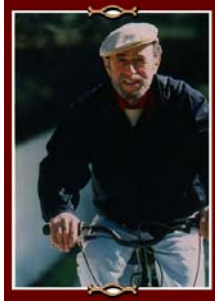


YHBA Novel Resource

Escape! The Story of the Great Houdini
Sid Fleischman
Greenwillow Books
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers
2006

Amy Nelson

About the Author



www.sidfleischman.com

Sid Fleischman is an award winning novelist. He has won the Newberry Medal for *The Whipping Boy*. He became a magician in the fifth grade, and then took his act on the stage. His interest in magic led him to a friendship with Bess Houdini, the widow of Harry Houdini. Sid Fleischman was born in Brooklyn, New York, and raised in California. Fleischman says that it was his children that led him to write for children. He has 60 books to his credit, and currently lives in Santa Monica, California.

Other books from Sid Fleischman include: *The Abracadabra Kid*, *The Entertainer and the Dybbuk*, *Bandit's Moon*, *The Whipping Boy*, *The White Elephant*

Honors for *Escape!*:

*New York Public Library's "One Hundred Titles for Reading and Sharing"

*School Library Journal Best Book

*ALA Best Book for Young Adults

*ALA Notable Children's Book
New York Public Library Books
for the Teen Age

*Boston Globe–Horn Book Award
Honor Book

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Annotation

Author Sid Fleischman has 60 books to his credit, and is well known for his work in fiction. He has won multiple awards for children's literature. He uses his unique abilities of his fiction writing in this work for non-fiction. This book is filled with interesting facts and inside information from the world of magicians. This is a very entertaining biography.

Harry Houdini (1874-1926) was born Ehrich Weiss, the son of a poor rabbi born in Hungary. This book shows the evolution of the creation of Harry Houdini from Ehrich Weiss. Houdini ran away from home at the age of twelve hoping to have enough money to send home to his struggling family. In his teens he moved to New York City and discovers magic, and he changes his name to Harry Houdini. The name Houdini came from the French magician Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin. Through a lot of hard work and a little luck, Harry Houdini becomes the most famous escape artist and debunker of Spiritualism of all time.

This is a great book to not only learn about the life and work of Harry Houdini, but also touches on anti-Semitism, fame, and Spiritualism. It is through his interest and work in magic that led him to a friendship with Houdini's widow. Sid Fleischman has a professional connection to the material, and a personal one. And it shows in the thoroughness of his work.

There is a great bibliography for those who want to learn more about Harry Houdini, and the world of magic. The only concern that I have is the vocabulary. It is written in an easy-going style that makes it accessible to students in grades 6-8; however, it is filled with difficult to understand words. There needs to be a concerted effort on the part of the instructor to explain many vocabulary words.

Genre:

Non-fiction/Biography/Magic

Point of View:

Sid Fleischman writes this biography with a clear love for magic, and Houdini, while trying to get to know the real Houdini, not the just the ego-filled legend. This book is in third person.

Theme:

The theme of *Escape!* Is quite simple: to adequately portray the life of Harry Houdini. Sid Fleischman does not want to propagate the misconceptions about Houdini from his ardent supporters. Not everything that has been said about Harry Houdini is correct. Not everything Houdini said about himself was true. Sid Fleischman also did not take the side of his critics who said that Houdini was just a show person and a hack as a magician. Fleischman's goal was to peak interest in Houdini and magic: warts and all.

The Title: Harry Houdini was a famous escape artist.

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Conflict:

The conflicts in the biography *Escape!* are those personal to Harry Houdini. One conflict is with his mother-in-law, Mrs. Rahner, a Catholic, who did not like her daughter marrying a Jewish man. She did not have anything to do with the couple for twelve years.

Another conflict that Houdini endured was with his imitators; other escape artists and magicians who called themselves Whodini, Oudini, and Hardini.

Houdini, with his love of magic and showmanship, campaigned against Spiritualism which he felt was taking advantage of innocent believers. This led to a loss of friendship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was a believer of Spiritualism.

Resolution

Unfortunately, many of the conflicts were not resolved. Houdini's friendship with Doyle did not survive the differences they had over Spiritualism. Because he was so successful, Houdini had to deal with copy-cat escape artists which he sued in court. He also would out-due his own tricks so that they evolved in new stunts to keep up with copy-cats. The only conflict that seemed to be resolved in a positive way was when his mother-in law reconciled with her daughter, and moved in with the Houdini's.

Characters

Harry Houdini- World-renowned magician known for his stunts and feats of escape.

Ehrich Weiss- Harry Houdini's given name

Rabbi Mayer Samuel Weiss- Harry Houdini's father

Cecilia Steiner Weiss- Harry Houdini's mother

Theodore (Dash) Weiss- Harry Houdini's brother and fellow escape artist.

Bess Houdini- Harry Houdini's wife. She also worked on stage with him

Martin Beck- The person who booked the Houdini's for the Orpheum circuit of theaters. He becomes the manager for the Houdini's early in their career.

Harry Day- London agent for the Houdini's. He books acts for the Houdini's in Europe.

Edward Saint -He was a conservator of Houdini's legacy, ran Bess Houdini's business affairs, and saved many Houdini's clippings & photographs. He ran the séance on the 10th Anniversary of Houdini's death.

Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin-French magician who modernized magic. Houdini's hero, and the person Houdini name himself after.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle-Author & creator of Sherlock Holmes. Friends with Houdini until they disagreed about the topic of Spiritualism.

Setting

The setting of *Escape!* is mobile. The book follows Houdini and his travels from Europe to Wisconsin, Texas to Montreal. Harry Houdini did live in New York City and Appleton Wisconsin, as well as spent over four years traveling in Europe. **Time frame:** 1874-1926

Interest Level:

9 -15 years old

Reading Level:

9-12 years old

Booktalk

Escape! The story of the Great Houdini, is a biography of Harry Houdini who is one of the best know historical figures today, even though he died 82 years ago. That is for one reason: he is a legend.

