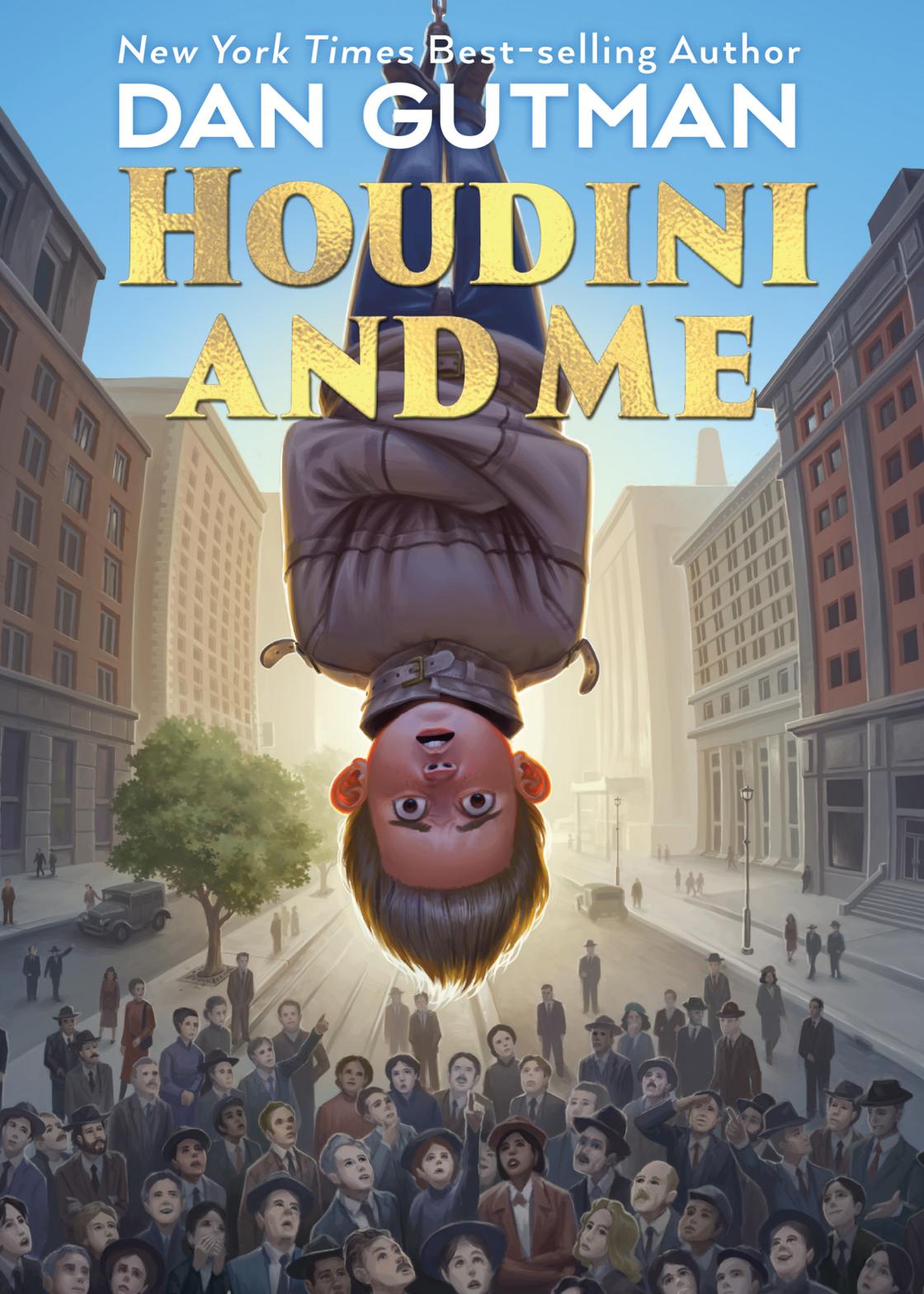


New York Times Best-selling Author

DAN GUTMAN

HOUDINI AND ME



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HOLIDAY HOUSE  NEW YORK

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Printed and bound in November 2020 at Maple Press, York, PA, USA.

www.holidayhouse.com

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gutman, Dan, author.

Title: Houdini and me / Dan Gutman.

Description: New York City : Holiday House, 2021. | Audience: Ages 8–12.
Audience: Grades 4–6. | Summary: Eleven-year-old Harry Mancini lives in the house where Houdini spent his final years, so he has always been interested in the famous magician, and has even learned a few simple magic tricks; he just never expected Houdini to contact him from beyond the grave—and what Houdini wants him to do could well cost Harry his own life.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019049888 | ISBN 9780823445158 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Houdini, Harry, 1874–1926—Juvenile fiction. | Escape artists—Juvenile fiction. | Near-death experiences—Juvenile fiction.

