INTRODUCTION

Harry Houdini was the world’s most famous magician . . . but before his name became legend, who was young Houdini?

This is a story about what might have happened to him as a boy to turn him into such an extraordinary man.

The book is set in New York City, 1886. Harry Houdini is just a penniless street urchin dabbling with a few escape tricks. But when a well-known magician goes missing in mysterious circumstances, Harry and his friends, Arthur and Billie, are sucked into a deadly adventure.

Harry must put all his extraordinary skills into action - not just to solve the mystery—but to stay alive.

When he falls into the clutches of some of Manhattan’s most dangerous villains, his spectacular escapes won’t be for show—they’ll be a matter of life and death!

Simon Nicholson grew up in Raynes Park, London. He worked in theatre for a while before starting to write stories, mainly for children. Since then he has written books, plays and many episodes of internationally successful children’s television shows. He has been nominated for BAFTA and RTS awards.

Look out for Young Houdini: The Demon Curse, the second book in this Young Houdini series.

What readers say about Young Houdini: The Magician’s Fire

‘This book is fun, fast-paced, and well-written. Populated with magic tricks, illusions, sneaky villains, and death defying escapes, it was a really fun read.’

‘I loved the story, especially the friendship factor and the revealing of the magic tricks’

‘...historic New York City was painted in clear details that made for a great backdrop.’
Can you find these hidden words about things in the story?
The words may go across, down or up!

- Houdini
- Great Train Escape
- Padlock
- Cake
- Ukelele
- Theatre
- Magician
- Library
- Purple Smoke
- Tightrope Trick
- Whirlpool
- Key
CAN YOU MATCH THE OBJECT TO THE CHARACTER?

Draw a line from each object to the name of its owner!

- Books: Boris
- Lock: Billie
- Hat: Artie
- Guitar: Harry
- Mustache: Herbie
**NEW YORK—WHAT HAPPENED WHERE?**

*Young Houdini: The Magician’s Fire* is set in 19th century New York.

Imagine you are making a film of the book and are thinking about the places where you will film. Here are some key locations in the story, which you will need—next to each location describe one of the scenes you will film there—for example, the library is where Harry and his friends research the mysterious stranger with a moustache.

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<tr>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>DESCRIBE A SCENE FROM YOUR FILM, SET IN THIS LOCATION</th>
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<td>Grand Central Station</td>
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<td>The Wesley Jones Theatre</td>
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<td>New York Public Library</td>
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HARRY’S ESCAPE TRICKS

Escapology is the art of escaping from chains, and other restraints and traps, such as handcuffs, straitjackets, cages and barrels, coffins, bags, fish tanks, and burning buildings.

In Young Houdini: The Magician’s Fire Harry performs several escape tricks, and in real life the escapologist Harry Houdini was famous for a number of daring and thrilling escapes, including:

THE MILK CAN ESCAPE where he was handcuffed and sealed inside an oversized milk can filled with water, and then locked inside a wooden chest.

THE SUSPENDED STRAITJACKET ESCAPE where he was strapped into a straitjacket and suspended from a tall building or crane. It took him 2 minutes and 37 seconds to escape.

THE BURIED ALIVE STUNT where he was strapped in a straitjacket, sealed in a casket, which was then itself buried in a large casket filled with sand.

During his career, Houdini explained some of his tricks in books written for the other ‘magicians.’ In Handcuff Secrets (1909), he revealed how some locks and handcuffs could be opened with force applied to specific pressure points, others with a looped shoe lace. At other times, he carried concealed picklocks or keys. When tied down in ropes or straitjackets, he gained wiggle room by breathing out and puffing out his chest as he was being tied up, thus enlarging his shoulders and chest; he also moved his arms slightly away from his body.

Houdini was also an expert at card tricks, and a great supporter of other magicians. For many years he was President of the Society of American Magicians.

Find out some more about magic tricks from books and the internet – and choose a trick to teach yourself and impress your friends!

Here are some books you might find useful for this.