Harry Houdini was a man who could walk through walls and make an elephant disappear He was a phenomenal escape artist who could escape from jail cells, handcuffs, and straightjackets even while hanging upside down.

But who is this Harry Houdini who claimed to have been born in Wisconsin? Where was he actually born? Was Houdini his real name? When he was stuffed into a milk can filled with water, and he lowered his head under the water, with the lid was secured with locks, was this to be his death scene? After 30 seconds locked in this milk can, the audience did not hear or see Houdini emerge from the can. After 60 seconds they did not see or hear from him. Had something gone wrong? Was he drowning? It would take another two minutes to find out Houdini's fate.

By the end of the book, we know the more about the person Harry Houdini, as well as the remarkable showman Harry Houdini. But most importantly, we find out if he survives his time in the milk can.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 1

He Was Born, But Where?

Pre-Reading:

I would use Anticipation Guide

During:

1. What is the Milk Can Escape? Pg 7
2. What made Harry Houdini so famous in Australia? Pg 8
3. What is significant about the day Houdini died? Pg 10

Post Reading:

List 4 things you would like to know about Houdini.

Chapter 2

From Rags to Rags

Pre-Reading:

If you could change anything about yourself what would you change?

During:

1. What is Harry Houdini's real name? Pg 12
2. Who real-life person did Houdini get his stage name? Why? Pg 13
3. Where did Houdini say he was born? Where was he really born? Pg 13 & 15

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Post-Reading:

Imagine you have just moved to a new school and could create a new identity. What would be your new identity?

Chapter 3*King of the Necktie Cutters***Pre-Reading:**

What hobbies and interests to you have? How do you pursue them?

During:

1. Why is Mrs. Flitcoft important? Pg 19
2. What factors may have contributed to Houdini liking magic? Pg 25

Post-Reading:

Identify issues that immigrants faced when coming to the United States. What is an American?

Chapter 4*The Pygmalion of East 69th Street***Pre-Reading:**

What is the difference between being famous and being successful: celebrity vs. talent

During:

1. Explain the illusion “Metamorphosis. Pg. 32
2. Did this trick make him famous? Why or why not? Pg 34

Post-Reading:

What would you do to be famous? What do you need to be famous?

Chapter 5*Dressing Up the Act***Pre-Reading:**

What was Houdini’s life like as a child?

During:

1. Who did Harry Houdini marry? Pg 40
2. What superstitions did Houdini have? Pg 41
3. What did he buy in Nova Scotia and how was it instrumental to his success? Pg 50

Post-Reading:

Make a timeline of Harry Houdini’s life so far using 7-10 events.

Chapter 6*Magic for Sale!***Pre-Reading:**

Go to www.sidfleischman.com/magicktrick To perform a card trick: let students try as well

During:

1. In Kansas, Houdini changed his act to make it more profitable. What did he start doing? Pg 55
2. Why did he change back to an escape artist? Pg 56

Post-Reading:

What would be willing to give up to be famous?

Chapter 7

Mr. Beck Beckons

Pre-Reading:

Has anyone ever dared you to do anything? What was it? Did you do it? How did you feel?

During:

1. Why did Houdini always check handcuffs before putting them on? Pg 62
2. How did his act change after meeting Martin Beck? Pg 65

Post-Reading:

Make your own Houdini advertising poster. In the time of Houdini, there was no television or internet in which to advertise or get your story to people. Colorful posters were used to advertise exciting events. Make your own poster advertising Houdini coming to perform in your town. What stunt, and information would you put on your poster? Think about your audience, use of color, and design before beginning.

Chapter 8

Don't Walk on the Grass

Pre-Reading:

Look up magic world records in books or the internet.

During:

1. How did Houdini convince the London theater, Alhambra, to book him as an act? Pg 71
2. What addition to the 'escaping from shackles act' did he put in while in Dresden? Pg 74
3. How long did he stay in Europe? Why did he stay as long as he did? Pg 76

Post-Reading:

With a map of Europe, trace Houdini's travels.

Chapter 9

The Queens Dress

Pre-Reading:

Have you met your hero? How was the experience? If you haven't met your hero, how would you like it to go?

During:

1. How did Houdini escape from the safe in the German Court? Why was he even in there? Pg 80
2. What did Houdini begin to collect while in Europe? Pg 82
3. What kind of reception did Houdini receive from Robert-Houdin family? How did that make him feel? Pg 83

Post-Reading:

How do you think Houdini would have like to have been received by the Houdin family?

Chapter 10

The Siberian Mystery

Pre-Reading:

What is Anti-Semitism?

During:

1. What was significant about Houdini being in Moscow? Pg 84
2. What did Houdini attempt to escape from while in Russia? Pg 85
3. Why did Houdini accept so many challenges? Pg 90

Post-Reading:

Research Czar Nicholas II and pogroms

Chapter 11*Double-Crossing***Pre-Reading:**

Have you ever had to talk to someone you didn't like? How did you get through it?

During:

1. Did Houdini's mother-in-law accept him? How do you know? Pg 99-100

Post-Reading:

Write what you think happened when Bess Houdini reconciled with her mother.
What might have been said or done?

Chapter 12*The Ink-Stained Wretch***Pre-Reading:**

What does it mean to re-invent yourself? What does that process look like?

During:

1. Back in New York, what famous jail cell did Houdini try to escape from? Why was it famous?
Pg 101

2. What is a ghostwriter? Pg 103

3. What was the name of the magazine Houdini started? Pg 106

Post-Reading:

Why do you think that there were more men than women watching Houdini's events?

Chapter 13*The Life Expectancy of an Eggshell***Pre-Reading:**

What is a fad? Why do they fade?

