

## The Fiction of Ong's Hat: Too Good to be False

Jayaditya Deep

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In his essay, Jayaditya “Jojo” Deep analyzes conflicting research about the psychology of conspiracy theorists. In his introduction, Jojo details a hypothetical scenario that immediately captivates a reader’s attention and creates an understanding of how conspiracy theories propagate. Continuing, Jojo uses this hypothetical scenario to lay the context of his main conspiracy of study—Ong’s Hat—before explaining how this case sheds light on the related psychological literature.*

### *Excerpt*

Imagine yourself in the mid 1990’s. You are surfing the internet and you come across a man by the name of Joseph Matheny. A few clicks later, you arrive at a brochure entitled “Ong’s Hat: Gateway to Higher Dimensions.” You find that he is a self-proclaimed secret agent, attempting to uncover and communicate the truth about Ong’s Hat, an overly wooded ghost town located in New Jersey. The truth, as he explains, is that a few members of society, notably Princeton physicists, have discovered the secret to interdimensional travel and are using Ong’s Hat as the location for their projects.<sup>1</sup> You then come across an article in Boing-Boing, a widely read print blog at the time, where Matheny interviews prominent Stanford-educated physicist and quantum mechanics specialist Nick Herbert.<sup>2</sup> In the interview, Herbert discusses various quantum theories of his, and when the elements of the Ong’s Hat research was brought up by Matheny, Herbert hastily ended the interview saying, “there are some questions you should not ask, ever.”<sup>3</sup> You understandably decide that there must be more to Ong’s Hat than a joke if all of this theory is involved and especially if the most qualified of scientists want to keep it top secret. Given that the documents pertaining to Ong’s Hat had been downloaded over 2 million times, you certainly were not alone.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph Matheny is a fiction storyteller who was able to invest the casual commuters of 1990s web traffic into his fictional world. In a 2006 interview, however, Matheny claimed that his intention was never to trick people into believing that the tale of Ong’s Hat was true.<sup>5</sup> Rather, he was simply attempting to create an enthralling story. When it became known to

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<sup>1</sup> Oelbaum, Jed. “Ong’s Hat: The Early Internet Conspiracy Game That Got Too Real.”

<sup>2</sup> Morrill, Dan. *Boom and Bust in the Blogosphere: Case Studies of the Blogging Industry*.

<sup>3</sup> “BOING BOING Issue 11 - The Brain Mutator for Higher Primates : Happy Mutants : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming.”

<sup>4</sup> Frisch, Benjamin and Willa Paskin. “How Do You Start a Conspiracy Theory?”

<sup>5</sup> New World Disorder Magazine: An Interview With Joseph Matheny.

Matheny that some of the consumers of his fiction were taking his work to be real, he categorized the Ong's Hat tale as "a teeth grinding obsession for a pathetic few and a fun run for an intelligent and vast majority."<sup>6</sup> This insinuates that Matheny felt that his work made it abundantly clear it was just fiction. Who would believe in a club of scientists devising elaborate alternate dimension travel plans from the middle of the woods in New Jersey? According to Matheny, only a "pathetic few," only the individuals whose thinking deranged from the majority.

This might seem like a brash, offhand comment about the certain individuals who believed in the story; however, the idea that conspiracy theory believers have an inherently different psychology is a firm belief of many scholars. As Matheny suggested was the case for believers in the Ong's Hat story, perhaps it can be generalized that it is the "unintelligent," "pathetic few" who tend to believe in obvious fiction as conspiracy theories. If this were the case, then we would expect these individuals to tend towards conspiracies in an attempt to gain a simplified version of real and complex events. Specifically, for Ong's Hat, we would then expect people to believe in the accounts of physicists building an "Egg" to travel to other dimensions because the story that Matheny created was easier to read and understand than actual physics research papers. However, based on a 1999 study carried out by Marina Abalakina-Paap, Walter Stephan, and colleagues from New Mexico State University and Purdue University, no correlation was found between belief in conspiracies and a desire for simplified explanations.<sup>7</sup> In this same study, it was also found that low levels of self-esteem were correlated to belief in some conspiracies.<sup>8</sup> This is in contrast to the findings of Kent State psychologist Aleksandra Cichocka in "Does Self-Love or Self-Hate Predict Conspiracy Beliefs? Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and the Endorsement of Conspiracy Theories." By surveying hundreds of MTurk workers across three studies, Cichocka found that increased levels of narcissism, notably opposite to low self-esteem, is an indicator for both general conspiracy theory tendencies and specific conspiracy theory belief.<sup>9</sup> While it may be true that extreme cases of certain psychology traits lend themselves to increased conspiracy theory ideation, the conflicting findings across the literature suggest it is difficult to pin down certain psychologies as significant indicators for conspiracy belief for the average person.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Abalakina-Paap, Marina, Walter G. Stephan, Traci Craig, and W. Larry Gregory. "Beliefs in Conspiracies."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Cichocka, Aleksandra, Marta Marchlewska, and Agnieszka Golec de Zavala. "Does Self-Love or Self-Hate Predict Conspiracy Beliefs? Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and the Endorsement of Conspiracy Theories."

## *Author Commentary*

Jayaditya Deep

“Most writers, poets in especial, prefer having it understood that they compose by species of fine frenzy, an ecstatic intuition, and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought.”

