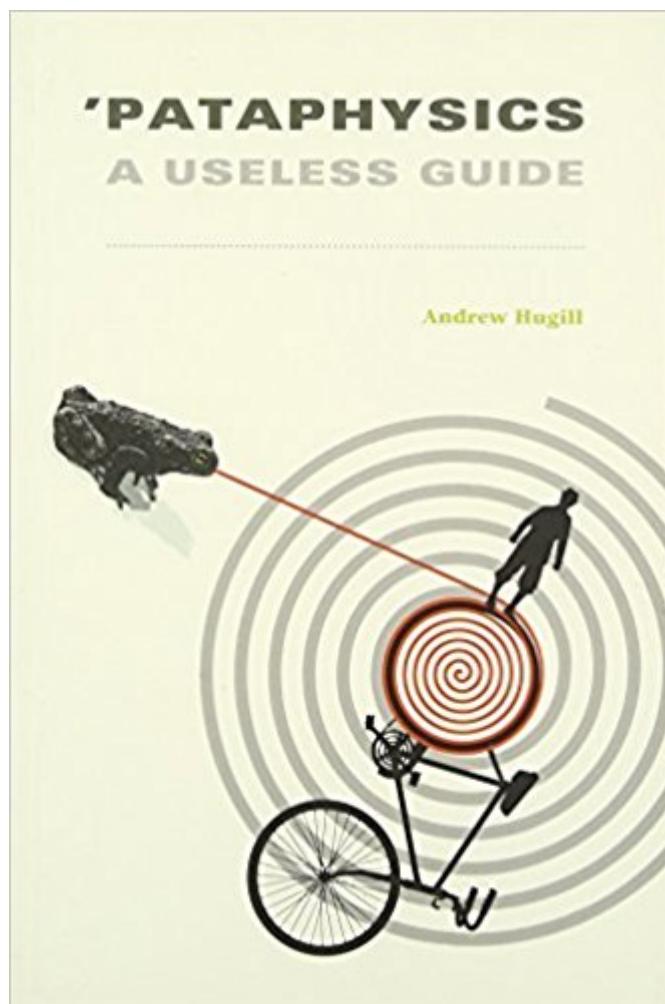


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# 'Pataphysics: A Useless Guide (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