During:

1. Could Houdini untie ropes with his toes? Pg 113

2. Name three things that Houdini escaped from. Pg 114

3. What does "Great success make great demands mean?" Pg 115

Post-Reading:

An historian in the film notes of Houdini, "He confronted our deepest fears." Ask students what they think this means. Introduce the concept of voyeurism: Why might people want to see an act such as Houdini's? How did it make students feel? Who might benefit and who might be harmed by such actions? Are there people such as Houdini today? (pbs.org)

Chapter 14*Unmasking an Icon***Pre-Reading:**

Has someone ever disappointed you? How did you feel?

During

1. Why do you think that Houdini wrote a book critical of his idol Robert-Houdin? Pg 128

Post Reading:

How real were Houdini's talents?

Chapter 15*Walking Through a Brick Wall***Pre-Reading:**

What is a fad? Name fads from your parents. What fads of today that will not be popular tomorrow?

During:

1. What does "Today's sensation is tomorrow's burnt toast" mean? Pg 130

Post Reading:

Where do you get your information on celebrities? What is "buzz"? How is it generated? Does the public see talent or marketing?

Chapter 16*One Elephant to Go***Pre-Reading**

What do celebrities do to support troops in time of conflict? Do you think it helps their moral?

During:

1. What trick did Houdini do for World War One troops? How much did he give away? Why did he do this? Pg 140

Post-Reading:

Research other magicians. How do they feel about Houdini?

Chapter 17*The Movie Star***Pre-Reading:**

Houdini was emblematic of the 1920s. His act increased in daring throughout his career; he reached the height of risk-taking in the '20s, mirroring much of American society's behavior at large. Then ask students to research photographs and stories about other risky activities from this era, such as airplane wing-walking. Also consider the similarities and differences between the '20s and the '90s, and the growth of extreme sports. (pbs.org)

During:

1. What was the name of the character in Houdini's first movie series? Pg 145

2. Why weren't his movies as successful as his live-action stunts? Pg 154

Post-Reading:

How is Houdini's celebrity like celebrities of today? How is it different?

Chapter 18*The Man Who Fooled Sherlock Holmes***Pre-Reading:**

Read about the WWI conditions faced by the troops.

During:

1. How did Houdini regard séance? Pg 154

2. How did Houdini expose George Rennan? Pg 155

3. What historical event made Spirituality easy to believe? Pg 158

Post Reading:

What do you think was more satisfying to Houdini, being an escape artist or combating Spiritualism?

Chapter 19*The Phantom Follies***Pre-Reading:**

Can celebrities take on causes? Do they have any credibility? Why or why not?

During:

1. What became Houdini's new mission? Pg 166
2. Who became his enemies? Pg 167
3. What are "familiaris" Pg 171

Post Reading:

Houdini said of his relationship to spiritualist Mina "Margery" Cranden, "It takes a flimflammer to catch a flimflammer." Students should study Houdini's "[Margery pamphlet](#)", to discuss both Margery and Houdini's motives and methods. How and why did they act as they did? Who was right? Who was wrong? Who was harmed? Then ask students working in pairs or groups to discuss motives and methods of each side. What did each have to gain? How did they gain it? Who is more believable and why? www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/Houdini

Chapter 20*The Pajama Pocket***Pre-Reading:**

Why do people like to buy things that belong to celebrities? Why do people think that these articles (autographs, clothing, etc) are worth what they are willing to pay?

During:

1. How did Bess help Houdini in his career? Pg 180
2. What happened in Canada? Pg 183
3. When did Houdini die? Pg 188

Post-Reading:

Houdini was a consummate showman, using timing and suspense as devices to heighten the drama of his escapes. Ask students to debunk or explain Houdini's tricks, and show how he turned his actions into theater. Divide the class into several groups, and give them each an escape to research: ropes, handcuffs, straitjacket, milk can, among others. Students can reference the "[Special Feature](#)" section for details. Have each group explain how Houdini escaped, and discuss his timing, suspense, and showmanship. Ask them to compare Houdini's methods with those used in entertainment today (pbs.org)

Chapter 21*Postmortem***Pre-Reading:**

How does ego relate to celebrity?

During:

1. Where is Houdini buried? Pg 189
2. What did Bess believe at the tenth anniversary of Houdini's death? Pg 193
3. What were Houdini's secret words? Pg 193

Post-Reading:

Watch PBS “Houdini on American Experience” DVD

Vocabulary:

Relics: pg 2: a thing left from the past

Sorcery Pg 2 : magic thought to be performed by the aid of evil spirits

Diminutive Pg 2: very small, tiny

Faux Pg 6: artificial or imitation; fake

Manacled Pg 7 to handcuff

Lithe Pg 16: bending easily

Contortionist Pg 16: a person who twists out of shape

Bamboozled Pg 18 to deceive or get the better of (someone) by trickery, flattery, or the like

Stature Pg 25: height

Conjuring Pg 27: to cause to appear or happen as if by magic

Pygmalion: Pg 28: A king of Cyprus who carved and then fell in love with a statue of a woman, which Aphrodite brought to life

Anti -Semitism Pg 29: discrimination against or prejudice or hostility toward Jews

Autodidact Pg 35: a self-taught person

Séance Pg 55: a meeting in which a spiritualist attempts to communicate with the spirits of the dead.

Infernal Pg 80: to have come from hell

Seclusion Pg 88: keeping apart from others

Invincibility Pg 93: not to be overcome

Grommets Pg 123: A small metal or plastic ring used to reinforce

Miser Pg 139: one who lives poorly in order to save money and keep it

.