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” is perhaps the most subconsciously influential piece I’ve read about writing, ever. From Poe, I learned that good writing couldn’t be produced in a feverish sprint of typing, and it certainly couldn’t be attributed to random chance. Producing quality work is instead the result of a methodical process that requires planning both in mind and on paper and care given to wording and phrasing. I read “The Philosophy of Composition” for the first time in high school, and the idea of his which has impacted my writing the most is the concept of “unity of effect,” that all components of a written piece should be working together to invoke a specific and chosen emotional response from the audience as they conclude reading. In fact, Poe went as far as to say that one should not even begin writing until this desired effect on the reader is realized.

Once this desired effect is seized, the question of implementation arises; this is where the introduction comes into play. In my view, the introduction of an essay carries hints of what is to come and promises of what will be able to be taken away from the piece. Following Poe’s understanding, my goal when writing introductions, then, is to give a promissory note containing a semblance of the emotional takeaway that I’d like the audience to have.

In the brainstorming process while coming up with my essay, “The Fiction of Ong’s Hat: Too Good to be False,” I wanted to fray the idea of the “gullible and stupid person susceptible to conspiracy theories” and introduce the opposite point of view: “the incredibly convincing and aware conspiracy theories acting on people.” Maybe the hardest thing for a human to do is to truly understand why other people believe different things, and a subset of this was essentially what I wanted to uncover through my essay. In fact, when I first saw the outline of the Ong’s Hat conspiracy, I laughed at the idea of people actually believing in this stuff. But as I read more and more about it and fell deeper and deeper into archives carrying various misleading articles and fictional interviews, I felt a change of heart. Instead of laughing, I sympathized with these users during the dawn of the internet age. This sympathy, I realized, was in part the response I hoped to evoke in my audience, and I, personally, was only able to achieve it after putting myself in the

shoes of a person in the mid-1990s getting sucked into the conspiracy. So, attempting to mirror my journey in the introduction, I set out to generate a thought experiment for the audience.

The initial question is that of conviction: how will the audience come to be convinced of the same things I have come to be? The answer: using the same evidence. During the research process, I would jot down notes recounting the important points of each paper and *how they made me feel*, so when I sat down to write the introduction with a desired effect in mind, really every piece of the puzzle was already there. My next step was arranging these bits of conviction and prose to path the audience's frame of mind. As writers, the ultimate objective is to make the reader think of something in a new way, and to do this effectively requires anticipating how the reader will feel when first introduced to the ideas at play. In the case of believing in Ong's Hat, that feeling is skepticism. So, the flow of my introduction became acknowledging this feeling and then trying to use the aforementioned evidence to introduce (pun intended) the desired effect. From here, the goal is that the rest of the essay can carry the torch lit by the introduction.

*Editor Commentary*

Alex Charles

Starting a paper is often the hardest step of academic writing. First and foremost, the introduction of an essay bears the burden of drawing the audience in. While the entirety of the paper may be brilliantly argued, it is the first few lines of the piece that may determine the merit of the entire work. At the highest level, these few sentences not only orient the reader to the broad subject matter of the essay, but they also present this material as particularly intriguing and worthy of interest. Beyond just a captivating hook, however, the entirety of the introduction must hold the reader's attention. Succinctly and efficiently, it must educate and orient the reader on the existing literature of the subject. Narrowing the focus, the author must present the motive behind their argument and their argument itself. All these tasks are incredibly conceptually difficult. To accomplish each well requires sufficient brainstorming, outlining, and revising. In his essay, Jayaditya "Jojo" Deep offers an exemplary final product of that very process.

"Imagine yourself in the mid-1990's," Jojo opens his essay. Right from the start Jojo intends to captivate his reader by placing them directly into a hypothetical scenario. Throughout the rest of the paragraph, Jojo narrows the hypothetical, introducing relevant characters and sources. I found this first paragraph to be particularly noteworthy because of the subtle work it accomplishes. While at first glance it reads like a guided narrative, in truth it lays the contextual groundwork for the essay as any normative introduction would. As he explains himself, Jojo's intent was to both educate readers about the subject of his essay—the conspiracy theory—while providing them with an understanding of how many individuals were duped into believing it.

The second paragraph continues from the first, explaining the origin behind the Ong's Hat conspiracy in a more direct fashion. It is the third paragraph, however, where the essay turns into a true academic piece and all the moving parts come together. Broadening his scope from an example conspiracy, Jojo introduces a new hypothesis: that perhaps people who believe in conspiracy theories are psychologically predisposed to do so. To concretize this hypothesis—and build his motive—Jojo introduces several scholars and their studies, noting conflicting findings and results. Consequently, in three paragraphs Jojo establishes the context of the case study he examines in his essay, generating an understanding of the process by which individuals often get involved in conspiracies, and situates this case study within the literature surrounding the psychology behind conspiracy believers. Noticeably, however, it is the intrigue of the very first sentence that lures the reader further down the rabbit hole of the Ong's Hat conspiracy theory.

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## **Bios**

**Jayaditya Deep, '23**, who goes by “Jojo,” is currently studying math and creative writing at Princeton. He is from Natchitoches, Louisiana, and at times he wishes it were a tad warmer up here. He enjoys a good laugh (who doesn't) and is a big fan of comedy. Outside of academics, Jojo loves competing in sports, watching movies, trying new foods, and being with friends and family. He wrote this essay as a freshman.

**Alex Charles, '22** is currently studying in the School of Political and International Affairs. He is a member of the men's soccer team, an avid music fan, and enjoys volunteering and mentoring in his free time. He wrote this as a or sophomore, etc.