



On the road with 'Jonny'

Teddy Wayne's new novel imagines the lonely life of a Bieber-esque pop star

THE LOVE SONG OF JONNY VALENTINE, by Teddy Wayne.
Free Press, 284 pp., \$24.99.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

The Love Song of Jonny Valentine," the second novel from prizewinning but not-yet-super-famous Teddy Wayne, follows the cross-country tour of a triple-platinum pop sensation clearly inspired by Justin Bieber — right down to his signature hairstyle, here called "The Jonny."

The book offers a savvy, deadpan satire of the entertainment industry, as well as a riveting look inside child stardom. While the of-the-moment subject matter is great fun — I can see people reading this book who haven't read anything but People magazine in quite a while — what makes the novel both profound and haunting is Jonny's first-person voice.

Here's a snippet from the second chapter, set — as is most of the book — in a hotel room. It's the second day in Los Angeles, and hard-partying momager Jane Valentine has crawled out of bed and announced that it's time for sound check. But first, to the hairdresser. "The Jonny" needs maintenance.

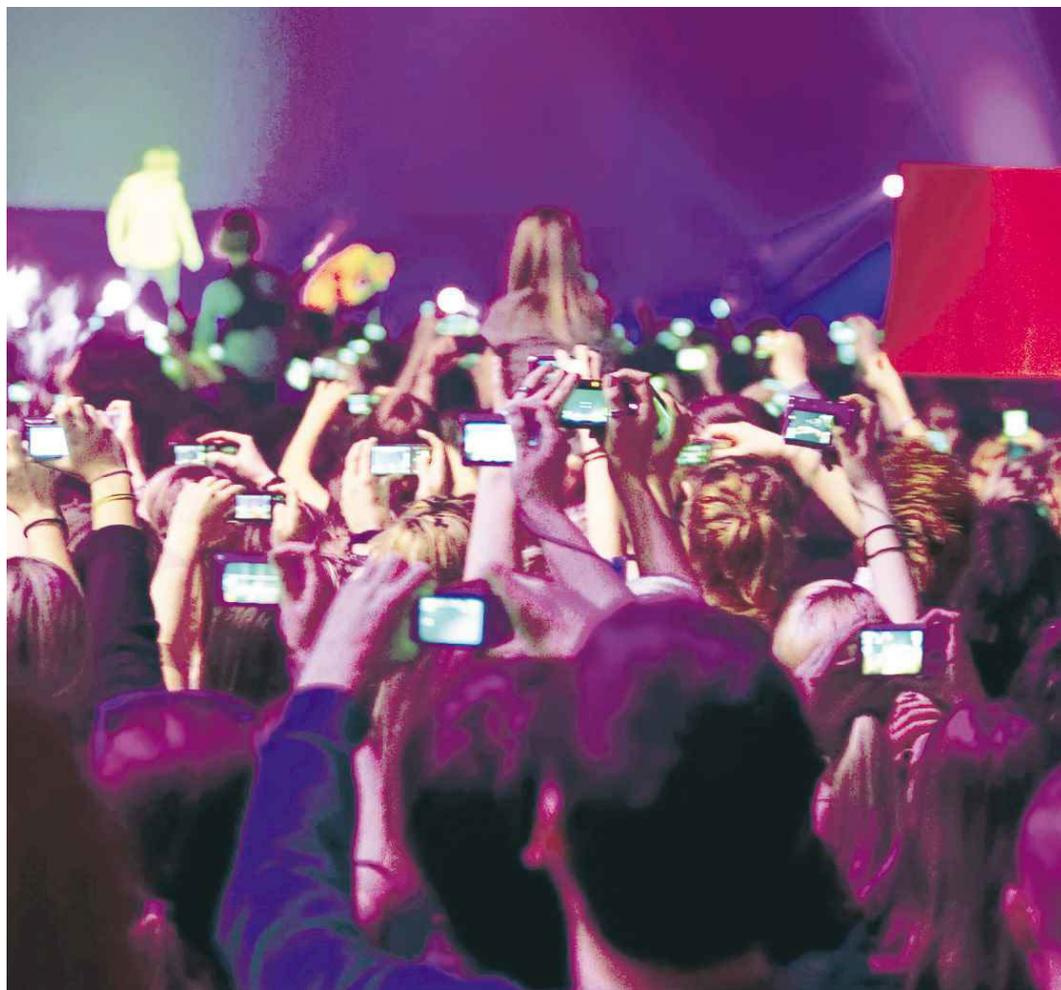
Eleven-year-old Jonny ex-

plains. "[M]y hair was dangling in my eyes, which my fans like, especially when I have to flip it away, but it screws with me when I'm dancing. Jane's always like, 'The hierarchy is your voice, your eyes, and your hair.'"

He goes on, "Walter fist-bumped me and said, 'Ready to kick some tail and take names tonight, brother?' and I never really know if he wants me to answer or if the question is what Nadine calls *rhetorical* and also what taking names actually means, like if you'd kick someone's tail and ask them their name after to put on a list to help you remember whose tail you don't have to kick anymore, plus I don't think kicking tail and taking names includes getting a ride from your mother over to a gay guy's hair salon on Beverly Drive to have your hair dyed blond, so I just said, 'Yep.' Maybe it's Southern demo[graphic] slang."

Walter is Jonny's bodyguard, Nadine is his tutor, and these hired hands are the closest thing he has to friends, just as his intense involvement with a video game called "The Secret Land of Zenon" is the closest

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He's fictional, but Jonny Valentine bears a striking resemblance to Justin Bieber, here in concert.

thing he has to a childhood.

