

# 4 3 2 1: A Novel by Paul Auster

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# 4 3 2 1: A Novel

by Paul Auster



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REVIEWED BY DANIELLE SPENCER

Chapter 2.1 of Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1: A Novel* opens with 12-year-old Archie Ferguson sitting at the dining room table in Montclair, New Jersey. He stares at the winged bare-breasted girl on the White Rock Seltzer bottle who kneels eternally, beguilingly, on a ledge at the edge of a lake. "For as long as he could remember," the chapter begins, "Ferguson had been looking at the drawing...." To him the nymph offers "a summons to a world of fleshly passion and fully awakened desires"—a promise to quench thirsts of more than one kind.

When it comes to idealized nubile female figures on food packaging, Ferguson has a more diffident response to the "Indian butter maiden":

There was also the kneeling Indian girl on the box of Land O'Lakes butter, the adolescent beauty with her long black braids and the two colorful feathers sticking out of her beaded headband, but the problem with this potential rival to the White Rock nymph was that she was fully clothed, which greatly lessened her allure, not to speak of the further problem of her elbows, which were thrust out stiffly from her sides because she was holding up a box of Land O'Lakes butter, identical to the one sitting in front of Ferguson, the same box but smaller, with the same picture of the Indian girl holding up another, smaller box of Land O'Lakes butter, which was an intriguing if perplexing notion, Ferguson felt, an infinite regress of ever-shrinking Indian girls holding up ever-shrinking boxes of butter, which was similar to the effect produced by the Quaker Oats box, with the smiling Quaker in the black hat receding to some distant vanishing point beyond the grasp of human vision, a world inside a world, which was inside another world, which was inside another world, until the world had been reduced to the size of a single atom and yet was still somehow managing to grow smaller.

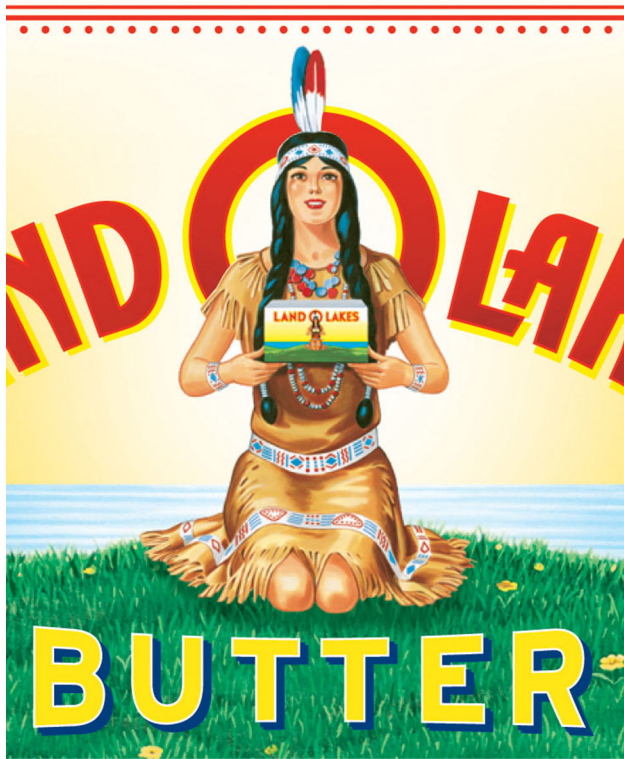
The sentence describing the butter packaging offers a long-take glide through the portals of an image containing itself, containing itself, ad infinitum. Such visual recursion is an example of *mise-en-abîme* ("placed-into-abys"), sometimes known as the Droste Effect after the 19th-century Dutch cocoa powder brand, packaged in a red tin featuring a painting of a nun in a spectacular headdress—like a luminous pilgrim with a hotel towel folded into the shape of a house or a giant fortune cookie enclosing her head—carrying a tray bearing a cup of cocoa and a red tin of Droste's cocoa powder, featuring a painting of a nun in a spectacular headdress.... Similarly, the scales of the fish in

M. C. Escher's 1959 "Fish and Scales" woodcut replicate the fish itself—the example cited in Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*.<sup>1</sup> If the reader of *4 3 2 1* suspects that Archie's encounter with the recursive butter package is a hint of more self-reflexive and metafictional narrative devices to come (unsurprising in Auster's worlds), the reader may be onto something.