Identity (Psychology)—Juvenile fiction. | Paranormal fiction. | CYAC: Houdini, Harry, 1874–1926—Fiction. | Escape artists—Fiction. | Near-death experiences—Fiction. | Identity—Fiction. | Supernatural—Fiction.

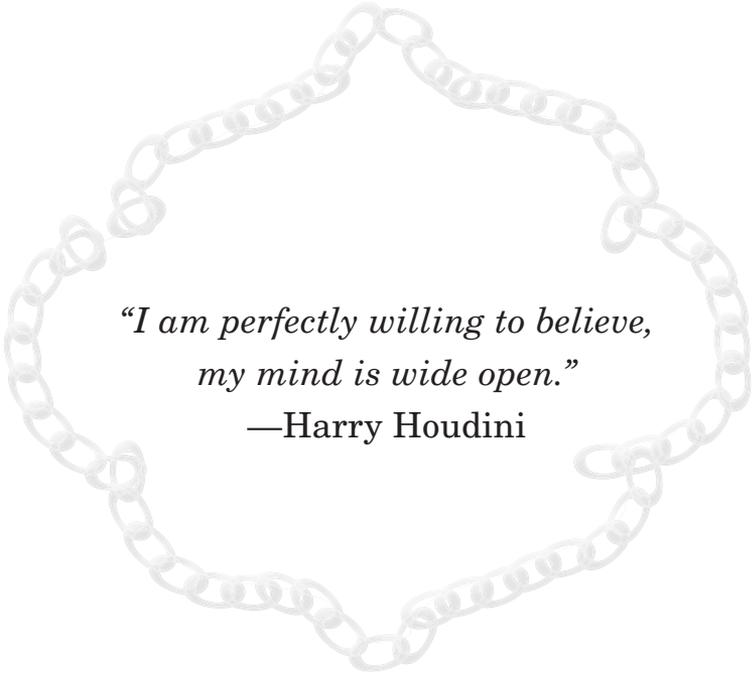
LCGFT: Paranormal fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.G9846 Hr 2021 | DDC 813.54 [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019049888>

ISBN: 978-0-8234-4515-8 (hardcover)

*Thanks to: Amy Toth, Dr. Scott Kolander,
Elizabeth Law, Eryn Levine, Howard Wolf,
John Simko, Lauren Nicole, Lisa Lee,
Nina Wallace, Peter Lerangis, Ray Dimetrosky,
and the Houdini Museum in New York City.*



*“I am perfectly willing to believe,
my mind is wide open.”*

—Harry Houdini



THE GREAT MANCINI

I was born in Harry Houdini's house.

I didn't just say that so you'd keep reading. I said it because it's true.

You don't have to believe me. If I wasn't me, I wouldn't believe me either. But it's true, I swear. Look, I took this picture of the plaque outside my front door.

I live on West 113th Street in New York City. If you don't know New York that well,



HOUDINI

1874-1926

The magician lived here from 1904 to 1926, collecting illusions, theatrical memorabilia, and books on psychic phenomena and magic.

Famous for daring escapes, no restraints-ropes, chains, straitjackets, bank vaults, or jail cells-could hold him.

HISTORIC LANDMARKS PRESERVATION
CENTER

113th Street is just three blocks from the most famous park in the world—Central Park. My house is right at the beginning of Harlem.

Anyway, this is where I was born and where I've lived all my eleven years. That's right, I wasn't born in a hospital. It's a long story that I won't bore you with, but my parents weren't able to get to the hospital in time, so I was born right here on 113th Street. I wonder if my folks saved money on hospital bills.

A century ago, this was Harry Houdini's house. He lived here for the last twenty-two years of his life.

Most likely, you know Houdini's name, but you probably don't know all that much about him. He was a famous magician and illusionist, but he was *most* famous for being an escape artist. They would lock him up in handcuffs, in a jail cell, a rolltop desk, a giant milk can, and a mailbag. He was even locked inside a hot-water heater!

He'd always find a way to get out. A Chicago envelope company once sealed him inside the world's largest envelope. He escaped. Houdini even escaped from inside a giant football.

They could lock him up in just about *anything* and he would find a way to get out. There was nobody else like him. A century ago, Harry Houdini was one of the most famous people in the world.

When I walk up the stairs in my house, it's cool to think that Houdini walked up those same stairs. When I go down to the basement, it's the same basement where Houdini practiced his escapes. When I go to sleep at night,



I'm sleeping in a room where Harry Houdini might have slept. When I get up in the morning, I step on a floorboard next to my bed that makes a loud creaking sound that Houdini might have heard when he lived in the house a hundred years ago.

