

Harry Houdini--a mama's boy who made good Houdini--a mama's boy who made good

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Harry Houdini— a mama's boy who made good

by LISA MITCHELL

The Great Houdinis by Melville Shavelson (Fawcett
Crest: \$1.50)

Houdini: The Untold Story by Milbourne Christopher
(Pocket: \$1.75; illustrated)

**Houdini: A Mind in Chains, A Psychoanalytic Por-
trait** by Bernard C. Meyer, MD (Dutton: \$10; illustrat-
ed)

He made 10,000-pound elephants disappear and
walked through brick walls, but Harry Houd-
ini was more than a perfect prestidigitator
and incomparable illusionist. A flurry of new books
about the phenomenal mysteriarch coincides with
the 50th anniversary of his death this Halloween.

The most famous magician/escapologist of all
time was born Ehrich Weiss in Hungary in 1874,
the son of Samuel the Rabbi, an apparently inef-
fectual father, and Cecilia, an obviously omni-
potent mother who became the subject of an obses-
sive love which dominated Houdini's life.

The family emigrated to America, settling un-
successfully in Appleton, Wis. (just the place for a
Talmudic rabbi who spoke no English), then in
New York, where teen-aged Ehrich worked as a
cutter in a tie factory. His older brother Theo (who
later became the magician, Hardeen) had shown
him a few simple coin tricks, but as biographer
Milbourne Christopher writes, "his interest in
sleight of hand grew . . . (and) became almost an
obsession after Ehrich read . . . the memoirs of
Robert-Houdin," the famous French conjurer. Lit-
tle Ehrich added an "i" to his hero's name, thus
making it his own, adopted the Americanized

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Harry Houdini

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"Harry" from his nickname "Ehrie" and "at 17 set out on a new career."

From medicine shows and dime museums to vaudeville, he struggled for seven years before becoming the most celebrated, highly paid performer of his day. He disciplined and conditioned his body mercilessly to contort it out of any straitjacket, wetsheet, tethering rope or chain. He learned to swallow and regurgitate tools to aid his extrications and inured himself to the freezing rivers into which he plunged his manacled body by adding ice cubes to his bath. He escaped from all kinds of regulation handcuffs, "inescapable" prison cells, giant footballs, sausage skins and sea monsters. He starred in, wrote and produced movies, relentlessly debunked phony spiritualists and made his wife, brother and employes swear sacred oaths of allegiance to him.

A few weeks ago, "The Great Houdinis" was aired as a teleplay, "taken from fact and fiction," written (and directed) by Melville Shavelson. He has novelized this into an easy-to-read, entertaining book, warm with Yiddish expressions and charged with the kind of make-believe of which a showman like Houdini would approve.

"You know what a magician does?," he has Houdini ask. "He escapes. From Hester Street . . . from the noise and the smell and the horse manure, he escapes. Colored lights, fancy costumes, making miracles, it's the second-best thing to being God."

With a dramatist's hand, Shavelson skillfully condensed several of Houdini's real-life escapes into a few representational scenes and opted to portray Mama Weiss as "an old yenta" at fiery enmity with her shiksa daughter-in-law, making Harry a turn-of-the-century Alex Portnoy. And although most of this lively book is pure conjecture, a sympathetic truth of feeling comes

through, leaving us wanting to spend more time with this "meshugeneh magician."

Now the definitive, painstakingly researched biography in which myths are explored and facts are delivered is Milbourne Christopher's "Houdini: The Untold Story." Here we get the professional's eye expertly describing Houdini's incredible performances, for Christopher himself is a noted magician. First appearing in hardcover in 1969, this updated paperback, thick with splendid photographs, now gives us the heretofore unpublished "Houdini manuscripts, notes and letters." These are fresh from the author's own extensive collection, as he has devoted much of his life to the study of Harry Houdini.

And if we wonder whether Houdini was something of a madman, psychiatrist Bernard Meyer will take us on a fascinating, in-depth study exploring this possibility in "Houdini: A Mind in Chains." Although written in the formal style of the clinician, there is fine humor in Dr. Meyer's footnotes and his chapter headings of delightfully appropriate literary quotations make for an elegant, incisive and ultimately engaging work.

Each book treats Houdini's encounters with Margery, the infamous, sensual Boston psychic, as well as the magician's unique friendship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Dr. Meyer, father of Nicholas ("The Seven Percent Solution"), devotes large portions of his book to Doyle and includes an astonishing photograph of Margery's purported ectoplasm emanating from her body.

As long as we're dealing with magic here, let's pretend these books themselves are anthropomorphized guests on *To Tell the Truth*. The host says, "Will the real Harry Houdini please stand up?" and—even though each is totally different from (and sometimes at variance with) the other—all three well-written volumes could justifiably rise.

Mitchell is a local free-lance writer.