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# ***Infinite Regress: Metafictional Memoir***

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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## Abstract

Writers like James Frey, author of the controversial work *A Million Little Pieces*, have shown aspiring memoirists the negative consequences of deliberately fabricating portions of a memoir. The question memoir writers now face: how much can an author add to or omit from a memoir before it risks betraying the reader's trust in the author, which is essential to the proper functioning of memoir as a genre?

I discovered I would be unable to produce a coherent or truthful memoir without fictionalising portions of it in a manner that could have subjected me to the same criticisms Frey faced. Because I did not want to produce a wholly fictional work but felt unable to reveal certain aspects of my true life in a straightforward memoir format, I instead made the problem of producing a truthful memoir the central focus of my work.

My novella, *Infinite Regress*, uses metafiction to subvert the genre of memoir as an attempt to work around this issue of truthful self-representation. The analysis following *Infinite Regress* examines the characteristics of memoir as a genre, how reader response to memoirs hinges on readers being able to trust the memoirist, and the consequences of a memoirist breaking that trust. I then examine metafiction as a possible method of side-stepping the issue of truth in memoir; through use of metafiction, an author can deliberately draw a reader's attention to the problematic nature of truth in *any* narrative.

Finally, I demonstrate how metafiction does not ultimately represent a *solution* to the problem of truthful self-representation, and I determine that writing a memoir in a metafictional mode may only be preferable to not writing a memoir at all.

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# **INFINITE REGRESS**

CHRIS RAWSON



## DISCLAIMER

*Just like Moses, the story of my exodus begins with a Bush.*

Chris Rawson typed those words, and some indeterminate period of time later, you've read them.

*Such clever wordplay*, he thought, *with a bonus classical/Biblical allusion to win over the intellectuals*. He sat in front of his computer's screen and laughed out loud.

The line was so monstrously clever that Chris Rawson had to put it on Facebook,<sup>1</sup> Twitter,<sup>2</sup> and other online portals where he lived his virtual life. "This will be the first line of my Master's thesis," he typed. On Facebook, people "liked" it. On Twitter, the line got "re-tweeted". Elsewhere, digital people assured him (or his pseudonymic avatars) that it was, indeed, a funny line.

Chris Rawson wrote the story which follows. He is its omniscient third-person narrator, its introspective first-person narrator. He is the plot's protagonist, and he is also its chief antagonist. In this world, everyone is Chris Rawson with a slightly different face. It is a tale told by an egomaniac, a man who has no problem admitting that he believes he is at the centre of the Universe because, in scientific terms, it's literally true.<sup>3</sup>

Why is Chris Rawson telling you this now? To put it less pretentiously, why am I? It's called fair warning. If you're going to spend time immersed in the sea of words which follows, I thought you should know who you're dealing with before getting your feet wet.

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<sup>1</sup> A social networking site on the Internet, and one of the most popular online destinations from 2007 - 201x. Now defunct.

<sup>2</sup> A "microblogging" site on the Internet, widely popular from 2009 - 201x. Now defunct.

<sup>3</sup> For any observer at any location in the cosmos, the distance between the observer's retina (or equivalent) and the edge of the *observable* Universe is a comoving distance of approximately 14 billion parsecs (at time of writing). Any individual observer is therefore located at the central point of his/her/its observable Universe, a sphere with a diameter of 28 billion parsecs. During the epoch in which this was written, the observable Universe's central point was located in the lounge of a house on the corner of Ruahine and Luton streets in Hokowhitu, Palmerston North, New Zealand, when the observer in question is identified as Chris Rawson. Your observable Universe has its central point in a different location, except in the highly unlikely event that you are sitting in my lounge as you read this.



The most important thing to get out of the way: Chris Rawson is a con artist, though he prefers con *artiste*. But he's not the ho-hum everyday variety of confidence trickster, like the guys who go after old ladies' pension cheques or the Nigerian spammers who clog up everybody's e-mail inboxes. Chris Rawson gets his jolliest jollies only when he manages to hustle otherwise highly intelligent marks.

It's not as though he goes out of his way to hide his dishonesty. If you could see his Facebook profile,<sup>4</sup> you'd find three quotes:

1. Your mom (verb phrase).<sup>5</sup>
2. I'm a Taoist, but not a very good one. For example, based purely on statistical probability, I probably want to kill you.
3. Truth is merely fiction stripped of all imagination.

These last two should be big warning signs. They depict two personality quirks common to the fraudster: misanthropy, and a delight in the art of the lie. It's no surprise Rawson became drawn toward creative writing; aside from sex, what more trusting, vulnerable act is there compared to what you're doing right now?<sup>6</sup>

This swindler, this cheat, this *bamboozler* has made a habit of surrounding himself with highly intelligent, driven people. All of his ~~closest~~ friends marks have genius-level IQs, but none of them suspect Chris Rawson for what he really is. He's so talented at masking his true self that he's even got animals fooled; you might expect dogs or cats to be able to sniff out his

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<sup>4</sup> You can't, and you never will.

<sup>5</sup> This is the linguistic root of all "yo momma" jokes. I used to feel self-conscious about such "lowbrow" humour, but it turns out even Shakespeare wasn't above a good yo momma joke:

Painter: Y'are a dog.

Apemantus: Thy mother's of my generation. What's she, if I be a dog? — *Timon of Athens* I.i

Demetrius: Villain, what hast thou done?

Aaron: That which thou canst not undo.

Chiron: Thou hast undone our mother.

Aaron: Villain, I have done thy mother. — *Titus Andronicus* IV.ii

<sup>6</sup> ***I'm inside your head.*** Think about what that implies for a minute.

true nature, but they flock to his banner with every bit as much enthusiasm as their bipedal counterparts.

Now that I've told you all this, will you read what follows any differently? Will you question the "truth" as it's presented here, or will you fall for the con too? Maybe this warning will ultimately prove counterproductive. After *telling* you everything Rawson says is a lie, you might shrug and say, "Well, at least he admits it. That's refreshing."

Chris Rawson is such a tremendous master of mendacity that only one person has ever managed to see past his carefully constructed façade and uncover the glistening evil that lies within him. This is not that person's story.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Yes it is. Obliquely.



**EVERYTHING I SAY IS A LIE.**

**-CLASSIC PARADOX**