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<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PUBLISHER</th>
<th>ISBN</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ben Denne</td>
<td>Magic Tricks to Make and Do</td>
<td>Usborne</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karl Fulves</td>
<td>Easy to Do Magic Tricks for Children</td>
<td>Dover</td>
<td>978-0486276137</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joe Fullman</td>
<td>The Great Big Book of Magic Tricks</td>
<td>QED/Quarto</td>
<td>978-1848351226</td>
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</table>
Do some research about the real Harry Houdini.
Which of the following is fact or fiction?

1. Houdini was born in Hungary
2. As a boy he was called Harry Weiss.
3. He called himself Harry Houdini, after the French magician Jean Robert-Houdin.
4. He performed a stunt where he was buried alive.
5. He was a champion cross-country runner.
6. His best friends were Billie and Artie.
7. As a child he earned his living on the streets as a shoeshine boy.
8. He made his public debut as a trapeze artist, calling himself ‘Prince of the Air.’
9. His early tricks included an escape trick on the railway line, and leaping between speeding streetcars.
10. His most famous act was the Chinese Water Torture Cell in which he was suspended upside-down in a locked glass and steel cabinet full to overflowing with water.

**FACTS:**

1. Houdini was born in Hungary
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**FICTIONS:**

6. His best friends were Billie and Artie.
7. As a child he earned his living on the streets as a shoeshine boy.
9. His early tricks included an escape trick on the railway line, and leaping between speeding streetcars.
10. His most famous act was the Chinese Water Torture Cell in which he was suspended upside-down in a locked glass and steel cabinet full to overflowing with water.

**ANSWERS:**

1. Fact
2. Fact
3. Fact
4. Fact
5. Fact
6. Fiction
7. Not sure
8. Fact
9. Fiction
10. Fact
TRY THIS QUIZ!

N.B. Sometimes there is more than one right answer

1. *Young Houdini: The Magician’s Fire* is set in Manhattan, U.S.A., in 1886. Manhattan is an area in
   a. New York
   b. New Orleans
   c. Los Angeles

2. To unlock the padlock holding him chained to the railway line, Harry uses
   a. a file, hidden in his sleeve
   b. a bent nail, hidden in his mouth
   c. a key on a string under his shirt

3. Which of these tricks are performed by Herbie Lemster, Harry’s magician friend?
   a. A floating trick over a bed of spikes
   b. Producing rabbits from a top hat
   c. A flower growing out of his open right hand

4. When Harry first sees Boris Zell in the theatre after the show, he notices that he has
   a. a large gold watch on a silver chain
   b. an ebony walking stick with a carved handle
   c. a silver brooch with a snake and sword design

5. To get into Boris Zell’s hotel, Harry and his friends cause a diversion by
   a. Artie playing the ukulele badly
   b. Harry shouting ‘Look over there!’
   c. Billie kicking over a garbage can

6. Which of these are in Harry’s new trick, re-enacting the Amazing Rescue of Herbie Lemster?
   a. A straitjacket
   b. A cage and water-filled vat
   c. A loaded cannon
   d. Purple smoke
Write a Newspaper Piece about Herbie’s Disappearance

Read this extract from page 42, and Chapter 6 (pp. 44–52), about the disappearance of Herbie Lemster. Use the template below to collect and organise all the information given in the book about Herbie’s disappearance, and then write a newspaper report about this event.

Harry swung round. He saw Billie and Arthur, their arms pointing up at the window. Further down the street some of the passers-by had stopped and were staring up too... The silhouette in the window was no longer just moving about, it was tripping, staggering. Not only that but someone else seemed to have entered the dressing room... it clearly wasn’t someone Herbie Lemster was happy to see...

First make some notes for your report:

Who is this report about?

What is the report about?

Where did these events occur?

When did this event happen?

Now, using the notes, write your report:

NAME OF THE NEWSPAPER:

HEADLINE FOR YOUR REPORT:

INTRODUCTION:
Briefly sum up what has happened.

MAIN IDEAS:
This section tells your readers what actually happened, with details.