Indiana Academic Standards (content):

Social Studies: 6.1.16, 6.1.18, 6.1.21, 6.3.1

Language Arts: 6.1.1, 6.1.2, 6.1.4

7.1.3, 7.2.4, 7.2.8

8.1.3, 8.2.6

Anticipation Guide

Before		Escape! The Story of the Great Houdini	After	
Agree	Disagree		Agree	Disagree
		Houdini could pick up needles with his eyelids.		
		Houdini could untie ropes with his toes.		
		Houdini was also a Spiritualist.		
		Houdini's given name was Ehrich Weiss.		
		To be famous, you must have a big ego.		
		Houdini was a better showman than a magician.		

Read-Aloud:

Read Aloud #1

Bottom of page 108-page 110: "In preparation, he would tumble blocks of ice into his oversize bathtub and get in. He needed to practice freezing his gluteus maximus."

This passage is perfect to entice new readers to this biography. This selection describes a legendary episode in the Detroit River. There is an audience waiting breathlessly to see for themselves a death-defying stunt. Will Houdini survive this one?

Before using this passage, a discussion or journaling about the topic of danger. Why do we like it? Why do people watch Horror movies, or go on roller coasters? How do those kind of experiences make you feel?

After the read-aloud passage, it is a good time to brainstorm if there is anything comparable to Houdini today. Is there anyone today that we watch for entertainment sake that see get hurt or even die? How does the television show "America's Funniest Home Videos" or sports fit in with this discussion?

Read Aloud #2

Bottom of page 31-, top of page 34: “Earlier, he had persuaded Dash to loan him his life savings, some sixteen dollars, with which to buy magician’s equipment from a retired wonder worker. The haul included a well-scuffed trunk.”

This read-aloud is a great passage to explain that Houdini was not always famous. There is a lot of detail and suspense explaining the “metamorphosis” trick. The trick works great; it is a success, but no one seemed to care. Why?

Before I would use this passage, I would have a discussion about fame, and the difference between fame and talent.

After reading this passage, the discussion would subtly change to how do you make someone famous? What makes someone famous? Does it matter how you dress or talk? Is it enough to be have talent?

If You Liked Escape! The Story of The Great Houdini, by Sid Fleischman, You Might Also Like.....

***The Whipping Boy** By: Sid Fleischman

Newberry award winning novel about a prince and his whipping boy have many adventures when they trade places after becoming involved with outlaws.

***Disappearing Act** By: Sid Fleischman

A 12-year-old and his singer sister flee from a stalker called Toad. They don't know what he wants, but perhaps it has something to do with their missing archaeologist mother.

***Danger in the Dark (Houdini and Nate Series)** By: Tom Lalicki

A fiction book where Harry Houdini – the world's greatest escape artist – is in need of a new hat. That is what brings him to Bennett & Son, Gentlemen's Hatters of Fifth Avenue.

***Peter and the Starcatchers** By: Dave Barry & Ridley Pearson

An adventure on the high seas and on a faraway island where a boy named Peter and his new friend, Molly, overcome bands of pirates.

***Who Was Harry Houdini?** by Tui Sutherland

Part of the *Who Was...?* Series. A biography for 9-12 year olds telling of Houdini’s stunts and adventures.

Across Curriculum Connections:

Art: Making a Poster

Make your own Houdini advertising poster. In the time of Houdini, there was no television or internet in which to advertise or get your story to people. Colorful posters were used to advertise exciting events. Make your own poster advertising Houdini coming to perform in your town. What stunt, and information would you put on your poster? Think about your audience, use of color, and design before beginning.

Supplies needed : Paper, pencils, markers, colored pencils, crayons

Resource: An Example of an advertising poster, like the one below, and those in the book.



Standards Art: 6.1.1, 6.1.3
7.7.1, 7.7.2, 7.8.1
8.7.1, 8.7.2, 8.7.3

Social Studies: American History Roaring 20's

Houdini was emblematic of the 1920s. His act increased in daring throughout his career; he reached the height of risk-taking in the '20s, mirroring much of American society's behavior at large. Then ask students to work in groups and to research photographs and stories about other risky activities from this era, such as airplane wing-walking. Also consider the similarities and differences between the '20s and the '90s, and the growth of extreme sports. Present findings in an oral report to the class (pbs.org)

Supplies Needed: Paper, Pencil (to make notes for a report), internet, books, magazines to explore the time period: supplies by instructor/school librarian.

Standards Language Arts: 6.2.1, 6.2.3, 6.2.4, 6.2.6
None from grade 7 (Africa, Asia and Southwest Pacific)
None from grade 8 (US History until Reconstruction)

THEME: Harry Houdini Biography

Web Resources:

Appleton Public Library

www.apl.org/history/houdini/biography.html

THEME: Magic

Web Resources:

Peter Monticup: Owner of MagicTricks.Com

www.magictricks.com

THEME: Spiritualism

Web Resources:

Wikipedia

www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritualism

THEME: Roaring 20's

Web Resources:

The Roaring Twenties

www.1920-30.com/

Resources:

**Houdini: The American Experience* DVD series, A Nancy Porter Productions, Inc., WGBH Educational Foundation 2000.

The DVD takes its viewers through Houdini's rise from Hungarian immigrant to international star. Houdini confronted our greatest fears of entrapment, pain, death. Produced by Nancy Porter. Mandy Patinkin narrates.

Included is a wonderful web-site with activities, teachers guide, transcript, further reading, and escape secrets. www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/Houdini

*www.magictricks.com/Houdini :

This is a site that contains Magic tricks for kids, magic shop, magical history and biographies of Houdini and other magicians. Peter Monticup: Owner of MagicTricks.Com What's the world's most dangerous magic trick? Which magician invented the Sawing In Half Illusion? Who holds magic world records?

