail.com) when you're sober.

xx

Robert

*I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith

This is one of those jewel-box novels that's so entirely frustrating because it's so entirely unknown. Dodie Smith, whose fortune was made by her children's books (*101 Dalmatians*) wrote this wry and glorious romance about two poor sisters (in a castle!) with a graceful curtsy to Jane Austen. Trust me when I tell you you'll adore Cassandra and Rose. It's a novel that builds and builds like a locomotive, until it ends with a big, happy bang. Always a lovely thing.

*Love in a Cold Climate* by Nancy Mitford

Has there ever been anybody more charming and witty than Nancy Mitford? You know her, don't you? The one with all the sisters—one was a duchess, one was a communist, and two were Nazi sweethearts. Well, with material like that, how can a writer lose? This novel is chock-full of great lines, like when that awful ambassadress says she put India on the map. So wicked. Precious and priceless.

*Hons and Rebels* and *A Fine Old Conflict*  
by Jessica Mitford

Okay, so for those who don't know, these two memoirs were written by Nancy's little communist sister, and they just might be my favorite books of all time. Of course, they're both loaded with all that delightful Mitford madness, but they're also incredibly thoughtful and smart, packed with political adventure and intrigue, and funny, funny, funny.



*Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*  
by Florence King

Well, what can you say about the great Florence King? She's the only Republican lesbian feminist philosopher in the state of Virginia, and I can't help loving her dearly. She can, at times, be just *awful*. But she's forever brilliant and funny and besides, *Confessions* is also an incomparable story about growing up southern, female, and sane—all at the same time.

*Molly Ivins Can't Say That, Can She?*  
by Molly Ivins

Molly Ivins made me so proud to be a Texan, and this collection of essays is my favorite of all her books. My mother and I still howl over the piece written about the Greenhouse, that fabulous Neiman Marcus salon outside Dallas, where a beautician, desperate to contrive a compliment, tells Molly she's got a fabulous space between her eyes. My friend Muriel Stubbs said, "You know, being smart and being intelligent isn't necessarily the same thing. But Molly was both." So true.

*Faithfull* by Marianne Faithfull

I wrecked my mother's car reading this book when I was sixteen. And not because I'm a lousy driver, but because this is an enthralling book, as addictive as the heroin that plagued dear Marianne. Partly because of its superior writing, but mostly because Marianne Faithfull is just such a badass. Hers is a big, unbelievable, mythic life, the least interesting part of which was that little star-crossed romance with Mick Jagger. I will admit that I'm not Marianne Faithfull, but it is not for lack of trying.

*Recommended  
Reading*

*Eleanor Roosevelt, Vols. 1 & 2*

by Blanche Wiesen Cook

And speaking of unbelievable, mythic lives . . . I remember reading these books as a teenager and thinking that if I could ever be half as good or brave or strong as Eleanor, my life would be made, and that's still the gospel truth. She is, to my mind, the single greatest American.

*D.V.* by Diana Vreeland

Diana Vreeland—earthquaking editor of *Vogue*—was one of those geniuses whose vision of the world was so unique and profound that it absolutely changed the way all of us live our lives. Don't you *dare* scoff; it's the truth. She's right up there with Diaghilev, Dior, and Disney, and she's also a ring-tailed blast.

*Great Granny Webster* and *The Last of the Duchess*

by Caroline Blackwood

The woman who wrote these two very different books was an infamous beauty who enthralled and married two very brilliant men—Lucian Freud and Robert Lowell. She was also one hell of a terrific writer who never, ever gets her due. High-minded, elegant smut. You'll eat it with a spoon, and never feel guilty.

*Splendor* by Edward Swift

For my finale, I'll round out with another perfect, and perfectly unknown novel. It's my favorite Texas book, and maybe, too, my favorite novel. It's a satire and a fable about a little gay boy, Timothy John, bruised and battered by his East Texas town, who returns years later to reap his revenge disguised as a *lady* of fortune, Miss Jessie Gatewood. It's a Texas *Twelfth Night* with a happy ending! How high the moon!



## Reading Group Questions

1. What are some of your favorite of Mother's "quotable phrases" in *Memoirs*? Which of her words-to-be-embroidered did you find particularly funny, offensive, profound—or all of the above?
2. Robert spent most Saturday mornings at Neiman Marcus with Mother. What does he learn there about style and sophistication, art and artifice, and—most important—his identity? Discuss the department store as microcosm in Robert's world, and our own.
3. Take a moment to talk about Mother's desire for—and her attempts to be found desirable by—a wealthy new man. Do you believe she was desperate, or just deluded? Do you judge her for embodying the cliché of a Texas gold-digger? Or do you have sympathy for her as a so-called starter wife?
4. How do you feel about Daddy in *Memoirs*? Is he worthy of contempt? Or does he deserve forgiveness? What is your lasting impression of him, after the conversation he has with Robert on the phone?
5. What would have been different for Daddy and Mother has they given birth to a beautiful *girl* instead of Robert? Discuss your theories about what this family might have been like.
6. What does it mean to be "beautiful" in the context of this memoir? Is beauty skin-deep? Is it masculine or feminine? Coveted or feared?
7. How did Robert escape his small-town circumstances by joining the theater? In what ways—metaphorically and literally—does role-playing parallel one's coming-of-age? How did Robert eventually assume the role of his own true self?

Reading  
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Reading Group  
Questions

8. Discuss the significance of Robert's dream in which he appears as a guest on the *Barbara Walters Special*, and Barbara tells him: "You're under the impression that the story of your life is your mother's story. But in time you'll realize that the story of your life is your own."
9. "My time in public school taught me the lesson every gay boy learns fast," writes Robert. "That language is the weapon of the powerless." Talk about Robert's path toward leading a literary life.
10. Now that you have read the material in this guide, do you feel differently about the author, or his mother? Were any of their insights surprising to you? How?