He can't help treating the 20-something lead singer of his opening act like an older brother, and he secretly corresponds via email with someone claiming to be his father. He knows there's a good chance that anyone who reaches out to him is a child predator, a con artist or a user, but his loneliness trumps his fear.

His loneliness colors everything. Though Jonny knows musicians are supposed to hate sound check, he prefers it to the actual show. At least everyone's in it together; it's "like you're practicing on a team."

When he's out in front of the audience, it's all him, and he is acutely aware of his responsibility for the jobs of 136 people in his immediate entourage, not to mention all the people at the venues. It's no wonder he vomits before every show. That and the fact that the heart-shaped cage that flies him out over the audience to drop rose petals on the fans'

heads nearly plummets to the floor on its maiden voyage. With him in it.

"The Love Song of Jonny Valentine" has been compared to Jennifer Egan's "A Visit From the Goon Squad" and Joyce Carol Oates' "Blonde," but more than anything, Jonny reminded me of Jack, the 5-year-old captive narrator of Emma Donoghue's "Room." Like "Room," this novel takes a sordid tabloid situation and illuminates it with a child's voice so real you want to climb inside the book and rescue him.

Where the stories diverge is at the character of the mother. Unlike Jack's mom, who saves her son and herself, Jonny's mother can't seem to take care of him at all. Far from offering any respite from his isolation, she leaves him alone with a room service menu and a game controller most nights, and subjects him to a series of faux social experiences created at the behest of the record company and for the benefit of the pa-

parazzi. There's a ludicrous ice-cream date with pop singer Lisa Pinto, where Jonny's expectation that they might actually interact only serves to humiliate him. There is a televised visit to their old hometown, St. Louis, where an orchestrated reunion with Jonny's much-missed best friend, Michael, is a nightmare. Jonny's bodyguard tries to comfort him: "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," says Walter.

Wondering if this can be true, Jonny thinks of his video game. Could taking a hit somehow make the player healthier? "The only way that was kind of true in Zenon," he concludes, "is that when you're at a hundred percent health, you're always worried someone's going to damage you and make it so you're not perfect. When you're already pretty damaged you stop caring as much."

This equally heartbreaking and amusing novel, to use its own language, will surely expand Teddy Wayne's base.