Of all the French cultural exports over the last 150 years or so, 'pataphysics -- the science of imaginary solutions and the laws governing exceptions -- has proven to be one of the most durable. Originating in the wild imagination of French poet and playwright Alfred Jarry and his schoolmates, resisting clear definition, purposefully useless, and almost impossible to understand, 'pataphysics nevertheless lies around the roots of Absurdism, Dada, futurism, surrealism, situationism, and other key cultural developments of the twentieth century. In this account of the evolution and influence of 'pataphysics, Andrew Hugill offers an informed exposition of a rich and difficult territory, staying aloft on a tightrope stretched between the twin dangers of oversimplifying a serious subject and taking a joke too seriously. Drawing on more than twenty-five years' research, Hugill maps the 'pataphysical presence (partly conscious and acknowledged but largely unconscious and unacknowledged) in literature, theater, music, the visual arts, and the culture at large, and even detects 'pataphysical influence in the social sciences and the sciences. He offers many substantial excerpts (in English translation) from primary sources, intercalated with a thorough explication of key themes and events of 'pataphysical history. In a Jarryesque touch, he provides these in reverse chronological order, beginning with a survey of 'pataphysics in the digital age and working backward to Jarry and beyond. He looks specifically at the work of Jean Baudrillard, Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, J. G. Ballard, Asger Jorn, Gilles Deleuze, Roger Shattuck, Jacques Prévert, Antonin Artaud, René Clair, the Marx Brothers, Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, James Joyce, Flann O'Brien, Raymond Roussel, Jean-Pierre Brisset, and many others.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is a past and future history of 'pataphysics, and should give great comfort to those conflicted souls (everybody) who still believe in anything. (Andrei Codrescu, author of The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara and Lenin Play Chess.) Andrew Hugill masterfully manages the apparent impossibility of writing seriously about a subject that makes unseriousness its core. I discovered 'pataphysics at age 16 and was immediately drawn to its irreverence and the impossibility of determining whether it was deep or pretending to be deep or something else entirely. Now that Hugill, himself a composer of pataphysical music, has explicated the intricacies, subtleties, and slapstick of 'pataphysics, I'm beginning to understand how much more there is to the practice than meets the mind. (Howard Rheingold, critic and author of Net Smart, Tools for Thought, The Virtual Community, and Smart Mobs) 'Pataphysics: A Useless Guide is a richly informative critical overview of the wide-ranging influence of (and influences on) 'pataphysics, from Groucho to Deleuze, OuLiPo, Borges, Béla K, Situationism, SciFi, Raymond Roussel, and a wildly creative crew of fellow travelers, diviners, alchemists, and literary and theatrical pioneers. Andrew Hugill's encyclopedic tribute shows how, for more than a century, Alfred Jarry's precocious mind theater has remained exhilaratingly exceptional and exceptionally exhilarating. (Charles Bernstein, Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature, University of Pennsylvania; author of Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions) Hugill has written an essential, sharp book on this vital subject. He has a brisk style that gives the book pace and punch. It is authoritative and full of wonders. He gives the geography of the movement and maps out the exhilaration of uselessness. (Richard Marshall 3:AM Magazine) Andrew Hugill, professor at De Montfort University and, equally important, Commandeur Requis of the Ordre de la Grand Gidouille in the Collège de 'Pataphysique, has in well under three hundred pages traced the lineaments of a science which, like a particle in quantum mechanics, fundamentally resists accurate measurement. He describes a field known for its wordplay and willful obfuscation with clear language, an admirable breadth of reference, and an abiding respect for the complexity and, well, willfull obfuscation of his subject. (Andrew Hultkrans Bookforum) From the Theatre of the Absurd through to modern art, literature, music, even postmodern philosophy, pataphysics has been one of the driving forces of the avant-garde for more than a century. Hugill's self-deprecating study provides us with not only an intellectual history of this fascinating but elusive community but also, and no less importantly, proffers valuable clues as to the nature of the creativity of the attitudes and tenets of its members.

Andrew Hugill is a Professor at De Montfort University, England. He is also a Commandeur Requis of the Ordre de la Grande Guidouille in the Collège de 'Pataphysique.

enjoying a new outlook.

Surrealism has been a most potent influence on the Arts, and this well written and research book explains the serious foolishness and irreverence that made the movement so influential. This is a bit of a dry read in places, but relates well to other material available. It also contains quite a bit of material that is not mentioned in other writings on the topic.

Are you a pataphysician? No, you don't think so? Let me ask you two questions: Do you see how things are and ask why? Or, do you see how things could be and ask why not? If you answered yes to the second question, you may be a pataphysician and don't know it, up until now. Concisely put, the science of 'pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions. Since a guide to a person's imagination presupposes a reality which is unattainable, that is, it presupposes the possibility of knowing a territory, a *terra incognita*, which exists inside of another person, any guide to 'pataphysics would be *perforce* useless, thus you have an imaginary solution to the problem of the subtitle, "A Useless Guide". Some readers, grammatically and punctuationally inclined, will be wondering about the apparently superfluous apostrophe which precedes the instances of the word pataphysics above. The correct spelling of the word coined by Albert Jarre in the 18th century includes the apostrophe, thus: 'pataphysics is the correct spelling of the science when used alone; when used to indicate a practitioner of the science, a pataphysician, or in a sentence, the apostrophe may be dropped, as is also the case for adjectives and other parts of speech, such as pataphysical, pataphysically, etc. Thus said, I have demonstrated a paradox: that even a useless guide can be useful at some level, a possibility which seems to me to be an example of an imaginary solution. I will hazard furthering the paradox by reviewing this useless guide and further mining its uselessness for possible usefulness. "Surely you're joking" may come to mind along with its imaginary solution or response, "Don't call me Shirley." Okay, let's get serious: "Is 'pataphysics a joke?" Obviously not -- as Hugill points out in his Preamble, "Everybody knows that a joke explained is not a joke at all." So don't expect explanations or unambiguous definitions for a field which embraces diffuse explanations and is big on ambiguity. Besides, definitions are dead, abstract

