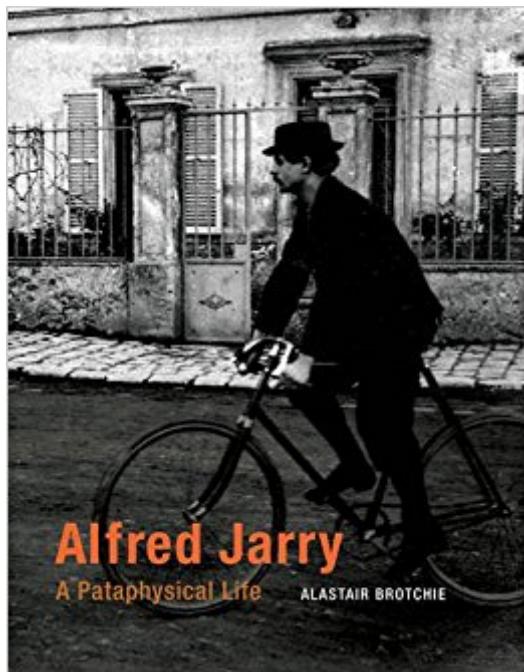


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# Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

When Alfred Jarry died in 1907 at the age of thirty-four, he was a legendary figure in Paris -- but this had more to do with his bohemian lifestyle and scandalous behavior than his literary achievements. A century later, Jarry is firmly established as one of the leading figures of the artistic avant-garde. Even so, most people today tend to think of Alfred Jarry only as the author of the play *Ubu Roi*, and of his life as a string of outlandish "ubuesque" anecdotes, often recounted with wild inaccuracy. In this first full-length critical biography of Jarry in English, Alastair Brotchie reconstructs the life of a man intent on inventing (and destroying) himself, not to mention his world, and the "philosophy" that defined their relation. Brotchie alternates chapters of biographical narrative with chapters that connect themes, obsessions, and undercurrents that relate to the life. The anecdotes remain, and are even augmented: Jarry's assumption of the "ubuesque," his inversions of everyday behavior (such as eating backward, from cheese to soup), his exploits with gun and bicycle, and his herculean feats of drinking. But Brotchie distinguishes between Jarry's purposely playing the fool and deeper nonconformities that appear essential to his writing and his thought, both of which remain a vital subterranean influence to this day.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Who was Alfred Jarry really? And how did this angry young man from the provinces come to invent pataphysics and to write the revolutionary drama *Ubu Roi*? In this, the first full-length biography of

Jarry in English, Alastair Brotchie, himself a central figure in the 'Collège de 'Pataphysique' and scholar of the avant-garde, gives us a richly documented, beautifully illustrated, and intimate portrait of the complex personality behind the Ubu masks. I found it a real page-turner. (Marjorie Perloff, author of *The Futurist Moment* and *Unoriginal Genius*) Alastair Brotchie has achieved something very rare. In giving us the first detailed account of Jarry's life, he shares a lot of discoveries and unknown documents but avoids reducing the life to a collection of biographical or archival facts. Indeed, he makes us feel, think, act, see, and almost speak in connivance with this delicate and strange monster, Alfred Jarry. (Thieri Foulc, cofounder of the Oupeinpo and