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Publisher's webpage: "Greenwillow Books from HarperCollins"
www.harpercollins.com/imprints/index.aspx?imprintid=517996

Publisher's webpage for the author or author's books:
www.harpercollins.com/authors/16485/Sid_Fleischman/index.aspx

Other Web Resources:

PBS: American Experience

www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/Houdini

Magic Tricks & Biographies

www.magictricks.com/Houdini

Sid Fleischman/Magic

www.sidfleischman.com/magic

Commonsense Media

www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/escape-story-great-Houdini.html

Book Activities:

Write a scene describing what you think happened when Bess Houdini reconciled with her mother. What might have been said or done? What were they feeling? Where did it take place? Was Houdini there? What would he do or say? Then act out the scene. Each scene should last 2-5 minutes. Remember mother & daughter have not been in contact for 12 years.

No Handouts or teacher key needed.

~Small Groups 3-4 students

~Indiana standards: Language Arts: 6.4.1, 6.7.7

7.4.1, 7.4.8, 7.7.5

8.3.4, 8.4.1, 8.4.7, 8.7.10

Houdini vs. Spiritualism: Houdini said of his relationship to spiritualist Mina "Margery" Cranden, "It takes a flimflammer to catch a flimflammer." Students should study Houdini's "[Margery pamphlet](#)", to discuss both Margery and Houdini's motives and methods. How and why did they act as they did? Who was right? Who was wrong? Who was harmed? Then ask students working in pairs or groups to discuss motives and methods of each side. What did each have to gain? How did they gain it? Who is more believable and why? www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/Houdini

Write a 2-3 page report on your findings.

~work in pairs or groups

~answers will vary--no teacher key

~use following information for hand-outs

Standards Language Arts: 6.2.1, 6.2.3, 6.2.4, 6.2.6

7.2.1, 7.2.4, 7.2.7, 7.2.9

8.2.6, 8.2.6



Margery Pamphlet

In the last years of his life, Harry Houdini became, to borrow the title from one of his books, "A Magician among the Spirits." As the most famous illusionist in the world, Houdini was naturally drawn into the great debate over Spiritualism in the wake of World War I, eventually becoming one of its most vocal opponents.

At first Houdini was drawn to Spiritualism out of genuine curiosity, as well as out of his friendship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a fervent believer. Houdini suspected that the secret of their craft lay not in any mystical connection with the spirit world, but in clever trickery. And after sitting with more than a hundred mediums, he was sure of it. As he told an interviewer from the Los Angeles Times, "It takes a flimflammer to catch a flimflammer." With characteristic Amy Nelson, abc school, bear_nelson@yahoo.com

tenacity, he set out to expose as many mediums as he could.

Houdini's longest and most publicized confrontation with a spirit medium began in 1924, when he took on a formidable Boston woman named Mina Crandon, known publicly as "Margery." The thirty-six-year-old wife of a prominent Boston surgeon, Crandon was the most serious contender for a \$2,500 prize offered by "Scientific American" magazine to the first medium who could produce "conclusive psychic manifestations" under test conditions. That such a contest was sponsored by a venerable publication is evidence that "psychical" research was considered a legitimate area of scientific inquiry at the time. Houdini, always eager to be seen as more than a mere entertainer, was delighted to join the investigative committee, which included some of the world's most distinguished psychical researchers.



a. Houdini
b. J. Malcolm Bird
c. Margery
d. Mr. O. D. Munn

With the "Scientific American" committee taking months to issue a definitive statement on the case, Houdini published the following pamphlet at his own expense in November, fully expecting it to settle the matter once and for all. To his great disappointment, it did not. In January, 1925 Houdini staged a dramatic exposé at Boston's Symphony Hall, with the Crandons replying with their own presentation days later at Jordan Hall. Only in February, when the Crandons declined any further tests or encounters with Houdini, did the committee vote to deny her the prize.

Ironically, "Margery's" final unmasking did not come at the hands of the world-famous Houdini at all, but by a Harvard graduate student in psychology later that spring. Still, Houdini had come out on top: by the end of the year his career peaked with a one-man show on Broadway. The show's final act, "Do the Dead Come Back," featured "The Elusive American" at his medium-busting best.

An excerpt from Houdini's

"Margery" the Medium Exposed

In order that the reader may thoroughly understand my relation to the "Margery" case and the "Scientific American," and to make this record as complete and clear as possible, I will first review briefly my connection with that magazine's investigation of so-called psychic phenomena.

Something like three years ago I was asked to write a series of articles on Spiritualism for the "Scientific American" but had to refuse owing pressure of work. Later a Mr. James Black furnished the magazine with a number of articles which were published, but these were so inaccurate that they were assailed, and justly so, from all sides.

Having thus stirred up a hornets' nest and not having a sufficient knowledge of Spiritualism to meet the situation, one of the oldest editors on the "Scientific American," and my friend for over a quarter of a century, Mr. A.A. Hopkins, wrote me again, urging that I prepare some articles on Spiritualism for them. The letter was followed very soon by a call from Mr. Hopkins who came to my office in New York bringing with him a tall man whom he introduced as J. Malcolm Bird, also a member of the "Scientific American's" editorial staff.

They discussed the Black articles with me and asked why it was that I would not write on Spiritualism for them. I explained that the research work involved was such that I could not entrust it to anyone else and that it was impossible for me to spare the time which this and the writing of the articles would require, but I advised them to form an investigating committee and said if the other members were honest, reliable, and qualified, I would serve as one without pay with the stipulation that I was to have the right to reject any person proposed as a member of the committee with me. My reason for this was, as I explained to them, that while an ordinary investigator, whether layman, professor, or scientist, could make a mistake and later correct himself without damage to his standing, I was in a different position, for due to the peculiar nature of my work my reputation was at stake and I could not run the risk of having it injured. This was agreed to before they left my office, but sometime, afterwards hearing that they had selected a committee without consulting me I wrote the following letter to protect myself.

November 13, 1922.

Mr. J. Malcolm Bird,
Scientific American,
233 Broadway,
New York City.

