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Social Studies

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Biography

Harry Houdini: The Man and His Magic

by Andy Tang



Genre	Comprehension Skills and Strategy	Text Features
Biography	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Compare and Contrast• Fact and Opinion• Predict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Captions• Glossary

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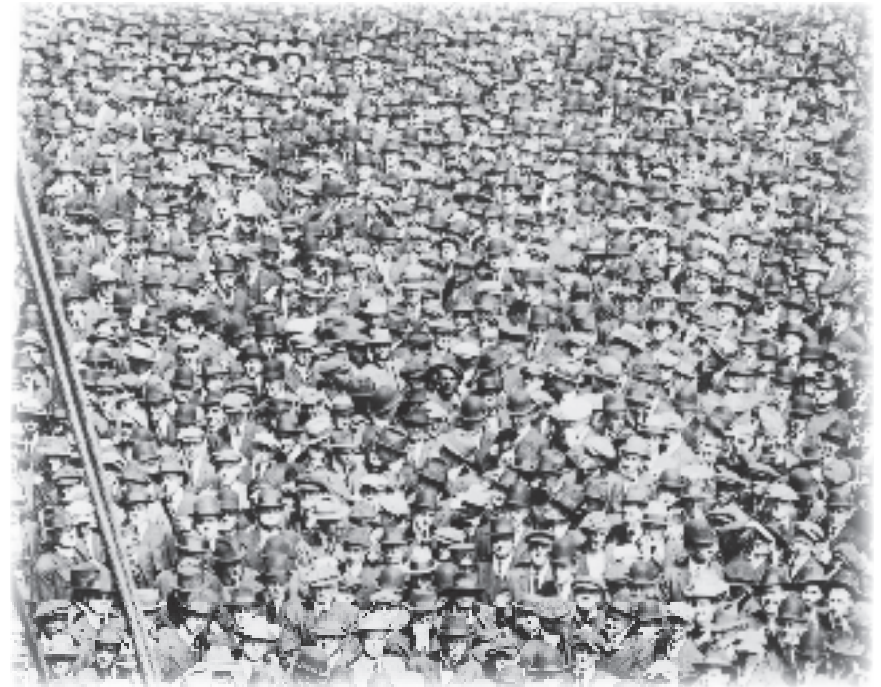
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Harry Houdini: The Man and His Magic

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Harry Houdini could **escape** from all sorts of tight spots, including handcuffs and locked trunks. He shocked audiences when an elephant **vanished** into thin air right in front of them! He is still known today as the world's greatest **magician**. Who was Harry Houdini? How did he perform his feats of magic?



Houdini made this 10,000-pound elephant disappear.



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Harry Houdini was born Erik Weisz on March 24, 1874, in Budapest, Hungary. The name *Weisz* was changed to *Weiss* by American officials when the family immigrated to the United States. His father was a rabbi, or a Jewish spiritual leader.

Soon after settling in Wisconsin, the family fell on hard times and was deep in debt. When Erik was about thirteen years old, he and his father moved to New York City. His mother and four brothers would soon join them in the **bustling** city.

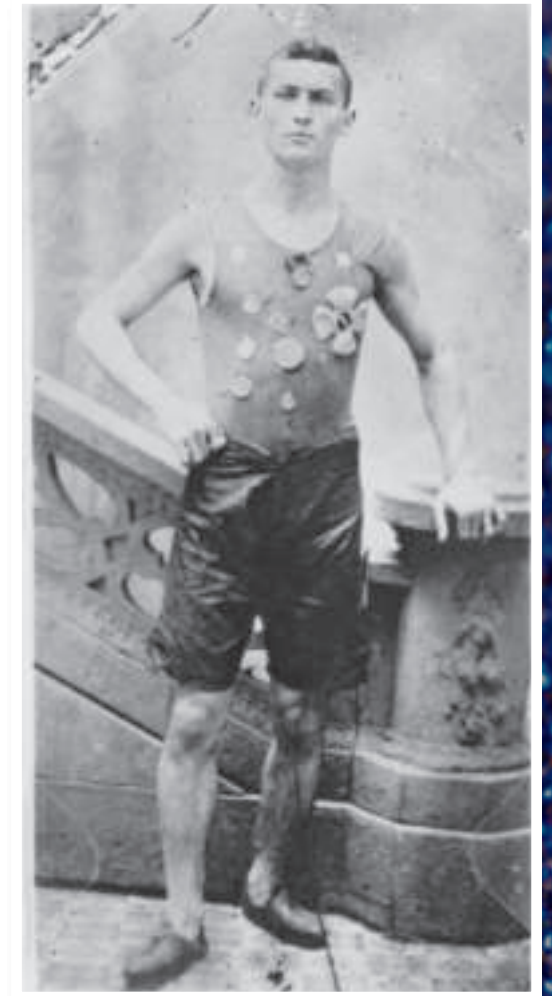


Budapest, Hungary



Erik saw a traveling magic show as a young boy in Wisconsin. He was so inspired by the show that he learned to perform as a trapeze artist at the age of nine.

Erik was an athletic young man. He played different sports such as swimming, boxing, and track. The strength he gained from such sports would prove useful in his future profession.



Erik Weisz shows off the track team medals that he won.