Living in the house once owned by this famous guy, I naturally became curious about him. I've read a bunch of biographies and learned a lot. To be completely honest, I'm sort of obsessed with Houdini, and with magic.

People walking past my house are always stopping to take pictures of the plaque on the wall and asking me questions about Houdini. It makes me feel like I'm a little famous too. I like that.

Oh, I forgot to tell you. The funny thing is, my name is Harry too. My parents didn't name me after Houdini. They just liked the name. And my last name is Mancini, which sounds a lot like Houdini. Mancini is an Italian name. Houdini wasn't Italian. In fact, he wasn't even born with the name Houdini.

Harry Houdini's *real* name was Erik Weisz.

He was a Jewish kid who was born in Budapest, Hungary. His family came to America and lived in Wisconsin before they moved to New York City when Erik was a teenager.

Growing up, Erik's idol was a French magician named Robert-Houdin. Harry just added an "i" to the end of "Houdin" and called himself "Houdini" for the rest of his life. I don't know why he changed his name from Erik to Harry. I guess he thought "Harry Houdini" sounded better than "Erik Houdini."

Lots of kids from school have seen the plaque on the wall, of course, so everybody knows I live in Houdini's house. Sometimes they ask me to do magic tricks, so I learned a few.

You know how grown-ups always say, "Don't try this at home, kids"? Well here's a really simple magic trick you can try at home to impress your friends. All you need is a raw egg, a little salt, and a smooth, level table.

First, challenge your friends to try to balance the egg on its end so it stands up all by itself. It's really hard to do, and they probably won't be able to do it.



Now here's the trick—while your friends are trying to balance the egg (and not looking at you), take a little pinch of salt in one hand. Wave your other hand above the table and say some magic mumbo jumbo like “abracadabra” or “hocus-pocus.” While they're watching that hand, use your other to put the pinch of salt on the table.

This is called “misdirection,” and it's the key to many magic tricks. Magicians get you to watch one thing so you don't notice something else they're doing at the same time.

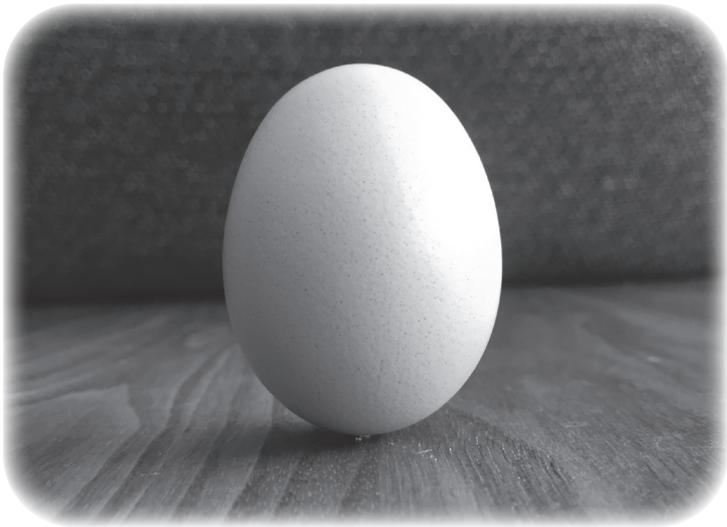
Anyway, build a *tiny* mound of salt on the table with your fingers. Just a few grains will be enough to form a little base that will hold up the egg, the same way a tee holds up a football for a kickoff. Position the egg on top of the salt until the egg stands up. Then quietly blow away any extra grains of salt.

Presto! You've done it, as if by magic. For the fun of it, tell your friends some more mumbo jumbo about how the position of the sun and the moon on that particular date make it possible to make an egg stand up on one end. That's



garbage, of course, but it *sounds* like it makes sense.

It's pretty cool to see the look on your friends' faces when the egg stands up by itself. Maybe I'll be a magician when I grow up. My best friend, Zeke Austin, already calls me "The Great Mancini."



Houdini was a really mysterious guy, so naturally there are rumors that my house is haunted. In fact, the lady who owned the house after Houdini died was convinced there was buried treasure in the basement. She



spent a year digging around down there, but she never found anything.

People make up crazy stuff like that all the time. Like at my school, kids are always saying the boys' bathroom on the second floor is haunted. They probably say the same thing about the bathroom in your school. Kids always say weird stuff to try to freak people out.

The thing is, when Houdini was alive, a lot of people believed that he had supernatural powers. He did such amazing things that people couldn't believe he was just doing tricks.