Dear Mr. Bird:

I have just been informed by Mr. Hopkins that you have already selected a committee to serve as investigators for the \$5,000.00 offered to the mediums.

So, that there is no mistake in this, I would like to have it understood emphatically, that when I consented to be one of your committee, it was under the condition that,

1. I am to know each and every man selected.
2. That all conditions placed before the mediums should be thoroughly gone over with me, so that there could be no loophole for anyone to misconstrue the conditions of the manifestations required.
3. Another condition is that the selected committee will go to a number of séances for investigation purposes, so that we could get a line on each other regarding the capability of actually recording in writing what was seen, as mal-observation is the curse of all description.

It was also stipulated in my condition that we are to hold conferences to see whether all the committee are agreeable to each other, because we must work in harmony.

I have more at stake than the money you are offering and that is my reputation.

As a psychic investigator, and I, therefore, ask you to give me your full confidence, as I am giving you mine. I intend to serve you faithfully, and with all the knowledge I possess, but I ask to be fully protected in this.

May I suggest that it might be advisable for us to get together again before publicity is given, so as to prevent any mistakes on all our parts. I am keenly and intensely interested in the subject and will deem it a compliment to be on the committee, but if any of the above conditions do not meet with your approval, please count me out.

Yours sincerely,
Houdini.

HH.JLD

The Committee as finally formed consisted of Dr. William McDougall, of Harvard University; Dr. Daniel F. Comstock, Amy Nelson, abc school, bear_nelson@yahoo.com

formerly of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Dr. Walter Franklin Prince, of the Society for Psychical Research; Hereward Carrington; and Houdini. Mr. Bird acted as Secretary for the Committee and Dr. Austin C. Lescaboura, another editor on the "Scientific American" staff, has assisted in arranging the tests and been present at most of the séances.

Following the "Scientific American's" offer of a sum of money as a prize to any medium who could successfully pass its tests, several presented themselves and gave sittings before the Committee. Among them were the Tomsons, Mrs. Josie Stewart, Valentine, and Pecararo. Bird did not invite me to the major part of the séances, whereas, as Secretary, it was his duty to do so, therefore, on learning of the Pecararo tests, I traveled from Little Rock, Arkansas, to New York, to be present at one of the Pecararo séances.

In all these investigations it would seem that Mr. Bird allowed the mediums to believe that they had practically won the prize and this is mirrored in the press reports given out by him. Dr. Prince and I strenuously objected to this course.



a. Dr. Walter Franklin Prince
b. Dr. Daniel F. Comstock
c. Margery
d. Mr. O. D. Munn
e. Houdini

So far as I knew there was no other investigation under way when, on picking up a copy of the "Scientific American" early in 1924, I was surprised to find an announcement of a series of séances being held by the Committee with a certain "Margery" and judged from the reading of it that the Committee was on the verge of awarding her the prize. In the next issue of the magazine I again found mention of the mysterious medium whose identity was being hidden behind the name of "Margery," but as most all American papers carried stories giving her correct name and address before I was called into the séances, and as later she gave interviews to newspaper men, and one in particular in my presence, without denying her name, it would be ridiculous for me now to do other than call her by her right name also, Mina Crandon, wife of L.R.G. Crandon, a well-known Boston surgeon.

The "Scientific American" reports, written by Editor Bird, were such as to lead an ordinary layman to believe that the magazine had found a medium who had successfully passed all its crucial tests and to all intents and purposes was "genuine." In addition the lay reader, and the uninitiated reporter as well, were left with the impression that the Committee had approved this medium, whereas the articles only represented the opinion of Mr. Bird, who, garbing himself in a mantle of authority, had written whatever he desired, always, however, being careful to so phrase his material that later, in case the necessity arose, he could claim a certain alibi. A careful reading of the articles makes these subtleties obvious.

These articles, written by Bird, are the worse piffle I ever read, paralleled only by the tommy-rot written about Mrs. Guppy, who was said to have been floated through the air, plate-glass window, and solid brick. Bird represented the medium as not only doing the ordinary table tilting, lifting and communicating by means of a code of raps common among all mediums, but in addition, such stunts as stopping and starting clocks, tipping over the cabinet, having furniture moved around the room before the observers in full light and with no visible means of accomplishing it. Spirits whistling a tune, using a megaphone, and sending a curtain rod sailing around the room. They also claimed the transportation of a live pigeon through solid matter. They are fulsome, gushing reports of nothing, and to intimate that a live pigeon had been brought into the room from the outside, passing through glass or brick without making or leaving an aperture, is doing something which a magazine with such a reputation for conservativeness and accuracy as the "Scientific American" should avoid, even though the idea is covered.

Shortly after the appearance of the articles, I received the following letter from Mr. Bird:

Amy Nelson, abc school, bear_nelson@yahoo.com

Scientific American,
233 Broadway, New York.
June 18, 1924.

Mr. Harry Houdini,
278 West 113th St.,
New York City.

My Dear Mr. Houdini:

As you will observe when you get your July "Scientific American," we are engaged in the investigation of another case of mediumship. Our original idea was not to bother you with it unless, and until, it got to a stage where there seemed serious prospects that it was either genuine, or a type of fraud which our other Committeemen could not deal with. Regardless of whether it turns out good or bad, there will be several extremely interesting stories in it for the "Scientific American" and these will run in the August and following issues.

Mr. Munn feels that the case has taken a turn which makes it desirable for us to discuss it with you. Won't you run in, at your convenience, to take lunch with one or both of us, and have a talk with Mr. Munn? Better call me in advance, and make sure that he and I will be in at the time you select.

Faithfully yours,
J. Malcolm Bird,
Associate Editor.

P.S. Mr. Munn left the office today, to be gone until Monday morning.