CONCLUSION:
What could happen now?
WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Here is an excerpt from the last two pages of *Young Houdini: The Magician’s Fire*:

There he was. The man in the pale suit. The one he had glimpsed ten storeys up, the one who had written in the notebook as the crowd cheered. He was standing just a short distance down the street, staring directly up to Herbie Lemster’s office window. And he stayed like that, staring, as Harry felt a strange twitching sensation in the fingers of his right hand…The door opened. Harry watched it, and tried to look up, but his head was too heavy. He saw a pair of polished shoes, and the hems of some pale suit trousers, step into the room. They crossed to a point just a short distance away from him.

‘Your greatest achievements do indeed lie ahead of you,’ a voice said. ‘You’ll discover more shortly, when you wake up.’

Harry tipped forward onto the rug. He landed right next to the polished shoes. He saw his own face, reflected back to him in the gleaming leather. It was curved, out of shape. Who was this man? What was his purpose? Most importantly, what did he mean by ‘greatest achievements’? Harry felt those strange little twitches quivering through his body again, and his heart pounded, as he readied himself for whatever lay ahead…

But—for the time being—his eyes flickered shut.

And he stopped seeing anything at all.

This is how *Young Houdini: The Magician’s Fire* ends, with Harry and his friends unconscious in the theatre office, and the pale-suited man in the room with them.

**Look for clues in the book and in the excerpt above, and think about Harry, Artie and Billie, the characters you have got to know in *Young Houdini: The Magician’s Fire*, and their adventures so far.**

- What do you think might happen at the start of the next book about Harry?
- What are they like?
- Why might the mysterious stranger be interested in them? How do they tackle challenges and danger?

**There are other possible clues earlier in the story—for example on p198 the pale-suited man talks about ‘the Monticelso Case’—what could this be?**

Then have a go at writing a first page for the next book, beginning with the words:

‘Harry opened his eyes.’
Here’s a poster being designed for the new Herbie Lemster Theatre and the show which Harry takes part in at the end of the story.

It’s got the names of all the artistes but it needs some description about their acts—can you add this in?

STARRING
HARRY HOUDINI

WITH
BRUNO

PEARL-DIVING DANCERS

THE ENGLISH NIGHTINGALE

YOUR FAVOURITE COMEDIAN

JUGGLING ACROBATS

COSSACK DANCERS

AND
HERBIE LEMSTER
THINGS TO TALK ABOUT

Reading the book
Set the scene briefly before reading the book—talk about the period, the Manhattan location, and Houdini himself. See the Author’s Note at the beginning of the book.
Then let everyone experience the book as a whole, and with time to think about it and their response to the story.

Talking about the book
Get everyone to share their first responses to the book. This could be with everyone together—or discussion in pairs or small groups, before sharing key feelings and questions.

Ask lots of open questions to get people talking:
◆ What did you like best in this book?
◆ What do you remember most?
◆ What didn’t you like?

Then talk about the story in more detail — here are some themes you could follow:
◆ Was this book what you expected?
◆ Did you read it straight through, or did it take a while?
◆ What age person do you think would like this book best? Why?
◆ What did you think of the characters? Who is your favourite? Why?
◆ How does the author build up tension in the story?
◆ Did you follow the plot? What did you think of the way the story turned out? Had you worked out what might happen? How?
◆ What did you think at the very end of the book? (See activity sheet ‘What happens next?’)
◆ What do you know about the real Houdini? (See activity sheet ‘Houdini—Fact and Fiction!’)
◆ Does the book give you a picture in your mind of New York in those times? (See activity sheet ‘New York—what happened where?’)
◆ Harry’s tricks are scary and difficult, and need complete concentration: talk about things which you have done which have been really challenging. How did you get on? How did you feel?
◆ What does this story tell you about friendship and teamwork? What happens when Harry isn’t listening to his friends? In pairs you could put together and role play a conversation about what’s important in teamwork.
ACTIVITY PACK

ACTIVITY IDEAS

Talking with the author
It’s great to talk directly with an author about their work—through a website or email, or by actually meeting face-to-face. Collect from everyone the questions they would like to ask the author, Simon Nicholson, about Young Houdini: The Magician’s Fire and about being an author, and then get in touch with Simon via his website: http://www.simonbnicholson.com/

Write a review of the book
Have a look at some book reviews on websites such as Books for Keeps http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/reviews
Then ask people to write their own review of Young Houdini: The Magician’s Fire—make it at least 100 words in length.
◆ Give the essential information about the book: Title, author, publisher
◆ Briefly summarise the story
◆ Say what works for you—and what doesn’t
◆ Most important of all, what are your feelings and thoughts about the book? Would you recommend it to other readers?
The review could be written as a blog, or a piece for a magazine or website—or it could be a PowerPoint presentation.

