Houdini and Me
by Dan Gutman

THEMES
• Modern Fantasy
• Time Travel
• Friendship
• Bullies

ABOUT THE BOOK
Harry has always admired the famous escape artist Houdini. And when Houdini asks for help in coming back to life, it seems like an amazing chance . . . or could it be Houdini’s greatest trick of all?

Eleven-year-old Harry Mancini is not Harry Houdini—the famous escape artist who died in 1926. But Harry does live in Houdini’s old New York City home, and he definitely knows everything there is to know about Houdini’s life. What is he supposed to do then, when someone starts texting him claiming that they’re Houdini, communicating from beyond the grave? Respond, of course.

It’s hard for Harry to believe that Houdini is really contacting him, but this Houdini texts the secrets to all of the escape tricks the dead Houdini used to do. What’s more, Houdini’s offering Harry a chance to go back in time and experience it for himself. Should Harry ignore what must be a hoax? Or should he give it a try and take Houdini up on this death-defying offer?

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

• Harry Mancini was born in Harry Houdini’s house on West 113th Street in New York City. How has he become obsessed with the great magician? What information about Houdini is revealed as the novel progresses? Harry Mancini learns from Houdini that the key to a magic trick is “misdirection.” Explain how Gutman uses misdirection to keep the reader in suspense. How might this also be called a twist in the plot?

• At what point is it obvious that this novel belongs to the genre of fantasy? Modern fantasy is rooted in reality. What is the reality of this novel? Discuss the concept of time-travel fantasy. In this type of fantasy, the main character often travels through time while in a dream. There is usually a device, or element of magic, that aids the time travel. What is the magical device in this novel? This device has meaning other than simply making the time travel possible. What is especially symbolic about the device?
• Describe the friendship between Harry Mancini and Zeke Austin. Which boy is the leader of the pair? What unique qualities does each boy bring to the friendship? While in a coma, Harry tries to tell Zeke that he is communicating with Houdini. What is Zeke's reaction? Discuss what happens when Harry wakes from the coma and tries to explain to Zeke what had happened. Why is this scary to Zeke?

• Discuss the text messages that Harry receives from Houdini. Why are they written in capital letters? Explain the first message, “YOU COULD HAVE ESCAPED” (p. 44). Houdini tells Harry, “WE EXIST IN PARALLEL WORLDS” (p. 53). How does this explain the supernatural and spiritual elements in the story? Harry knew that Houdini had spent much of his career trying to expose fraudulent spiritualists. How does Houdini explain his change in views regarding spiritualism?

• There is often a struggle between good and evil in fantasy. Discuss the point when Harry Mancini realizes that Houdini is evil. How does Harry eliminate the evil force of Houdini? When Harry tells Houdini that he thought he was a good guy, Houdini replies, “I’M A DESPERATE GUY. DESPERATE MEN DO DESPERATE THINGS” (p. 183). How does Harry himself feel desperate and powerless?

• Harry reveals that he is afraid of heights and bullies. Houdini tells him, “YOU CANNOT GET PAST FEAR UNLESS YOU CONFRONT IT” (p. 89). How does Houdini help Harry confront his fear of heights? Who is the bully in Harry’s life? Debate whether Harry is ready to confront his bully when he awakes from the coma.

• At the beginning of the novel, when Zeke suggests that they put a penny on the train track in Freedom Tunnel, Harry replies that it sounds like an urban legend. What is an urban legend? Discuss whether Harry feels as though he has been a main character in an urban legend when he wakes up after a week in a coma.

• Explain how the chapter titles advance the plot of the novel. What is the climax, or turning point, in the novel? Falling action is the series of events that happen after the climax and moves the plot toward a conclusion. Discuss the falling action in Houdini and Me. What is significant about the cell phone at the end of the novel? Dialogue adds to the action and characterization in the novel. How are the characters of Harry and Houdini developed through the use of dialogue?

• Good fantasy allows readers to see themselves more clearly. How does Harry see himself more clearly at the end of the novel? In what way might readers see themselves? In fantasy, there is a sense of wonder as well as a familiar feeling. How does the novel appeal to the reader’s sense of wonder? Explain the familiar feeling created by Harry’s relationship with his mother and with Zeke.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Gutman is the author of Houdini and Me. He grew up in New Jersey loving sports, which inspired him as an adult to write his Baseball Card Adventure series, beginning with Honus & Me, which was nominated for eleven state awards and adapted for television. Other titles of his include the My Weird School series, The Genius Files series, The Kid Who Ran for President, and many more. He lives with his wife and two children in New York City. Houdini and Me is Dan’s first title with Holiday House.