I made the appointment requested in the letter and on meeting Mr. O.D. Munn he explained that he had been anxious to get in touch with me, and in fact had been trying for a week, but Bird had been sidestepping the matter, and that he thought we should go to Boston together and sit in at the "Margery" séances. After we had talked the matter over he called Bird into his office and turning to him I asked point blank:

"Do you believe this medium is genuine?"

I asked him this because, although a raw amateur at investigating, which amounts to a profession in itself, and with no experience with or knowledge of "the production of mysteries" he had nevertheless, given his approval to several mediums and failed to detect their conjuring trick methods. His reply, as near as I can remember, was:

"Why, yes, she is genuine. She does resort to trickery at times, but I believe she is fifty or sixty percent genuine."

"Then you mean that this medium will be entitled to get the "Scientific American "prize?" I asked.

"Mr. Bird," I replied, "you have nothing to lose but your position and very likely you can readily get another if you are wring, but if I am wrong it will mean the loss of reputation and as I have been selected to be one of the Committee I do not think it will be fair for you to give this medium that award unless I am permitted to go up the Boston and investigate her claims, and from what you tell me I am certain that this medium is either the most wonderful in the world or else a very clever deceptionist. If she is a fraudulent medium I will guarantee to expose her and if she is genuine I will come back and be one of her most strenuous supporters."

Amy Nelson, abc school, bear_nelson@yahoo.com

Then turning to Mr. O.D. Munn, I said:

"If you give this award to a medium without the strictest examination every fraudulent medium in the world will take advantage of it. I will forfeit a thousand dollars if I do not detect her if she resorts to trickery. Of course if she is genuine there is nothing to expose, but if the "Scientific American" by any accident should declare her genuine and she was eventually detected in fraud we would be the laughing stock of the world, and in the meantime hundreds of fraudulent mediums would have taken advantage of the error."

"Well then you and I will go up together and see," he replied.

"All right, I am at your service," I told him.

This was the condition of affairs on July 23, 1924, when Mr. O.D. Munn and I reached Boston, where Bird had preceded us by auto and was the guest of the medium and her husband, as he had been previously for weeks at a stretch, at times accompanied by Mrs. Bird and at other times alone. Carrington had also spent a number of weeks in the family, but, although we had dinner with the Crandons, Mr. O.D. Munn and I stopped at a hotel, for I agree fully with Dr. Prince that it is not possible to stop at one's house, break bread with him frequently, then investigate him and render an impartial verdict.

We were given to understand that this first séance which I attended on the evening of Wednesday, July 23rd, was the forty-eighth in which Mrs. Crandon had been tested, but I learned later from a letter written by her husband that it was nearer the eightieth, and by the time Mr. O.D. Munn and I had finished our fifth séance Dr. Crandon claimed that the total was ninety. All séances were dark.

At this séance Dr. Crandon sat on the medium's right and held her right hand and J. Malcolm Bird, as had been customary in their previous séances, circled with one of his hands the fingers of both the medium and her husband. This left one of Bird's hands free for "exploring purposes" as he said.

I sat on the left of Mrs. Crandon and held her left hand with my right. My right foot was placed against her left foot, pressing against her ankle.

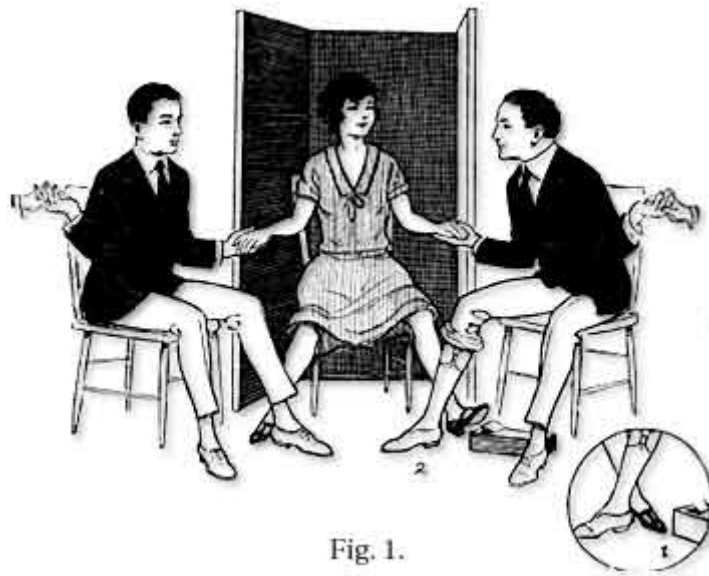


Fig. 1.

Anticipating the sort of work I would have to do in detecting the movements of her foot I had rolled my right trouser leg up above my knee. All that day I had worn a silk rubber bandage around that leg just below the knee. By night the part of the leg below the bandage had become swollen and painfully tender, thus giving me a much keener sense of feeling and making it easier to notice the slightest sliding of Mrs. Crandon's ankle or flexing of her muscles. She wore silk stockings and during the séance had her skirts pulled well up above her knees.

One of the successful demonstrations which she had been giving and which none of the Committee had been able to expose, involved the use of an electric bell enclosed in a box fourteen inches long by six wide and five deep.

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This box was stoutly fastened on all sides except the top which was covered with boards. Inside the box with the bell were dry batteries which rang it whenever a certain pressure at the top of the box completed the circuit. In previous séances when this box had been placed in front of Mrs. Crandon and the sitters supposed they had her perfectly controlled (held hands and feet so they could detect any motion) the bell had been rung repeatedly and the explanation given was that "Walter," the medium's dead brother, had closed the circuit. Not only had the bell been rung but it had been used with a code and answered questions.

On the evening in question the bell-box was placed between my feet with my right foot between it and Mrs. Crandon's left foot. As the séance progressed I could distinctly feel her ankle slowly and spasmodically sliding as it pressed against mine while she gained space to raise her foot off the floor and touch the top of the box. To the ordinary sense of touch the contact would seem the same while this was being done. At times she would say: "Just press hard against my ankle so you can see that my ankle is there," and as she pressed I could feel her gain another half inch.