For instance, he would be handcuffed, shackled, and locked in a big wooden trunk that would then be thrown into a river. It looked like he was sure to drown and die a horrible death. Then, a few minutes later, he would pop up to the surface with no handcuffs or shackles on him. The trunk was still locked and sealed. Nobody knew how Houdini got out. The only explanation seemed to be that he could make the atoms of his body dematerialize and then rematerialize outside the box. People thought that he must have had superpowers. That nothing could kill him.



Well, they thought that until Houdini actually *did* die for real, on Halloween night in 1926. But even after his death, people were convinced that he would somehow find a way to come back from the dead. To this day, every Halloween, mediums all over the world hold séances to try to communicate with the spirit of Houdini.

When he was alive, Houdini never claimed to have supernatural powers. He insisted that he was just doing tricks. But he also said something else. He told his wife Bess that after he died, if there was any way for him to come back from the dead and communicate with her, he would do it. If *anybody* could come back from the dead, it would be Harry Houdini.

I never thought too much about any of that creepy stuff. A house is just a house, right? It doesn't matter who lived in it a hundred years ago. There's no such thing as ghosts, and the living can't communicate with the dead.

But then one day something happened that changed my mind. And my life. I'll tell you the whole story.





THE FREEDOM TUNNEL

Riverside Park is a long, thin strip next to the Hudson River. It's just five blocks from my house. Hidden underneath the park is a tunnel that's nearly three miles long. It's called the Freedom Tunnel. Back in the 1980s the train line that went through the tunnel was shut down for a while, and a bunch of homeless people and graffiti artists set up a tent city down there. They were called the Mole People.



Hardly anybody knows about the Freedom Tunnel. Well, I know about it. My best friend Zeke knows about it. And now you know about it. But pretty much nobody else does. Iron gates cover the archways now to prevent people from going onto the tracks and getting run over by trains.



Zeke and I hang out in Riverside Park all the time after school. (His full name is Ezekiel but everybody calls him Zeke.) Zeke is African American and I'm white. I don't know why

I'm bothering to tell you that, but just in case you're interested, that's who we are.

Anyway, Zeke and I were hanging out near the Freedom Tunnel one day after school and complaining about our parents, which is what we usually complain about. Zeke was saying that his parents wouldn't let him play some video game because they think it's too violent.

"I told 'em that playing violent video games is a great way to blow off steam," Zeke explained. "That way, kids don't become violent in real life. But they weren't buying it."

I only have my mom. My dad died a long time ago. I was complaining that my mom won't let me have my own cell phone. Everybody else in fifth grade has a cell phone except me. My mom says that if I had a phone I'd spend my whole day staring at the screen instead of interacting with the real world. When I tell her that's not gonna happen, she comes up with other reasons why I can't have my own phone: I'll lose it, or there's inappropriate stuff online, or companies will be able to track me and invade my privacy. You know,

all the usual reasons parents don't want their kids to have phones.

I have to admit she's probably right about that stuff, but I still want a phone! All my friends have one. I told Mom that I need one so I can reach her in case of an emergency, but she wasn't falling for that. Everybody knows that when you get a phone for emergencies, you end up using it to text goofy pictures and stuff to your friends.

"Hey, are you coming to my birthday party?" Zeke asked me out of the blue.

"When is it?"

"Next Thursday," he told me. "I e-mailed you an invite. Didn't you get it? You didn't reply."

"I didn't check my e-mail."

"You need to get a smartphone, dude," Zeke told me. "Join the 21st century."

"I know."

"It's an escape-room party," Zeke said.

"Escape rooms are lame," I replied, even though I had never been to an escape room and had no idea what they were like.



“No, this one is supposed to be cool,” Zeke told me. “They lock you up in a dungeon and you have to figure out how to open a bunch of locks to get out. Just like your man, Houdini. C’mon, it’ll be fun.”

“Okay, I guess I’ll go,” I replied.

Suddenly a train roared through the Freedom Tunnel. We rushed over so we could see it through the gate. Trains go all the way up to Albany and Maine on the tracks. I like to watch them go by. It’s one of the few places you can see the trains up close.



“Hey, did you ever put a penny on a train track?” Zeke asked me as we peered through the gate.

“No, why would I do that?” I replied.

“If you put a penny on the track and a train runs over it, the penny gets flattened, like a pancake,” he said. “It’s cool.”

“Couldn’t that derail the train?” I asked.

“A penny derail a train?” Zeke said with a snort. “You nuts?”

“Did *you* ever do that?” I asked him. “Put a penny on a train track?”

“No, but I heard kids talk about doing it.”

“Sounds like one of those urban legends,” I told him. “I bet the penny just gets knocked off the track.”