Backing up slightly—in Chapter 1.0 the novel begins with the Ferguson "family legend" of Archie's grandfather, Isaac Reznikoff, arriving at Ellis Island from Minsk on 1 January 1900. Advised by a fellow traveler to identify himself as a Rockefeller, the new surname slips from memory when he reaches the immigration official: "Slapping his head in frustration, the weary immigrant blurted out in Yiddish, *Ikh hob fargessen (I've forgotten)*! And so it was that Isaac Reznikoff began his new life in America as Ichabod Ferguson." We begin to follow the family's lineage, questioning not only the meaning of names but the value of stories themselves. The former Reznikoff was not well-to-do, and so we learn that "the only things poor Ike Ferguson bequeathed to his wife and three boys were the stories he had told them about the vagabond adventures of his youth. In the long run, stories are probably no less valuable than money, but in the short run they have their decided limitations."

In this case, we are in it for the long run, as *4 3 2 1* multiplies with stories; after Archie's birth in 1947 the novel splits into four different narratives, each continuing in subsequent chapters—a Borgesian garden of forking paths (as the character Albert describes in Borges' story: "In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pen, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork."<sup>2</sup>) Here the number 4 hums with mortality, divided into subsets of 1 and 3: in Chapter 1.0 we find that Archie's grandmother was rumored to have drowned her fourth child in the bathtub in Duluth, Minnesota, during hard times, and that his mother suffered 3 miscarriages before he was born. Many such specters accompany the living, such as Archie's mother Rose's first love, David Raskin, killed in basic training ("No, she would never recover from David's death, he would always be the secret ghost who walked beside her as she stumbled into the future") and we will learn the fate of these four Archie Fergusons, also split into 1 and 3, and of his family, friends, and lovers. Each story is different, though each Archie encounters desire (whether it be for the White Rock girl, for various romantic interests, some overlapping between the different versions) alongside love, loss, creativity, and—for some—a tumultuous coming-of-age in the 1960s. We are meant to experience and ponder the effects of chance, as Archie #2 does when he falls from the oak tree in the backyard and breaks his leg in Chapter 1.2, musing, during his hours of solitary recuperation and contemplation, alone in his room with his leg in a cast, about what might have happened had even one detail of his life been changed:

Such an interesting thought, Ferguson said to himself: to imagine how things could be different for him even though he was the same. The same boy in a



**Figure 1.** The recursive Land O'Lakes butter packaging.

different house with a different tree. The same boy with different parents. The same boy with the same parents who didn't do the same things they did now. [...] Yes, anything was possible, and just because things happened in one way didn't mean they couldn't happen in another. Everything could be different.

I knew of the novel's quadripartite structure in advance, but with this first shift to an alternate path in Chapter 1.2 I felt a bit irked, tricked, my enchantment with Archie's emerging bildungsroman mocked with the revelation of the novel's fictive devices. I preferred to consume the story—like Archie's prepubescent longing for the seltzer bottle nymph (metonymic desire: *if you can't have me, drink the seltzer!*)—unclouded by awareness of any given narrative's contingency and untroubled by clever literary conceits obstructing my gaze, like the annoying *mise-en-abîme* butter package blocking the breasts of the nubile butter maiden.<sup>3</sup> Yet by the beginning of chapter 2.1, when Archie #1 returned, I was becoming increasingly curious to follow the different sequelae to a key event in the family—the fate of his father's Newark electronics store, 3 Brothers Home World—for Archie's two uncles, Aaron (who went by Arnold, eager to assimilate) and Lew, as well as for his parents, and for Archie himself. I became absorbed in these lives and curious, too, to see how the novel's structure would evolve and resolve, or not resolve.