When Erik Weisz was about fifteen years old, he read a book by the French magician Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin. From then on Erik wanted to become a professional magician. He added an *i* to Houdin's name and, as a tribute to his hero, Erik Weisz became Harry Houdini.



Harry Houdini's early performances took place at amusement parks, museums, and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. He often performed with his brother, Theo. They called themselves the Houdini Brothers. For their act called the Metamorphosis, Harry was handcuffed inside a sack and locked in a trunk. Somehow he would free himself and switch places with Theo, who was standing beside the trunk.



The Houdini Brothers





In 1894, while performing on Coney Island in New York, Harry met Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner, a singer and dancer. Harry and Bess, as she was called, married a few weeks later. Bess replaced Theo and worked as Harry's assistant for the rest of his career.

For the next several years, Harry Houdini performed mostly card tricks and other traditional magic acts, such as making objects disappear. He found audiences at fairs, music halls, and circuses. The work required a lot of travel, and times were tough. Houdini's dreams of fame and success seemed to have **crumbled.**



Harry and Bess Houdini pose for a photograph.



In 1898 Houdini developed his handcuff challenge. In this act the magician said he would pay one hundred dollars to anyone who gave him handcuffs he could not escape from. This handcuff escape became an important part of Houdini's act. He never had to pay anyone the one hundred dollars.



Harry and Bess Houdini, sitting in the front row on the right, performed with the Welsh Brothers Circus in 1895.





In 1899 Houdini's fortunes would change. Houdini's handcuff escapes caught the attention of a promoter for a chain of theaters. He encouraged Houdini to concentrate on escape acts. He signed Houdini as the featured performer for his theaters.

Soon the talented magician was escaping from locked trunks and prison cells. For free publicity Houdini would ask the local police to lock him up in a jail cell. He always escaped.



In 1900 Houdini and his wife took their show to Europe. At London's top police station, Houdini escaped from a pair of handcuffs. In Paris he jumped into a large river with handcuffs on and **appeared** above the surface with his hands freed.

In 1905 Houdini returned to the United States and continued to amaze people with his spectacular escapes. Audiences watched him escape from sunken crates, burglarproof safes, a rolltop desk, and a giant football.



Thousands of people watched Houdini's escapes. This display in the lobby of a theater in Salem, Massachusetts, shows Houdini's feats.





In 1913 he introduced his most famous stunt, the Upside-Down Water Torture Cell. In this act, Houdini was locked in a water-filled, glass-and-steel cabinet while hanging upside down by his feet.

Although Houdini was known for his escape acts, he pursued other interests as his fortunes grew. In 1910 he flew a plane over Digger's Rest in Australia. This was the first sustained flight on the Australian continent. In 1919 Houdini starred in several silent movies, including *The Master Mystery* and *Terror Island*.



Houdini performs for children in the hospital.



Houdini explained some of the secrets to his tricks in books that he wrote. Many handcuffs could be opened with properly applied force. Sometimes he carried hidden lock picks or keys. In the *Metamorphosis*, the trunk had a hidden side panel. This allowed Houdini to escape.



Houdini escapes from a milk can filled with water.





When Houdini was handcuffed, nailed inside a crate, and then thrown underwater, the crate would be rigged. Houdini would remain submerged as long as possible to increase the audience's suspense. He spent hours practicing holding his breath in the bathtub to increase the drama during his performances.



On October 31, 1926, Houdini died from an infection following a burst appendix. He was fifty-two years old.

Probably no **monument** could preserve the achievements of someone such as Houdini. But people all over the world still recognize his name. His huge collection of books on magic can be found in the Library of Congress. He has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. On July 3, 2002, the United States Postal Service issued a Harry Houdini stamp. Houdini's fame has lived on.



Bess Houdini put together this booklet in honor of her husband.





Glossary

appeared *v.* came into sight.

bustling *adj.* busy, hurried.

crumbled *v.* fallen to pieces.

escape 1 *v.* to get free from. 2 *n.* act of escaping.

magician *n.* one who entertains with magic.

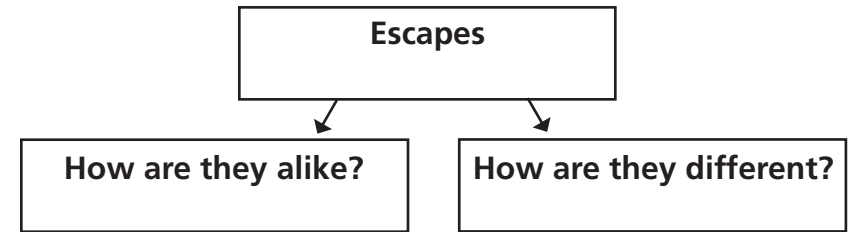
monument *n.* something that honors a person or event.

vanished *v.* disappeared, especially suddenly.



Reader Response

1. You have read about the various escapes that Houdini performed during his career. Use a chart similar to the one below to give examples of how his escapes are alike and how they are different.



2. Tell about something in Houdini's childhood that could have influenced his adult life as a magician.
3. What words other than *escape* can you use to describe Houdini's tricks?
4. Nonfiction uses captions to help you learn more about photographs, illustrations, and the topic. Tell something you learned from a caption in this book.

