

'Our Very Own Role Model'

John Waters has acquired his fair share of adjectives in his long dirty career: King of Sleaze, the Prince of Puke, the Pope of Trash. For him, the ultimate accolade, as the title of the final chapter of his new book *Role Models* suggests, is Cult Leader. It is a natural end-point and an obvious legacy for a man who has amassed a wealth of naughty titular. Waters, now 64, lays before us his pantheon of role models: musicians, clothes designers and artists as well cult members, pornographers and the ordinary (but obviously extraordinary) folk of his native Baltimore.

Although Waters' characters and language are graphic and grisly, you feel completely at ease in his company; it's like reading an elongated – albeit X-rated - issue of *Take a Break* (packed with real life stories). There's nothing here that shocks and I don't think Waters intended it to. The world, with some exceptions, has changed, and obscenities - gay sex and murderers - raise few eyebrows these days, especially amongst the book's intended readership. For Waters, such things are simply his natural context and his usual lexicon.



(Photo: [Le Monochrome](#))

The third chapter, 'Leslie', describes his friendship with Charles Manson accomplice Leslie Van Houten. Van Houten was involved in the cult killing of Leno and Rosemary LaBianca in 1969. He has visited her in prison, where she has been, for the last 24 years. The chapter describes their deep personal relationship and Waters' belief that she should be paroled. She stabbed Rosemary LaBianca sixteen times in her lower back; she was part of America's most notorious homicidal cults so of course John wants to be her friend! He goes on to say that Leslie, in a different life, could easily have ended up a member of his film troupe. Part of Waters' philosophy is the fine line between the regular and the irregular, 'taste' and kitsch (Waters describes the Manson's early, non-murderous behaviour as "...some freakish kind of art"). I was left thinking, in Van Houten's case: what could be more shocking than forgiving her?

Despite owning homes in L.A. and New York, Waters' hometown of Baltimore features heavily in both his literary and cinematic work. 'Baltimore Heroes' (who are naturally all anti-heroes) describes the memorable people that Waters meets in the various bars he frequents. Baltimore has become famous in recent years due to the success of *The Wire* and there's a whole other book to be written of Waters' own Baltimore experiences. The people in this chapter all seem to merge into one glorious amorphous alcoholic arch-type. Esther Martin is a remarkable character: think Peggy Mitchell in a late night version of *Eastenders*. She owned the Club Charles bar and only admitted 'alcoholics, mental patients and vets[!]'. I would like to see the bar's dress code. According to Waters she had a foul mouth but also looked after her patrons, managing their money and visiting them in hospital. Nearly all of Waters' role models redeem themselves because Waters reveals their subversive aspects as being completely integral to their humanity. That goes for him too.

Waters', like all good prospective cult leaders, has the perfect mixture of insane, quirky bravado (as does any man who has pencilled in his own moustache using Maybelline Expert Eyes in Velvet Black for the last forty years) and an original intelligence and take on the world. There's lots on offer here, lots of humour, sex and degradation and it's easy (and enjoyable) to be pulled into Waters' glorious cesspit. What is also striking is the level of empathy, insight and tactility with which he approaches his subjects. I suppose he has to, they're his idols after all.