Fig. 2.

When she had finally maneuvered her foot around to a point where she could get at the top of the box the bell ringing began and I positively felt the tendons of her leg flex and tighten as she repeatedly touched the ringing apparatus. There is no question in my mind about it. She did this. Then, when the ringing was over, I plainly felt her leg slide back into its original position with her foot on the floor beside mine.

During the second intermission "Walter" asked for an illuminated plaque to be placed on the lid of the box which held the bell and Bird went to get it. This left the right hand and foot of the medium free. Bird had difficulty in finding the plaque and while he was searching "Walter" suddenly called for "control."

Mrs. Crandon placed her right hand in mine and gave me to understand that I had both her hands. Bird was requested to stand in the doorway, but without any warning, before he could obey, the cabinet was thrown over backwards violently. The medium then gave me her right foot also saying: "You have now both hands and both feet."

Then "Walter" called out:

"The megaphone is in the air. Have Houdini tell me where to throw it."

"Toward me," I replied, and in an instant it fell at my feet.

The way she did these two tricks is as follows: when Bird left the room it freed her right foot and hand. With her right hand she tilted the corner of the cabinet enough to get her free foot under it, then picking up the megaphone she placed it on her head, dunce-cap fashion. Then she threw the cabinet over with her right foot. As she did so I distinctly felt her body give and sway as though she had made a vigorous lunge. As soon as this was done "Walter" called for "better control" and she gave me her right foot. Then she simply jerked her head, causing the megaphone to fall at my feet. Of course with the megaphone on her head it was easy and simple for her to ask me or anyone else to hold both of her feet and also her hands, and still she could snap the megaphone off her head in any direction requested. This is the "slickest" ruse I have ever detected, and it has converted all skeptics.

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Fig. 3.

The next day Mrs. Crandon told us it would be impossible to either kick or push the cabinet over as it was hinged on the inside and would double up in the middle, but that afternoon Mr. O.D. Munn and I went upstairs alone and while sitting in the medium's chair I put my right foot under the right-hand corner of the cabinet and easily tilted it so that the slightest movement caused it to fall over.

The second séance of Mrs. Crandon's which I attended was on the evening of July 24th, at Professor Comstock's hotel. At this time I discovered without question that she used her head and shoulders to push back the table. Her great asset in disguising the muscular movements which she uses in doing this is the arm chair in which she sits. As she is unusually strong and has an athletic body she can press her wrists so firmly on the arms of the chair that she can move her body and sway it at will without the sitters, who have hold of her hands, detecting the movement.

That evening I was in charge of her left hand which rested lightly on the palm of my right. With my index finger I could feel her pulse. In fact I used the secret system of the "touch and tactics" of the mind or muscle performer, (I had given performances or tests in this field of mystery) who is guided by the slightest muscular indication in finding a hidden article. I was able to detect almost every time she made a move. Frequently she stretched out her arms to rest them and once I caught her using this motion as a subterfuge, leaving only her elbow on the chair while she pushed the table with her head.



Fig. 4.

"Walter," her guide and aide, is very autocratic, seldom asking anything but usually directing, and this evening he ordered everyone to move back from the table around which we were sitting so that he might gather force. This was simply another ruse on the medium's part, for when all the rest moved back she moved back also and this gave her room enough to bend her head and push the table up and over. I caught her doing this twice.



Fig. 5

Before going to the séance Mr. O.D. Munn and I had determined to explore things to our satisfaction and had arranged a code of signals. At the séance he sat at my left in the circle, I holding his right hand. At the first movement of the table I pushed his hand under it and let go and began groping around with my left hand. As I did so I felt Mrs. Crandon's head at the edge of the table pushing it up and forward until the box with the bell had slipped off to the floor. I reached over and whispered to Mr. O.D. Munn what I had detected. Then to check up and assure myself of the deception I reached out again into the dark and she ran her head directly against my outstretched fingers. I do not think she was more surprised than I. She then said something about losing hairpins and after the séance her hair was loosened. This was done for effect and to offset my discovery.

While I knew she was still using her head, I pulled Mr. O.D. Munn's ear to my lips again and whispered:
"Will I denounce and expose her now?"

"You had better wait a while," he replied.

"Now is the time," I urged.

"No, better not for a while," he answered.

After this demonstration the bell-ringing test was gone through again. The box was placed between my feet with her ankle against my right foot like the night before. I had rolled my trousers up as on the previous evening. She began with exactly the same tactics, but nothing happened. Finally she said to me:

"You have garters on, haven't you?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Well, the buckle hurts me," she said.

I reached down to undo the garter and found that the buckle had caught her stocking so fast that it prevented her from sliding her ankle enough to get room to tap the bell. After I took the garter off she was able to reach the bell as she had the previous night. When the spirit asked Mr. O.D. Munn how many times he wanted the bell rung and Mr. Munn said "five," she made so bold a sliding movement with her ankle to reach the box that I think she was under the impression that I was badly fooled or was going to help her like others. After the five taps on the bell she slid her foot back into position on the floor beside mine.

When the séance was over Mrs. Crandon left the room to dress for the street. I had Mr. O.D. Munn call the Committee into a room by themselves and I explained the trickery which I had discovered and there was a discussion as to whether I should expose the medium then or after our return to New York. The Committee finally decided that we should return to New York first; that Mrs. Crandon was not to be informed that I had detected her, and I was to make an affidavit for

the Committee covering the details of my discoveries. Bird opposed my demands to have her exposed as quickly as possible, but I called his attention to the rapid exposure he had given the others and he replied: "We will do it different this time."

I strongly suspected his motives and told Mr. O.D. Munn so after we had left.

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