The stories continue to unfurl, each given its due (hence the book's 866 pages—nearly 4 novels in 1). And the Archies begin to die, and each death is hard. On 1 January 1970, the last surviving Archie's mother tells him the *Ikh hob fargessen* joke. When I had just begun the novel in

March 2017, I read the opening family legend passage aloud to my father, Joel Spencer, a mathematician (combinatorialist + probabilist, as chance would have it) who is just 1 year younger than all four Archie Fergusons as well as Paul Auster himself. My father explained that it's a classic tale, which is to say it was in the particular time, place, and culture in which he, the 4 Archies, and Paul all grew up. Indeed, in Chapter 7.4, on page 860, we learn that "It was an old joke, apparently, one that had been circulating in Jewish living rooms for years, but for some unaccountable reason it had escaped Ferguson's notice." It hadn't escaped my father's notice. My father, whose own father had changed his surname from Schnitzer to Spencer, whose close relatives also included a Rose and an Aaron, and whose grandfather Samuel Schnitzer, born Schmuel, originally from the Polish city of Łódź, arrived at Ellis Island on the Friedrich der Große steamship from Bremen in August 1904 at age 28 and moved to 176 Rivington Street, between Clinton and Attorney Streets on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where the Rainbow Nails Center stands today.

Ferguson, however, hadn't heard the joke, just as I hadn't heard it. (What else haven't I heard? What else has been forgotten?) He ponders the story—the way it turns several names into one—and imagines one name opening into different possible lives, conceiving the novel that we have just read. The move is not entirely unexpected; in his parodical catalog of the recurring tropes of Austerian fiction, critic James Wood includes the likelihood that "[a]t the end of the story, the hints that have been scattered like mouse droppings lead us to the postmodern hole in the book where the rodent got in: the revelation that some or all of what we have been reading has probably been imagined by the protagonist."<sup>4</sup> This is an example of what French narratologist Gérard Genette termed *metalepsis*, or the violation of the "shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells"<sup>5</sup>—a literary enactment of what Hofstadter identifies as a Strange Loop or Tangled Hierarchy.<sup>6</sup> In fiction, *metalepsis* produces a particular anxiety which Dorrit Cohn ascribes to the fact that, unlike an infinitely mirroring *mise-en-abîme*, "it is an extension of a situation that exists inside the text itself: if a second-level fiction can act on a first-level fiction... the first-level fiction may intrude on reality, on the world we inhabit, and thus on ourselves."<sup>7</sup>

As Borges' Doctor Stephen Albert learns in "The Garden of Forking Paths," a work can strive toward infinity through circularity or simultaneous forking paths, and *4 3 2 1* navigates both of those structures. Just as the four stories have become one again with the 3 Archies' deaths, we find ourselves confronted with the strange loop in which the novel we have just read has been written by the protagonist. And yet. The novel generated by the novel is not quite the same premise—several names into one becomes one life into several iterations—and it is not quite Archie who has written the book, but an Archie imagined by the young man hearing the joke—and the joke is not quite the family legend: "Ferguson, whose name was not Ferguson, found it intriguing to imagine himself having been born a Ferguson or a Rockefeller, someone with a different name from the X that had been attached to him when he was pulled from his



mother's womb on March 3, 1947. In point of fact, his father's father had not been given another name when he arrived at Ellis Island on January 1, 1900—but what if he had? Out of that question, Ferguson's next book was born." Similarly, the butter maiden may seem to duplicate identically, but we'll recall that the self-replication blocks her breasts, frustrating the 12-year-old Ferguson #1, who finds it "interesting in its way, but hardly the stuff to inspire dreams," in contrast to the beguiling White Rock maiden—and indeed, the mirroring of the Land O'Lakes box is also disturbed, altered, one fine day when Ferguson and his friend Bobby George unexpectedly learn a secret from Bobby's older brother:

Look at this, he said, and the two boys watched as he cut apart the six-paneled box and set aside the two large panels with the picture of the Indian girl on them. He cut into one of the pictures, removing the girl's knees and the bare skin just above the knees, which were sticking out from under the edge of her skirt, and then taped the knees over the butter box in the other picture, and lo and behold, the knees had been turned into breasts, a pair of large, naked breasts, each one with a red dot in the center of it that for all the world could have passed as a perfectly drawn nipple. The prim Lakota squaw had been transformed into a luscious sexpot, and as Carl grinned and Bobby squealed with laughter, Ferguson looked on without making a sound. What a clever bit of business, he thought. A few swipes from the scissors, a single strip of transparent tape, and the butter girl had been undressed.