Make a plan of what you want to say and what could go on each slide.

Why do you think people will want to read this book?
Include in the presentation:
◆ An attention-catching title and first slide
◆ Simple, clear bullet points
◆ Excerpts from the story

Harry, Billie, and Artie—who is your favourite character?
On a flip chart make two columns.
In the first column, for each character, collect a list of things about them—what they are like, what they think, how they do things.
In the second column, next to each point, give a reference to the story, or a quote, the story to back up what you say about the characters. Ask everyone to vote for their favourite character.
**ACTIVITY IDEAS**

**Be a researcher!**

Do you know what all these things are? Look them up in books or on the internet, ask people, or see if you can work out the meaning from the story.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>WORD</th>
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<td>Side-walk (p13)</td>
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<td>Ticker-tape (p15)</td>
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<td>Diner (p20)</td>
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<td>Streetcar (p21)</td>
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<td>Illusionist (p26)</td>
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<td>Proscenium arch (p35)</td>
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<td>Pandemonium (p50)</td>
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<td>Telegram (p81)</td>
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<td>Vaudevillian (p166)</td>
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**Billie’s adventures**

Before this story starts, Harry’s friend Billie has had lots of adventures, and with Harry and Artie she has quite a few more! She calls her adventures ‘stunts’ and gives them special names to remember them by.

**What happened in each of these stunts?**

- The Louisiana Hay Wagon (p3)
- The Knotted Sheet Dangle (p19)
- The Tennessee Stage Coach Squeeze (p38)
- The Glue Pot Scramble (p58)
- The Atlantic Laundry Caper (p108)
- The Wesley Jones Theatre Dash (p186)
- …and here’s one of Harry’s stunts...The Hotel Crosby Disappearing Act (p87)
ACTIVITY IDEAS

**Reading faces - and first impressions!**

As a magician Harry needs concentration, observation skills, and attention to detail.

His first sight of Boris in the theatre is brief, but he takes in a lot of information about Boris’s appearance:

> A bulky figure, swathed in a dark cape. He was hunched over a briefcase, an arm delving inside it. The face glanced up at Harry, an oiled red moustache curling, two piercing eyes, a long, thin nose. On the collar of the cape, a silver brooch: a snake spiralled round a silver sword. From the briefcase a wisp of purple smoke.

With this detail Harry and Artie are able to do research in the library and identify Boris.

They also decide that his appearance is unnerving—*those glittering eyes, that long thin nose*—and that he must be a magician—and a sinister one too.

How wrong they were!

And how wrong we often are in our first impressions of people!

**Using books, newspapers, magazines or the internet, find pictures of faces that are likely to be unfamiliar to your group. Remove any clues or identification and ask people to**

**a.** Look at each picture for 2 minutes—then cover it and describe the person in as much detail as possible

**b.** Look at the picture again and jot down their thoughts about the person – what they’re like, what they might do

**c.** Then check their impressions against the real-life information about that person
MORE READING

About Houdini

Vicki Cobb
Harry Houdini (DK Biography)
DK Publishing
978-0756612450

Sid Fleischman
Escape! The Story of the Great Houdini
Collins
978-0060850968

Robert Kraske
Harry Houdini, Master of Magic
Scholastic
978-0590424028

Mary Pope Osborne
Hurry Up, Houdini! (Magic Tree House)
Random House
978-0307980458

More adventure heroes

Charlie Higson
Young Bond: Silverfin
Puffin
978-0141343372

Andrew Lane
Young Sherlock Holmes: Death Cloud
Macmillan
978-1447265580

Rick Riordan
Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief
Puffin
978-0141346809
ANSWERS

Wordsearch solution

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Quiz answers

1 – a
2 – b
3 – a & c
4 – c
5 – a & c
6 – b
7 – a
8 – b & d