Proviseur-éditeur Gérard of the Collège de 'Pataphysique) Aficionados of Alfred Jarry's writings will welcome this urgently necessary life of the inventor of 'Pataphysics, that mad and minor science of imaginary solutions. Alastair Brotchie's biography fills an enormous gap in our understanding not only of Jarry's complex life but of the tangled sociocultural networks of tastes and antipathies that constructed the Banquet Years. Impeccably researched, masterfully written, and profusely illustrated, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* is guaranteed to broaden and deepen Anglophone interest in Jarry (whom Cyril Connolly dubbed the Santa Claus of the atomic age) and 'Pataphysics alike. (Steve McCaffery, David Gray Chair Professor of Poetry and Letters, University at Buffalo, coeditor of *Imagining Language: An Anthology*) Alfred Jarry provides many new facts, some pertinent analyses, and a clutch of outrageously amusing yarns. (Mark Polizzotti Bookforum) Alastair Brotchie brilliantly evokes the avant-garde artistic movements of fin-de-siècle Paris in all their glittering grubbiness. (Charlotte Keith Varsity) *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* by Alastair Brotchie is a superb chronicle of the life and times of the fin-de-siècle French writer. (Times Literary Supplement -- (Book of the Year 2011)) An enthralling, scrupulously researched, and elegantly written biography. (Mark Ford The New York Review of Books) [Brotchie] gives us an unmatched and vivid picture of the belle époque's avant-garde, of which Jarry was an important, original part. (Michael Moorcock The Guardian)... [Brotchie's] tone is clear and informed, rooted in a familiarity with Jarry that has something quite personal about it, which is all for the good. (Allan Graubard Leonardo On-Line) Brotchie's archival work and translations are meticulous... Highly recommended. -- M. Gaddis Rose (Choice) [Brotchie] skilfully moves between providing a relatively straightforward and sympathetic account of the writer's life and critically sorting through the narratives that have sustained and shaped the long-standing image of Jarry... Brotchie's refusal to mythologise stands as the book's greatest strength, and as a fitting testament to the manifold complexity of Alfred Jarry. (Karl Whitney 3:AM Magazine) How a schoolboy caricature evolved into Jarry's best-known creation, his monstrous 'every-man', Père Ubu, is a fascinating story which

Brotchie tells with impressive scholarship, sympathy and wit. (Peter Blegvad *The Spectator*) Brotchie's painstaking and drily funny biography is now the most ample account of Jarry and his importance that is available in our language; it is unlikely ever to be bettered. (Kevin Jackson *The Literary Review*) That Jarry comes across as both more and less than we might expect from his reputation and his writings is a result of Brotchie so resolutely and expertly keeping his eye on the available facts and not allowing himself to wander into speculation and hero-worship. (William Bamberger *Rain Taxi*)

Alastair Brotchie is a founder of the London publishing house Atlas Press, a Regent of the Collège de 'Pataphysique in Paris, and the editor of books and anthologies on Surrealism, Dada, and the Oulipo.

An outstanding biography (the first comprehensive one in English) of this fascinating, beautiful monster, set in the swirl of fin-de-siecle Paris's artistic demimonde, this is required reading for anyone interested in the avant garde. Most famous for his theatrical creation *Pere Ubu* and the succès de scandale of "*Ubu Roi*"s debut performances in 1896, Jarry has proved a huge influence on successive artists and writers -- particularly those of a anarchic bent (Dadaists, Surrealists, Punks...) both through his works and his defiantly unconventional and often uproarious behavior. Compulsively readable throughout, packed with amusing anecdote and newly discovered material, this work is a beautifully mounted and long overdue tribute to Jarry's life and work, and Brotchie -- a Regent of the College de 'Pataphysique (Jarry's own 'science of imaginary solutions'), and co-founder of avant garde London publisher the Atlas Press -- has done a fine job of evoking his often difficult and paradoxical subject.

By far the best book on Alfred Jarry.

Grand!

The most entertaining biography I have ever read.

Alfred Jarry was always an fascinating person to my boyfriend and I when we were theatre majors and first read *Ubu Roi*, but our school library had little in the way on information on him. I purchased this as a gift for him after graduation and we both love it. We learned so many more crazy and

interesting facts about this already mysterious man. Excellent research, wonderful photographs, and so much more. A great addition to our library.

A Pataphysical Life is a magnificent biography, and a much needed one. For such an important and influential artist, and considering the madcap outrageousness of his life, it had been incredibly hard to find reliable information about the life of Alfred Jarry. Brotchie solves this problem once and for all. I have been a huge Jarry fan for several years, and when I saw this on the shelf, I bought it instantly. I also received a copy for Christmas. I will keep them both. There are so many rare photographs, so many newly uncovered letters, so many definitively researched anecdotes, that I have to stop and remind myself how lucky we are to finally have such a wonderful document about one of the most under-appreciated writers of his time. This book does a tremendous service to Jarry's life and his legacy, and with any luck it will greatly increase American interest in the great man's works.

Upon his death, Alfred Jarry asked for a fork.

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