

# Famous Past Life Claims

A common stereotype concerning reincarnation is that people who claim to have lived before also claim to have been famous. This is by no means always the case. However, it is true that fantastical claims of lives as kings and queens, legendary heroes, great artists and other historical notables do abound – most likely inspired by whimsy, desire to impress or even mental health issues. Reincarnation researchers agree that the investigation of any such claims requires particular rigour, and attach little significance to the overwhelming majority, although a very small number of cases have been shown to be strong.

## Prevalence

Logic dictates that the prevalence of famous past life (FPL) claims should roughly match the historical prevalence of famous or prominent people in the general population. That is to say, they should be rare, and the more renowned the figure, the more infrequent the incidence.

This is the case with the database of some 1,700 solved children's cases investigated by [Ian Stevenson](#) and other contributing [reincarnation](#) researchers and stored at the [Division of Perceptual Studies](#) at the University of Virginia. ('Solved' in this context means that the person the subject remembers having been has been identified well beyond statistical doubt). Challenged by critics to address the issue of false cases, Stevenson, [Satwant Pasricha](#) and Godwin Samararatne published seven cases in which either the subjects were apparently deceiving themselves, villagers or families were fantasizing or dishonest, or, in one instance, a journalist had fabricated the story. Of these seven cases, three were of world-famous historical figures (Mahatma Gandhi, John F Kennedy and the biblical King David) and two of prominent local people,<sup>1</sup> illustrating clearly that specious cases often involve FPL claims.

[Hypnotic regression](#) therapist Helen Wambach carried out experiments in which she questioned entranced subjects about details of their remembered lives. She found the incidence of upper class lives to be somewhat realistic, that is, a small minority,<sup>2</sup> but the number was still higher than the true incidence – an anomaly that could be due to chance. Findings from hypnotic regression tend to be treated with caution by reincarnation researchers.

## History of FPL Claims

Possibly the first person on record to have claimed a FPL was the Greek philosopher Pythagoras (c 570-c 495 BCE), who according to Ovid said he had been the Trojan warrior Euphorbos in the Trojan War, providing a single verification: 'I recognized the shield I used to carry on my left arm, recently, in the temple of Juno at Argos, city of Abas.'<sup>3</sup>

The Roman emperor Caracalla (188-217) was said to have been obsessed with Alexander the Great, claiming that when he acquired the surname 'Augustus,'

Alexander 'came into his body' so as to live a longer life than he had in his original incarnation,<sup>4</sup> – a claim more akin to possession than reincarnation. Another Roman emperor, Julian the Apostate (c 331-363), who attempted to convert Rome from Christianity back to its traditional pagan beliefs, was accused by a Christian historian of claiming to be the reincarnation of Alexander, but there is some doubt that he actually did.<sup>5</sup>

The seventeenth century philosopher John Locke wrote that he knew of a man who claimed to have the soul of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, adding that 'in the post he filled, which was no inconsiderable one, he passed for a very rational man'.<sup>6</sup>

## Academically Published Cases

Reincarnation researcher [Jim Tucker](#) has written about two cases of children whose apparent previous incarnations were famous in their times.

### Lee / Sydney Coe Howard

Tucker was contacted by a mother who suspected her three-and-a-half-year-old son Lee (not his real name) was remembering a previous life. He had been insisting for a year that his middle name was 'Coe' and his birthday was 26 June, not 21 June, which is his recorded date of birth. He had also developed an obsessive fascination with Hollywood. When the parents asked if he had played in movies, he said he had written them, rather. They read down a list of movie titles, and he said he had written *Gone With the Wind*. The parents researched and found that the classic film had been written by Sydney Coe Howard, and that his birthday was 26 June. Lee also had phobias that seemed to relate to Howard's death at age 48, from being crushed against a foundation by a tractor. He was afraid of tractors, and also didn't like being caught between his mother and a piece of furniture, or anything tight around his upper body. However, he gave few details to verify, and during a visit with members of Howard's family at the farm where Howard had died, he showed no sign of recognition. By this time he was five and had stopped talking about his memories.<sup>7</sup>

### Hunter / Bobby Jones

The second case involves the boy Hunter (not his real name) who, having been given a set of plastic golf clubs on his second birthday, played with them incessantly. After catching a glimpse of the Golf Channel on television, he wanted to watch nothing else. Once when he happened to see an infomercial about a legendary American golfer of the 1920s, Bobby Jones, Hunter said he had been Jones when he was big, and began wanting to be called 'Bobby' instead of 'Hunter'. Deciding to test him, his mother showed him six photographs of 1920s golfers. Not only did he say 'That me' about the picture of Jones, but he pointed out another photo and said 'This, Harry Garden, my friend.' The pictured golfer's name was Harry Vardon. They also tested him with pictures of houses, and he recognized Jones's, saying 'home'. Hunter's golf skills were so prodigious that he was accepted at age two for instruction at a golf club that usually only accepts students at age

five. Several older golfers at the club remarked that his golf swing reminded them of Bobby Jones's. He also liked to design golf courses with his blankets, and his favourite golf course was Augusta National Golf Club, which Jones had founded and helped design. As of Tucker's writing, Hunter dominated the child golf circuit.[8](#)

## **Commercially Published Cases**

Informal FPL claims abound on social media and Internet forums. Several have been published in print, and a small number have been investigated by researchers. The following are some of the better-known examples, of varying degrees of persuasiveness.

