



Jesse Eisenberg Is Hearing Voices

The *New Yorker* and *McSweeney's* have been publishing his humor pieces for years. Now the *American Ultra* star's first book is finally here, and EW sat in as the 31-year-old wisecracked his way through an audiobook recording session. **By Isabella Biedenharn**

JESSE EISENBERG HAS A dilemma. He's in the studio recording the audiobook for his short-story collection, *Bream Gives Me Hiccups*, and a particularly footnote-laden story isn't quite working. "My Roommate Stole My Ramen," which makes up a significant chunk of the book, follows college freshman Harper Jablonski as she writes effusive—and unwanted—letters to her high school guidance counselor. "Do you think it would work better if we didn't say 'footnote' every time?" Eisenberg asks from the glass-walled booth.

Darren Vermaas, the audiobook's director, weighs in: "To me, the repetitiveness of that is funny. But that's one man's opinion." Eisenberg buzzes through the line under his breath, like he's fast-forwarding that already rapid-fire voice—"I know we haven't spoken since junior year of high school. Footnote: So technically you're not my guidance counselor anymore"—and then stops to consider. "Okay, yeah, maybe it would be funny," he decides.

Bream is hardly Eisenberg's first literary effort: In addition to a plethora of short humor pieces, he's penned three plays and even a novel, although he promises we'll never see it. "Everybody who ends up putting a book out has a s---ty novel from college," Eisenberg says. "I would not ever publish mine. It's not good."

His strength is in dialogue and monologue, and in writing miserable characters who



alternately compel (like a 9-year-old from a broken home who writes restaurant reviews) and repel (like Harper, the footnote-obsessed freshman Eisenberg lovingly describes as "maladjusted"). "My only B in college was in short fiction, where I tried to describe a tablecloth for five pages," he explains. "I don't do that well. I'd rather describe somebody who tripped over a tablecloth and relate it back to some kind of Freudian experience."

Harper's story was inspired by tales of his sister's college-roommate troubles. He suggested she write a blog called "My Roommate Stole My Ramen," but she never did, so he took the idea back for himself. Harper's particular writing style came to Eisenberg while he was filming the acclaimed recent biopic *The End of The Tour*: "I suddenly had this epiphany that she should use footnotes, because David Foster Wallace used footnotes," he says. "I thought, 'Oh, that's what she is. She's somebody who overexplains everything, and she's full of rage and vitriol.' Then everything poured out." Eisenberg is uncannily good at capturing a specific breed of insincere teen girl. "The Slutnick [Harper's roommate] is *technically* a nice person. Like she always says the 'right' things, but it feels totally fake."

Eisenberg's embodiment of Harper's voice might be especially convincing because he always expected the character to come to life through the audiobook. "I think of acting and writing, oftentimes, as extensions of each other," Eisenberg says. "So when I'm writing something, I feel like its logical manifestation is a performance of it." It might be logical, but that doesn't necessarily make it easier: "Out of all of my jobs, recording an audiobook is the most exhausting. It's probably the combination of nonstop talking and not walking," he says. "I'm going to need a knee replacement after today."