concepts (See here). If you want to understand what pataphysics is, this review won't be much help, but at least you will have acquired a first-experience of being confused on a subject that you may not have known existed before.[page xv] How to write about something that exists mainly in the imagination, that constantly resists clear definition, is purposefully useless, and is regarded by many as a pseudophilosophy, a hoax, a joke, or a schoolboy prank? The enterprise is fraught with dangers. There is a risk of reduction: pataphysics is rich and complex, so anything that resembles a simplified "explanation" will fail to do it justice. Conversely, there is the problem of taking it all too seriously. Everybody knows that a joke explained is not a joke at all. Since pataphysics recognizes no distinction between humor and seriousness, there is always a possibility that any statement on the subject will end up pricking its own balloon. There is the ever-present danger of factual error in a history filled with myth-making, inconsistencies, deliberate hoaxes, and, sometimes, downright lying. Worst of all, there is fear of the disapproval of the worldwide community of pataphysicians, whose deep erudition and independence of mind make them supremely intolerant of any traducement of that which they hold so dear, even if it emanates from one of their own. In the face of these perils one may well wonder why this book exists at all. Did you enjoy pranks when you were a schoolboy? Well, I did. Nothing which caused physical harm, but those pranks which caused a burst of surprise or sudden revelation upon my playmates. I always wanted to try the bucket of water on the top of a door, but if I did that at home, the result would have been too painful for me, so my range of schoolboy pranks was limited by my meager funds and my dad's razor strop. So it was my great delight to find that the name 'pataphysics was invented by schoolboys! French schoolboys![page xv] Of all the French cultural exports of the past 150 years or so, pataphysics has, perhaps surprisingly, turned out to be one of the most durable, and today is attracting ever-increasing attention. The word was invented by schoolboys in Rennes in the 1880s and is most strongly identified with one of their number: the poet and playwright Alfred Jarry (1873-1907). It is generally agreed that it lies around the roots of many of the key artistic and cultural developments of the twentieth century, including absurdism, Dada, futurism, surrealism, situationism, and others."I have never heard of 'pataphysics before!" you exclaim? Well, as the Author explains in his Preamble on page xvi, "The fact that relatively few people are aware of its existence is part of the secret of its success." After all, imagine flash mobs all over the major cities forming to create 'pataphysical happenings! What kind of world would we be living in? Hmmm, you know, on further consideration, perhaps that is already happening, those flash mobs, only due to the pataphysical need for sub rosa concealment, they do not advertise themselves as pataphysical flash mobs, but come up with ingenious cover stories for their existence. Note that there are no pataphysicists only pataphysicians. Most "-ists" have an "ism"

