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Review:

Houdini: The Elusive American

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Houdini: The Elusive American, Martin Begley (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), ISBN 978-0-30023-079-6, pp. 232, \$26, £16.99.

The latest in a long series of Houdini biographies, Adam Begley's *Houdini: The Elusive American* is truly a page turner. Coming out in the Yale Jewish Lives series, the book is an admirable work of synthesis that condenses the life of the master showman and escape artist (1874–1926) into a brisk narrative of less than two hundred pages. For readers relatively unacquainted with Houdini, this is an excellent and compelling introduction to an entertainer who – unlike so many of his contemporaries – continues to exercise fascination nearly a century after his death. For those who know Houdini's life story from previous biographies, much of the book's contents will seem familiar, although a number of key episodes definitely benefit from Begley's retelling.

As many previous biographers have emphasized, Houdini's life was a uniquely American story of scrappy determination and fierce upward mobility. Houdini had no formal education, but possessed a formidable and seemingly tireless work ethic, claiming that "five hours is a full night's sleep for me. I can do with less" (quoted on p. 65). Houdini was born, as Ehrich Weiss, in 1874, just a few years before his Hungarian Jewish family came to America. He later legally changed his name to Harry Houdini. The family initially settled in Wisconsin, but Ehrich and his father subsequently moved to New York, and found work in the garment industry cutting linings for neckties; the rest of the family then followed. Ehrich was fascinated by magic and determined to be like his idol, the great French magician Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, whose memoirs riveted and inspired him (and after whom he then named himself). Ehrich left the garment industry, and for much of the 1890s worked on the margins of American show business, performing as "Houdini" in dime museums, medicine shows, beer halls, circus sideshows, and other small-time entertainment venues. He partnered with both his brother, Theodore "Dash" Weiss (who later became a successful performer in his own right), and, following their marriage in 1894, with his wife, Wilhelmina "Bess" (née Rahner). Houdini got his big break five years later when the vaudeville manager Martin Beck saw his act in St. Paul and booked him for the big-time, insisting that he focus on handcuff escapes: "A year under Beck's management transformed Houdini into a highly paid headliner on the

vaudeville circuit: regular raises pumped his weekly salary up to \$400" (p. 40). An even more successful (and even more lucrative) extended European tour followed. Returning to the United States at age thirty, Houdini had seemingly achieved the American dream. An immigrant success story, yes, but what made Houdini's a Jewish life?

This book's focus on Houdini's Jewishness, such as it is, comes as a welcome addition to the Houdini bookshelf. The relevant discussion logically begins, as Begley does, with attention to Houdini's father, Rabbi Mayer Samuel Weiss, who instilled in his son Ehrich both a lifelong love of books and a lifelong fear of failure that haunted him no matter how successful he became. When Rabbi Weiss lost his job in Appleton, Wisconsin, and the family was compelled to move to Milwaukee, Ehrich's boyhood was effectively curtailed. By the age of twelve, Ehrich was on his own, having run away, tramping and riding the railways as far as Kansas City before belatedly returning home nearly a year later. When Rabbi Weiss died in New York in 1892, Ehrich and his siblings were left to provide for themselves and for their mother. While Houdini nurtured fond memories of his father, despite whatever disappointment he may have felt, his attachment to his mother was extremely close, so much so that the phrase "intense devotion to his mother" (p. 73) strikes me as an understatement. Even when he was married, "his mother remained paramount in his affections" (p. 19). Houdini's desire to be close to his mother continued after her death, partly explaining his interest in Spiritualism in the last decade of his life.

Begley does a nice job of narrating various episodes from Houdini's life, but Houdini's Jewishness drops out of sight for much of the book – in no small part because Houdini himself, although he made no effort to conceal the fact, was not eager to proclaim that he was a Jew. Begley chronicles Houdini's extramarital affair with Charmian London, his aborted friendship with the overly credulous Spiritualist Arthur Conan Doyle, his feud with the spirit medium Mina "Margery" Crandon and her supporters, and the contested circumstances of his death. While appearing to set the record straight on the cause of Houdini's premature death, Begley also uncovers the strong undercurrent of antisemitism animating the much discussed "Margery" affair, demonstrating how defences of "Margery" were "tinged with bigotry" (p. 165), and the investigation of her mediumship was tainted by the "stench of antisemitism" (p. 166).