### **AJ Stewart / James IV of Scotland**

AJ Stewart, born Ada Kay, is an English playwright who recalled from early childhood having being killed on a battlefield by blades and staves. By her own account, she was confused about why she was a girl, why her surname was not Stewart, and why she lived in a small house rather than a castle. As an adult she continued to feel like a male and dressed in a masculine way. She changed her surname to Stewart, and moved to Scotland. Her attempts to repress the memories failed, and she realized the incidents and surroundings matched the life of a king – specifically James IV of Scotland, of the Stewart clan. At the age of 38 she was invited to visit the site of the battle in which James had been killed, and she was able to lead others to the precise spot where he had died, having never visited the place before. Stewart wrote a past-life autobiography of James, presenting it as a historical novel,[9](#) and later a memoir which vividly describes not only her memories but also the sensations of having them.[10](#)

### **Barbro Karlen / Anne Frank**

Barbro Karlen is a Swedish writer who claims to have been the renowned adolescent diarist and Holocaust victim Anne Frank. By her own account,[11](#) she had nightmares as far back as she can remember, of men and dogs coming after her, kicking down the door of her small room. Aged two, she told her mother her name was not Barbro but Anne, and she wanted to be with her real parents. Like her claimed previous incarnation, she was a child prodigy writer; her first book of poetry and essays was published when she was twelve and remains popular in Sweden; by the time she was sixteen she had published eleven books. During a visit to Amsterdam at the age of ten, she was able to lead her parents to the house where Anne Frank had lived, and noticed accurately that the stairs had been changed and pictures that should be on a wall in Anne's former room were missing. She had no plans to reveal her FPL until she became the object of a vendetta by co-workers, and realized that it was a continuing pattern from her life as Anne, and that she had remembered in the first place so as to understand and overcome the pattern of being persecuted. By Karlen's account, she was introduced to the actor Buddy Elias, Anne Frank's last living relative, by a publisher who told neither of them who they were about to meet, and they recognized each other immediately. He supported her claim despite harsh criticism, and the two remain close.

## **Christian Haupt / Lou Gehrig**

Christian Haupt is an American born in 2008 who has been obsessed with baseball since he was a toddler, practicing constantly and insisting on wearing a baseball uniform as much as possible. In terms of skill, he is a child prodigy. According to Christian's mother, Cathy Byrd, he told her while he was still a toddler that he remembered being a 'tall baseball player', that he'd played for the New York Yankees, and that Babe Ruth had been mean to him (Ruth and his fellow American baseball legend Lou Gehrig had a longstanding feud). Christian also described details about major-league baseball in the 1920s and 1930s, the era in which Gehrig played, that were accurate. Byrd has published two versions of how she discerned that her son had been Gehrig. In a newspaper article in 2014,[12](#) she quotes him as saying that he had played for the New York Yankees and his favourite position was first base (Gehrig's position), and added that she had shown him a picture of Gehrig and another man. In her 2017 book about him and her own regression-based claim to have been Gehrig's mother,[13](#) Byrd writes that when shown a group picture of the team, Christian picked out Gehrig and said 'That's me.' Neither version contains the details found in the other. Tucker met Christian and his mother, but declined to investigate it. Plans for making her book into a major motion picture seem to be at a standstill.

## **Sherrie Lea Laird / Marilyn Monroe**

Sherrie Lea Laird is a Canadian rock singer who began claiming to be the reincarnation of Marilyn Monroe after a series of regression sessions with hypnotherapist Adrian Finkelstein, as recounted in a 2006 book by Finkelstein.[14](#) Laird claims to have had a sense as a child that she had lived before as a 1950s movie star. She had a mole above her left lip that she wanted removed, and her aunt said it was just like the one Marilyn Monroe had. Haunted by the notion she had been the ill-fated screen legend, she was tempted by suicide as a teen, but Finkelstein claims to have cured her and brought out more memories of Monroe's life. The case was well-promoted by Finkelstein and widely reported in the media.[15](#) Treated with skepticism on the Internet, Laird reacted with rage. On her current Facebook page, she calls herself 'Lady Sherrie Lea', promotes anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and supports the claim of a man who says he is Jesus reincarnated.[16](#)