What a clever bit of business! With scissors and tape the infinite regress is interrupted, the woman's breasts revealed. Just so in the novel, for X who writes the novel itself is and is *not* the same as the Ferguson who emerges from it. The story is just "more or less his own story, since he too would become a fictionalized version of himself." The novel undresses the butter girl, disrupting the self-duplicating operation and revealing it to be itself and yet, now, also something else—*showing* us the ontological legerdemain, letting us into the play of presentation and representation, letting us *experience* it as part of its operation. For just as Ferguson-not-Ferguson imagines Ferguson, his story is told, too, by a narrator, who focalizes and meditates upon the character but is not him, and the characters are imagined by (and share geography and chronology with<sup>8</sup>) Paul Auster, who is, in turn, Paul-Auster-not-Paul-Auster, and read and imagined by my father and myself, ourselves and not ourselves (both Spencers, whose name is not Spencer, who might wonder if any of the other Łódź Schnitzers survived and remembered stories of Schmucl, and if their great-grandchildren are alive today)—and read, now, in turn, by you. We are not the self-same characters mirrored unto infinity, but many characters and selves and versions of selves telling our own and others' stories, absorbed by the novel and musing about its metafictional machinations, crossing layers of description, enacting the "sameness-in-difference" that Hofstadter famously explores through Escher drawings,

Bach canons, and mathematical recursion, in which "the events on different levels *aren't* exactly the same—rather, we find some invariant feature in them, despite many ways in which they differ."<sup>9</sup> For the Strange Loop is, as Hofstadter describes, the essence of consciousness itself.

We both inhabit and read the *Book of Terrestrial Life*, as it is called in *4 3 2 1*, and we learn, with the 4 Fergusons, that it's not linear, but travels in many directions—that "while all people were bound together by the common space they shared, their journeys through time were all different, which meant that each person lived in a slightly different world from everyone else." My great-grandfather Schmucl/Samuel and I live in different worlds, and although he came before me, I am sitting on the stoop of 176 Rivington Street as I write him into my own story, in the same-yet-different way that Paul Auster writes a speculative version of *his* family into his novels, pondering, perhaps, what might have happened if his own father had not been named Samuel, as indeed he was, or had not died young, as indeed he did. For my part, I wonder how my father's story is embedded, here, within mine—and mine within his—and how they both might have turned out otherwise. *Such an interesting thought*, I say to myself: *imagine how things could be different for me even though I am the same*. What are the chances that I'd be the same if my father hadn't become a mathematician, or hadn't been drawn to the probabilistic method? What are the chances that my father's own mathematical father—Paul Erdős—is sitting once more at the feet of the Statue of Anonymous in Budapest's *Városliget* with his friends from university, young again, now turning the pages of "The Book" of all perfect and beautiful theorems, a reward for a lifetime of proving and conjecturing? *Yes, anything is possible, and just because things happen in one way doesn't mean they couldn't happen in another. Everything could be different.*

It's a crafty but now-familiar trope to use self-reflexivity to describe itself, so I won't twist around like a wily ouroboros and generate the beginning of this essay here at the end, although I'll tell you that the contemporary White Rock Seltzer sprite still kneels on her rocky ledge (her breasts now demurely covered with a one-shouldered tunic) and I'll indulge in at least one self-referential statement about my own writerly decisions. And I'll tell you that if I take scissors and tape to *4 3 2 1*, I do so out of respect and love, as it's mine, too—just as we both, you and I, are on the pages of *The Book of Terrestrial Life*, which is also not quite *The Book of Terrestrial Life*, haunted by the lives that are not lived, by the *secret ghosts who walk beside us as we stumble into the future*.

