

‘Jonas in Frames’ by Chris Hutchinson

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Before reading Chris Hutchinson’s new book, *Jonas in Frames*, which on its cover is referred to as an epic, I prepared a bit by reviewing the markings familiar to the likes of *Beowulf* and *Ulysses*. Though I went on to find vast settings, divine intervention, and a (questionable) hero who embodies the values of his society, Hutchinson’s disjointed narrative imposed a reading similar to navigating the miasma of endless possibilities of Google search results. Even with the preparation, I had failed to anticipate a nosedive into a crash course in modernism framed for the Internet age.

In Hutchinson’s bio on the last page, *Jonas in Frames* is referred to as his fourth book of poetry and first novel. Therein lay a clue that I was in for something more complex than a traditional reading of a specific genre. Both the bio and back-cover blurbs from Michael Turner and Alayna Munce clued me further into Hutchinson as a writer and character much like his Jonas: well-traveled, informed and witty, but scattered against the impossibility of his self-research ever coming to an end.

At this point, my impressions had added up to the deconstruction of one frame, in its traditional four square corners, with the potential for it to be rebuilt into something completely new and amorphous, perhaps many times before I finished reading.

To call Jonas a hero would fit the epic trope, though he is more of an observer than an actor, digressing from meaningful character building as he resists claiming an identity or place as his own. In “Relationship,” he describes himself to a potential lover simply as an artist, burdened with the modern demand of interdisciplinary tactics that make it difficult to settle on a singular identity.

The story itself is looking for a place to happen in a series of false starts, cul de sacs, and utter failures. Even at the beginning Jonas questions if his story will end without ever having begun, describing it as “all jitter, stutter, and skip.” Every postcard chapter/prose poem casts Jonas as a wanderer in new, or revisited settings across the globe, each a lateral or backwards movement between romances, failures to pay rent, or stay sober.

In “Too Far North,” he considers the people and places he has abandoned throughout his travels, and sets himself down in the Yukon where he claims a blank slate and questions if he can consider himself and others as anything other than passers-by. To say that he “follows his bliss” would be inaccurate. Rather, he is in a ready state of escapism, ill equipped to confront his missteps but perfectly suited to discard his past and “pretend a new existence.” He’s much like a Russian nesting doll, where each smaller version of himself is held within, and compartmentalized from the larger ones.

Jonas as an anti-hero would certainly fit the modernist trope. Mopey, uninitiated, a poet and self-described “rugged individualist”: it certainly seems to fit. Not to mention how Jonas often keeps a banana on hand, much like Sam Beckett’s solipsistic and eponymous protagonist in *Krapp’s Last Tape*.

Jonas could easily be recast as a hacker-addict in a William Gibson-esque cyberpunk novel. What may be missing is an Ethernet port to the back of his skull, where he could jack in and dissolve into the frameless, collective unconscious of cyberspace. As he struggles with an artistic identity, he finds the only work he can get as a writer is on

a porn site of choice, describing the contents of the videos beneath thumbnail images:

The trick is to front load the descriptions with appropriate key words in order to optimize search engine results: missionary; doggy style; double reverse cowgirl; 360 bigspin to spread-eagle nosegrind, etc. ... In the world of virtual flesh, the combinations and permutations are endless – and Jonas sometimes gets carried away...

It's here that we see how Hutchinson's epic anti-hero embodies the society he represents: dependent on technology, but lacking in real human connection. It's the first-world problem of being all dressed up with everywhere to go, the alienation of everything one could possibly want, but "nothing I actually love, or need to survive."

Throughout the narrative, divine intervention manifests as a series of "Lab Notes" written by nameless beings influencing Jonas's calamity, offering another voice besides Jonas's as interesting bits of character study that add another layer of depth to the narrative. Often pairing with Jonas's personal revelations about his overachieving father and sickly mother, as well as those from failed romantic relationships and various unfulfilling occupations, they note their subject's attempts to push against the invisible frames imposed on him. While they make adjustments to ensure that his existentialist crisis is kept in check, it seems more often the case that Jonas's frame is self-maintained: "the more virulent the mutation, the more rigidly it is contained."

The quest eventually reveals itself late in the epic in moments of awareness and acceptance, inevitably concluding in a deflated sense of accomplishment – as a failure. Instead of frames being broken or discarded, they are instead reinforced and validated, giving Jonas the vision to perceive the truth of his being, as well as those who are observing him.

To call *Jonas in Frames* a novel would be inaccurate insofar as the style is concerned. Resembling chapters, the narrative fragments each represent distinct settings and individual calamities, which all contribute to a familiar sense of story arc. However, Hutchinson's style is indeed rooted in the heightened imagery and emotional effect of poetry. Accessed by transcendental verse, the mind does wander away from the common sense realm into a parallel world of

understanding. And perhaps therein lies Jonas's greatest psychic conflict as a poet: at which point does the mind cease to transcend, and instead begin to settle into a common sense realm?

A chimera of styles and influences, *Jonas in Frames* possesses the common tongue prosody of the already-cited Michael Turner's *Hard Core Logo* and the poetic reflection of Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*. Questionable as the character is, Hutchinson truly delivers us a hero for our times, one who diagnoses our first world problems with the hung-over vitriol of a punk rock lyricist who possesses a literary mind.

Despite the initial feeling of anomie in reading the book, I now feel somewhat at peace having realized it was likely intended. I am also mystified by the thought that like the compartmentalization of Jonas's "pretended existences," the smallest nesting doll at the very centre of a person's identity may not know its purpose any better than the largest, on the outside.