



Houdini!!!: The Career of Ehrich Weiss

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In the most comprehensive biography written about the great illusionist yet, author Ken Silverman, who has won both a Pulitzer and a Bancroft prize, draws on never-before-used scrapbooks, personal diaries, court transcripts and hundreds of unpublished notes and letters collected from around the world to reveal a far richer, more personal view of Houdini than ever before. While Silverman focuses on the magic and miraculous escapes that made Houdini a legend and the most celebrated, highest-paid performer of his day, he also delves deeply into Houdini's fascinating personal life. He explores Houdini's many friendships with politicians and celebrities like Jack Dempsey, Theodore Roosevelt, Thomas Edison, Jack London, the Astors and others. He looks into his traumatic encounters with anti-Semitism; his close-knit family; his strange and troubled relationship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; and his bitter war against spiritualism. He also uncovers new revelations about Houdini's secret affair with the widow of a famous American writer.

Houdini!!!: The Career of Ehrich Weiss Details

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Becky Loader says

I read this biography after reading "The confabulist" to get confirmation of how much was fictionalized in the first title. I especially liked the photos included here.

Michele J says

I really wanted to learn more about Houdini but this book was just way too descriptive for me.

Hannah says

This book pretty much covers anything and everything you could hope to know about Houdini. It is a little long-winded at times, but very interesting.

Steve Kimmens says

Don't read many biographies. But I've always had a fascination with conjuring and the showmanship that's critical to support it. And this biography shows why Houdini was so famed because of his genuine but hard learnt skills. And what a fascinating and complicated guy he was. But likeable too.

Mary Louise says

Amazing story.

Dru says

There are many biographies of Houdini out there, and I've only read this one...I don't make it a habit to be a scholar on one person. But I can tell you that this was a very engaging book, and I finished it feeling like I knew a great deal about the man, both as a man and as a performer.

This was not just about the magic and escape act. This was about the personality of Ehrich Weiss himself...his ego, his adventuring spirit. I learned things that were fascinating, such as his immediate appreciation for powered flight and his desire to become the first man to fly an airplane in Australia (note: it remains open for debate whether he was first or second).

All in all, this biography was a great story about a man who just happened to be a famous escape artist and magician. The story isn't about the act, it's about the man and the act is one layer of the story.

J.P. says

I remember as a kid going into a store and being fascinated by a bunch of cheap magic tricks that looked interesting but once I bought them ultimately became rather boring and hokey. Make a card jump from the deck! Amaze your friends!

Speaking of cards, Houdini was the real deal. His name has become synonymous with magic, and his now famous stunts are still being performed by other magicians to this day.

In this book Kenneth Silverman does a fine job of chronicling Houdini's career and how his act evolved over time. From his early slight of hand prestidigitation to his increasingly more complex handcuff escapes, Houdini's shows became a sensation. He would constantly play to packed houses despite hucksters selling pamphlets outside the theater prior to show time explaining how the tricks were done.

Houdini would go to great lengths to achieve his objectives. He would attend a magic show in disguise and then dash on stage to prove the magician was a charlatan. Or he would have a special pair of shoes made up that left his name written on the sidewalk as the person he paid to wear them strolled around.

The book does cover Houdini's private life but almost entirely through a diary he kept. A bit more in this area would have been better. Other than that, this was a fascinating look at one of the world's greatest performers.

Scott Klemm says

"Houdini!!! The Career of Ehrich Weiss" is a fascinating biography of America's most famous magician and escape artist. The author, Ken Silverman, is a Professor Emeritus at the New York University and a 1985 Pulitzer Prize winner for biography.

In the past I read several other biographies beginning as a teenager with Harold Kellock's "Houdini, His Life Story." However, none surpass Silverman's in detail and depth of research. For example, other writers have recounted how Ehrich Weiss adopted the name Houdini from the French conjurer Robert-Houdin, but I don't recall any telling how his first name, Harry, was selected. Silverman points out that Ehrich's nickname was "Ehrie" that easily became anglicized as Harry.

While others have documented Houdini's campaign to expose fraudulent mediums, in Silverman's book it becomes a thread weaving through the book. He points out that the first escape artists were actually mediums who allowed themselves to be tied up and restrained to prove that they could not ring bells or be responsible for floating aberrations. Surprisingly, Silverman reveals that at the very beginning of his career, Houdini had performed a séance himself.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, spiritualism was quite popular, and many such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle of Sherlock Holmes fame were convinced that Houdini had psychic abilities. Houdini always said he worked by natural means and never claimed any supernatural powers.

Peter Salva says

This was a wonderful book. Though it really is true that there may never be a complete and utterly comprehensive biography of Houdini, this is the most well-balanced telling of his life that I have read so far. The author is not fanciful in his telling, and does not get swept up in hero-worship, as the authors of several other biographies do. Nor does Silverman muddle the story with Freudian analysis galore. For my money that makes this biography of Houdini the best yet. As a side note, I cannot wait to get my hands on the companion volume of notes!

Eric Cartier says

Fascinating (the tricks and escapes Houdini created and performed, and how he completely harnessed both the media and the affordances of the industrial era) and frustrating (Houdini's egomania can be grating, and Silverman spends too much time on Spiritualism). For years I've wanted to read about Houdini, which I didn't recall until I learned that the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, where I work, has a large collection of his letters, memorabilia and photographs (many of which Silverman included in his book). It was totally worth the wait. What a man! What a dreamer!

"The English vocabulary promises to be exhausted in the efforts of people to describe their astonishment." - from a newspaper review of one performance

Erwin says

I wanted to learn more about Houdini but this was way too descriptive for me...

John A says

Fascinating history - shows all sides of Houdini's personality.

Ted says

Not a run of the mill Houdini Bio, with lots of interesting information and descriptions of his Many accomplishments.