## **Walter Semkiw / John Adams**

Walter Semkiw is a medical doctor and self-described reincarnation expert. He claims to have been John Adams, vice president of the United States of America under George Washington, based on a psychic reading, a perceived facial resemblance and personality similarities. Semkiw further claims that some sixty people he knows had past lives as people Adams knew.[17](#) He also claims to have matched scores of current celebrities to FPLs by the same three methods, using the trance channeler Kevin Ryerson.[18](#) The reading method is weak by parapsychological standards: rather than blinding Ryerson, (not letting him know the theorized answer prior to the reading), Semkiw simply asks him whether each identification is right or wrong.[19](#) Semkiw frequently references the work of

Stevenson in his works, but his own reincarnation cases entirely lack indications that Stevenson considered crucial: there are no recorded past-life memories, verifications, behavioral signs at any age, physical signs other than the supposed resemblances, announcing dreams, supporting witnesses, personal recognitions or place recognitions. These signs are only found in cases Semkiw cites that were developed by Stevenson and others.

### **Donald Norsic / Nicholas II of Russia**

Donald Norsic is an American art director in the advertising field who claims to have been Nicholas II, the last Tsar of Russia. In his autobiographical book<sup>20</sup> he tells of having been haunted for years by nightmares of being murdered, then remembering and verifying details of events and places of the Tsar's life. He reports some childhood precursors such as obsessively drawing crowns and being fascinated with the English royal family. However, Norsic's process of regression and verification was not tracked by a researcher or other independent party, and his memories, especially of the timing of the deaths of the family, conflict with the historic and forensic record. His claim to have been killed along with the rest of his family, in November 1918 rather than on 17 July 1918 as historians generally consider to be the case, is refuted by more recent findings.<sup>21</sup> Norsic also depends at times on somewhat tortuous coincidences, such as his surname being comprised of three letters that stand for 'Nicholas Of Russia' followed by the word 'sic', meaning 'exact replica thereof'. The title of the book is derived from Norsic's belief that he was personally responsible for the downfall of the Soviet Union by writing a predictive story in which it happens.

### **Laurel Phelan / Guinevere**

Laurel Phelan is a Canadian bookkeeper turned regression therapist who claims to have been Guinevere, wife of the legendary King Arthur. She published a book about her experiences with a mainstream publisher, a rare feat for an FPL claimant.<sup>22</sup> According to her, her memories started at age 21, with a gruesome scene of her killing a man with a dagger. In the story, she relates her memories as a solid narrative, including scenes where her claimed previous incarnation was not present, portraying Dark Ages Britain in a realistically harsh and primitive way. The weakness of her claim is that no trustworthy historic record or archaeological record of Guinevere exists. The primary source on Arthur is scant and portrays him as a warrior and war-leader more than a king; nor does it mention Guinevere,<sup>23</sup> who was created as a character in a pseudo-history of England by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century. <sup>24</sup>

## **Edgar Cayce's Claimed Identifications**

The renowned American clairvoyant Edgar Cayce performed hundreds of past-life readings for clients, and claimed to see many FPLs among their lives, including Alexander the Great and Thomas Jefferson (reincarnated as the same person), Noah, Helen of Troy, Marie Antoinette, Methuselah, Augustus Caesar and Ann Boleyn.<sup>25</sup> However, it has not been shown that any of these Cayce clients ever had any memories, verifications, behavioral signs or childhood precursors, and Cayce's

past-life readings show a degree of sameness that should not be present in a random sample of past lives. It has been noted that the lives cluster anomalously in certain patterns, particularly being set in Atlantis, ancient Egypt, medieval Europe, colonial America, and that the Atlantean, Egyptian and European lives tended to be of people in the political or spiritual elites.<sup>26</sup> One published past-life account based on a Cayce reading concerns the claimed reincarnation of suffragist leader Frances Willard.<sup>27</sup>

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## Literature

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1](#). Stevenson, Pasricha, & Samararatne (1988).
- [2](#). Wambach (1978).
- [3](#). Ovid, *Metamorphoses*.
- [4](#). Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Historiae Romanae*. Many thanks to Melissa Gold for translating the passage.
- [5](#). Smith (2011).
- [6](#). Locke (1694/1975).
- [7](#). Tucker (2014), 122.
- [8](#). Tucker (2014), 130.
- [9](#). Stewart (1970).
- [10](#). Stewart (1978).
- [11](#). Karlen (2000).
- [12](#). Bryd [sic] (2014).
- [13](#). Byrd (2017).
- [14](#). Finkelstein (2007).
- [15](#). e.g., [BBC](#); [Independent](#); [Los Angeles Times](#).
- [16](#). <https://www.facebook.com/sherrie.blakk>.
- [17](#). Semkiw (2011a).
- [18](#). Semkiw w. Ryerson (n.d.).

- [19](#). Semkiw (2011b).
- [20](#). Norsic (1997).
- [21](#). See Massie (2012).
- [22](#). Phelan (1997).
- [23](#). Nennius (eighth century CE).
- [24](#). Geoffrey of Monmouth (twelfth century CE).
- [25](#). Curtis (n.d.).
- [26](#). Melton (1994).
- [27](#). Furst (1971).

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