“No, I’m pretty sure it’s for real,” he replied.

The train tracks were just a few feet away, on the other side of the gate. You can’t climb over the gate because it goes all the way up to the top of the arch. There was no lock on the gate, but it looked like it was all rusted shut. Just for the heck of it, I gave it a yank.

It swung open with a loud creaking sound.



Zeke and I looked at each other and smiled.

“You wanna do it?” we both said at the same time.

“I will if you will,” he said. “You got any change on you?”

I reached into my pocket. I had a quarter, a nickel, and four pennies.

I peered inside the dark tunnel. There were signs on the wall: KEEP OFF THE TRACKS. NO TRESPASSING. NEW YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT.

“This is illegal, you know,” I pointed out.

“So is jaywalking,” said Zeke.

“What if we get caught?” I asked.

“We won’t get caught.”

We tiptoed into the tunnel and closed the heavy gate behind us. It was mostly dark in there, with a little light shining down through a grate in the ceiling. We could see graffiti written on the walls and some rubble scattered around the ground. Something smelled bad. The gravel crunched under our feet.

“There are probably rats in here,” I said, almost whispering.

“I don’t want to know what I’m smelling,”



Zeke said, his voice echoing off the walls of the tunnel.

“How often do the trains come?” I asked.

“All the time,” Zeke replied. “My dad takes it to Albany to go to work. They come every half hour or so.”

“We really shouldn’t be doing this,” I said. “You hear stories about kids getting killed doing dumb stuff like this.”

“Dumb kids get killed,” Zeke told me. “We’re not dumb.”

Let me say right here that putting pennies on train tracks is definitely one of those things you *shouldn’t* try at home. It’s just stupid and dangerous. But my mom once told me that the human brain isn’t fully formed until we’re in our twenties, and that’s why kids can’t be thrown in jail for doing the stupid things we sometimes do.

Zeke got down on his hands and knees and put his ear against the track.

“What are you doing?” I asked him. “You wanna get your head crushed?”

“They say that if you put your ear against



the steel track, you can feel the vibrations of a train coming from miles away,” he told me.

“That’s probably another one of those urban legends.”

“No, it’s true,” Zeke insisted. “Hey, I think I feel something! A train is coming! Quick, put the coins on the track!”

I looked around to see if anybody was watching before digging the coins out of my pocket again and carefully laying them in a row on the track. I could hear the rumbling of the train now, and I could see two headlights in the distance.

“I see it!” I said. “This is gonna be cool.”

Zeke scampered out of the way. I was about to do the same when I felt a tug on my left foot.

“Wait up!” I shouted. “I think my shoelace is stuck!”

“Very funny,” Zeke replied.

“I *mean* it!” I shouted. “The tip is stuck under the rail!”

“Well pull it out!” Zeke yelled at me.

I tried to pull it out.

“I can’t!” I shouted back. “I can’t see it! It’s too dark in here!”

Now we could both see the light of the train approaching in the distance. This was not funny. This was dead serious. My shoelace was somehow stuck under the rail. The thought crossed my mind—*I could die in this tunnel*. I fumbled with the lace trying to get it loose.

“The engineer will stop the train if he has to!” Zeke shouted as he waved his hands in the air. “He must be able to see us by now.”

But the train was not slowing down. Nobody was putting on the brakes. Why would they? The engineer probably wasn’t even looking ahead. There was no reason to think anybody would be inside the tunnel.

The rumble had become a thunderous roar that echoed off the walls as the train got closer. I kept tugging at my shoelace, desperately trying to get it loose. Sweat was pouring down my forehead. I wiped it away with my sleeve.

“Hurry up!” shouted Zeke.

I looked up. The train was closer.

I felt my heart racing. In a few seconds the train would be right on top of me.

“Forget about the lace!” shouted Zeke. “Just pull your sneaker off!”

“I can’t!” I shouted back. “The knot is too tight!”

Zeke crawled over to try to pull my sneaker off. But he couldn’t get it off either.

“Yank it!”

“I’m trying!”

There was no more time. The train was right on top of us. There was nothing we could do.

“Roll!” Zeke shouted, as he dove out of the way.

I rolled my whole body over, stretching out so I was as far away from the rail as possible. My shoelace was taut, still attached. If I was going to lose my foot, that was the price I’d pay for my stupidity. I just didn’t want to lose my life.

The train sounded like a rocket taking off. I couldn’t communicate with Zeke anymore. The noise was too loud. I covered my ears to block it out.



As the train roared past, it must have sliced through my shoelace, because I fell backward, landing on the rocks next to the tracks and hitting the ground hard.

And that's all I remember.