to which they belong: deists to deism, absolutists to absolutism, ascetics to asceticism, capitalists to capitalism, communists to communism, environmentalists to environmentalism, egoists to egoism, hedonist to hedonism, machinists to mechanisms, nihilists to nihilism, pessimists to pessimism, and optimists to optimism, just to name a few of the 234 ism compiled by The Phrontistery on-line.[page xv] Unlike other, more familiar, "isms" that have been fully documented and historicized, pataphysics has managed to retain its vibrancy by perpetually eluding "ism" ism. It has never fully become either a "movement" or a "philosophy," even though at times it shares some characteristics with both of those. It has managed to permeate both culture and society, but in ways that are somewhat shadowy. My career began as a physicist, evolved into a computer scientist, massage therapist, psychotherapist, philosopher, writer, photographer, cartoonist, poet, novelist, editor, and publisher and it continues to evolve(1). This points out that I have worked in many of the areas that pataphysics has had a "demonstrable impact on" listed below:[page xvi] . . . theater, music, painting, sculpture . . . Its influence on politics, economics, philosophy, critical theory, and the wider social sciences is less clear, but can nevertheless be traced. Its presence in the sciences is still less obvious, and yet with a little digging it can be detected. Both scientists and pataphysicians have too much to lose to admit that there are many similarities and connections between them, but the subject does pop up in quantum physics, in computer science, or in scientific research in general. From my reading of advances in quantum mechanic theory such as the Bell Theorem, the double slit experiment, et al, it has seemed to me at times that the theory itself was formed as a schoolboy prank by Heisenberg, Bohr, Boehm, Feynman and others. It would be laughable if it were not taken so seriously were it not so important to our modern technology and understanding of the world. My pataphysical roots go way back to 1953, on the memorable day when a couple of thirteen-year-old pals of mine introduced me to the first issue of Mad -- a new Comics Book which had just appeared. I began reading it like a regular Batman or Superman comic book when suddenly I realized it was making fun of things that our parents took seriously! My pals and I all roared at each page. I discovered my love of satire on that very day, and I knew that my life would never be the same again, that no matter how serious things got, I could always find something humorous in them. Later in my twenties, I discovered Italo Calvino and struggled with his writings, too young for them, I expect because recently I read his "If on a winter's night a traveler . . ." and enjoyed it immensely, especially its pataphysical aspects of imaginary solutions, even though I had not consciously encountered the concepts and techniques of 'Pataphysics until I read this book a year or so later. Also recently I viewed the movie, "Idiocracy" and it blew me away with its imaginary (i.e. pataphysical) solutions to the problems of the world. It hinted at such solutions by simply

depicting the ultimate end of the path that we are currently embarked upon where our world will be run by such idiots that an average person of today, projected a hundred years into future, would be deemed the smartest man in the world. People will be sprinkling Gator-Aid on plants ("What? Use water? That's for the toilet!") and the huge warehouse stores will get immense ("BBQ Sauce? Aisle G at Mile 17."), just to name a few quirks of the future path we're heading upon. Before we step off onto one of M. C. Escher's pataphysical staircases and depart this review, may I remind you that there are no rules for 'Pataphysics, only exceptions; rightly understood, a "rule" is an exception to an exception. Those of you who take exception to anything the author or I have written in this review should follow that rule. In closing, I hope by now you may have acquired a nascent sense of humor (or increased one already present) and that you will know how to respond if someone ever asks you, "How can you take pataphysics seriously?" The answer as proposed by the author is simple, elegant, and easy to remember, unless you inflexibly answer a question by asking a question. Do you? If you immediately responded to my "Do you?" by saying, "Well, do you?" then you will know to respond to the question, "How can you take pataphysics seriously?" with the question, "How can you not take pataphysics seriously?" You read the entirety of my review in DIGESTWORLD ISSUE#136 by Bobby Matherne.

I have been an avid Alfred Jarry reader since high school, but there has not been much by or about him lately. Not the easiest read, but fun, and, of course, surreal.

Hugill connects the dots linking some of the most creative thinkers of the past and present. Book is well designed with an unusual level of attention to typography, layout, and stock. Provocative and informative. A must for anyone who enjoys thinking.

Andrew Hugill's book is easy to read---though chronologically backward---funny and packed with information, much of which will be new to readers.

I was quite intrigued by the concept of a theory that dealt with untrue facts. Explaining this has been interesting and comical, yet as an abstract artist my take on reality fits well with the book. I have come to embrace the maxim, "Perception is Reality" and so, what we perceive and believe is not what others can accept. Now there is this book to prove it.

As a rule, it's not easy to find straight talk about 'pataphysics. Which is probably as it should be.

However, this book a welcome exception to that rule. Covering the subject from a variety of angles, the author's love for all things 'pataphysical is obvious. He's clear that he's not claiming any sort of exclusive interpretational validity, but handles his discussion with the right balance of theory/explication and serious absurdity. If not enlightened, you are guaranteed to be more 'pataphysical when you're done reading it. Whether you want to be or not...

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