Given Houdini's involvement, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, in a fifteen-episode serial, four feature films (two of which were

Hollywood productions), and numerous non-fiction films, many of which were integrated into his live performances, the author's dismissive assessment of the significance of film for Houdini, not to mention his assertion that "the magic of the moving picture killed the magic of the escape artist" (p. 122), is wide of the mark. Here as elsewhere, Begley follows the trail of prior biographers, echoing their conclusions, rather than digging into primary sources – or at least casting his net more widely for secondary sources – to complicate reductive formulations of this kind.

In life as in death, Houdini's relationship to Judaism was ambivalent. One suspects that certain Jewish traditions were visible reminders of the Old World which Houdini hoped to leave behind, along with his birth name. He married a Catholic woman, and his primary affiliations were with the fraternity and professional community of magicians. After his death, following his instructions, Houdini's body was embalmed, which was clearly "a violation of Jewish law" (p. 185). Yet, Houdini insisted that in order for his brother "Dash" to receive his part of the inheritance (Houdini and Bess had no children of their own, only pets), his brother's "surviving children shall have been confirmed according to Jewish law and tradition (Orthodox or Reformed) or shall be so within three months of my death" (quoted on p. 175). By cobbling together fragments like these, Begley formulates as good an explanation of Houdini's relationship to Judaism as I have read, saving the payoff for very near the end of the book (spoiler alert):

He wasn't an atheist; he wasn't even an agnostic. He certainly wasn't a Christian (though he liked to celebrate Christmas and regularly sent out Christmas cards). He wasn't in league with Jews bent on world domination, or with any other kind of Jew – once he'd been bar mitzvahed he rarely set foot in a synagogue. It's much easier to say what he wasn't than to say what he was, to put a label on his hopeful, skeptical, decidedly undogmatic faith. He believed in a supreme being; he believed in the afterlife. He observed the anniversary of his father's death by reciting Kaddish, the ritual prayer of mourning, wherever he happened to be. Other Hebrew rituals he disregarded or adapted to suit his purposes. Perhaps he should be called a self-liberating American Jew [pp. 171–2].

Others might be more inclined to call Houdini a secular Jew. Given that it is not entirely clear how Begley has arrived at his intriguing, though generally circumspect, conclusions about Houdini's Judaism, it is hard to know for sure what to make of them.

Houdini: The Elusive American is, regrettably, devoid of either footnotes

or endnotes. Is the same true of all books in the Jewish Lives series? This may be an issue only for scholars and for “collectors of Houdiniana” (p. 188) who, admittedly, are not Begley’s primary readership, but it does limit the utility of the book for future researchers, and constrains the reviewer’s ability to assess it as a contribution to the existing body of knowledge about Houdini. Coming to the end of a book of this quality (and a university press publication at that), to find only a cursory and all-too-brief “Note on Sources”, lively as Begley makes it, is a disappointment. The absence of detailed references is especially glaring, given Houdini’s own issues with the referencing of historical claims. It was by checking Houdini’s sources that several generations of French magic historians – from Maurice Sardina to Christian Fechner – were able to reveal the manifest weaknesses of the overreaching book *The Unmasking of Robert Houdin* (sic), which Houdini published in 1908 and dedicated to his father. Begley perceptively tabs this publication not only as an “appalling jumble of a book”, but also as “a crucial moment in Houdini’s life” (p. 72). In the case of both the late Kenneth Silverman’s still definitive biography, *Houdini!!! The Career of Ehrich Weiss* (1996), and of William Kalush and Larry Sloman’s *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America’s First Superhero* (2006), which Begley rightly characterizes as “meticulously researched” (p. 196), entire additional volumes were required to present the references underpinning the meticulous research that had gone into each of these books. Perhaps Begley’s notes too will one day be made available – if not in a separate volume, then at least online. Other researchers could then pick up more readily where Begley left off. After all, the issue of Houdini’s Jewishness (and Judaism) has by no means been exhausted.

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