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- <sup>1</sup> Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, New York, Basic Books, 1979, p. 154. For a study of the mathematics of the Droste effect through the artwork of M. C. Escher, see B. de Smit and H. W. Lenstra Jr., “The Mathematical Structure of Escher’s ‘Print Gallery’” in *Artful Mathematics: The Heritage of M. C. Escher*, *Notices of the AMS* 50(4) (April 2003), 446–457, and <http://escherdroste.math.leidenuniv.nl>. The effect is also featured on *La vache qui rit* (The Laughing Cow) cheese spread packaging, Cracker Jacks, and Morton Salt, among others. As Hofstadter recounts, the “Morton Salt girl” was a source of fascination in childhood, and “when I took my children to Holland and we visited the park called “Madurodam” [...] which contains dozens of beautifully constructed miniature replicas of famous buildings from all over Holland, I was most disappointed to see that there was no miniature replica of Madurodam itself, containing, of course, a yet tinier replica, and so on... I was particularly surprised that this lacuna existed in Holland, of all places—not only the native land of M. C. Escher, but also the home of Droste’s famous hot chocolate, whose box, much like the Morton’s Salt box, implicated itself in an infinite regress, something that all Dutch people grow up knowing very well.” Douglas R. Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*, New York, Basic Books, 2007, p. 59. Later he clarifies that the Morton Salt girl’s hand is in fact blocking the image on the box—so it’s “self-reference without infinite regress!” (pp. 144–145).
- <sup>2</sup> See Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths” (translated by D. A. Yates) In D. A. Yates & J. E. Irby (eds.), *Labyrinths*, New York, New Directions, 2007, pp. 19–29. When *4 3 2 1*’s Archie #4 acknowledges that he hasn’t yet read Borges, his Princeton literature professor replies, “What fun awaits you, Ferguson.” (p. 495).
- <sup>3</sup> In *The Pleasure of the Text* Roland Barthes associates what he calls the “readerly” text with *plaisir*, or pleasure: the satisfaction of consuming, of consummating readerly desire, of gratifying one’s expectations in keeping with cultural norms. In contrast, he describes the “writerly” text as one associated with *jouissance*, understood as an orgasmic bliss, an inexhaustible excess; it is the text “that

imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.” (Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller, New York, The Noonday Press, 1989, p. 14) In these terms, the experience of reading *4 3 2 1* can be said to traverse from the realm of readerly to writerly text as one encounters the metafictional devices.

<sup>4</sup> James Wood, Shallow Graves: The novels of Paul Auster, *The New Yorker* (November 30, 2009), 82–85.

<sup>5</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (translated by Jane Lewin) Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 236.

<sup>6</sup> “The ‘Strange Loop’ phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started.” Stated another way: “A Tangled Hierarchy occurs when what you presume are clean hierarchical levels take you by surprise and fold back in a hierarchy-violating way. The surprise element is important; it is the reason I call Strange Loops ‘strange.’” Hofstadter, 1979, pp. 18, 686. See also Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York, Taylor and Francis, 2003, and the short story, “Continuity of the Parks,” in Julio Cortázar, *Blow-Up: And Other Stories* (translated by Paul Blackburn) New York, Pantheon Books, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Dorrit Cohn, Metalepsis and Mise en Abyme, translated by Lewis S. Gleich, *Narrative* 20(1), (January 2012), pp. 105–114, p. 111. In Hofstadter’s analysis, this type of disquiet is produced when “something in the system jumps out and acts on the system, as if it were outside the system. What bothers us is perhaps an ill-defined sense of topological wrongness: the inside-outside distinction is being blurred, as in the famous shape called a ‘Klein bottle.’” (Hofstadter, 1979, p. 686).

<sup>8</sup> As Auster describes, “It’s really not me at all, even though the interest of the Fergusons seemed to overlap with mine. I think of this book as sharing my geography and sharing my chronology, but it’s really not at all my story.” (*1 Character, 4 Different Lives In Paul Auster’s ‘4 3 2 1’*, February 6, 2017, NPR, Washington, DC).

<sup>9</sup> Hofstadter, 1979, p. 149.