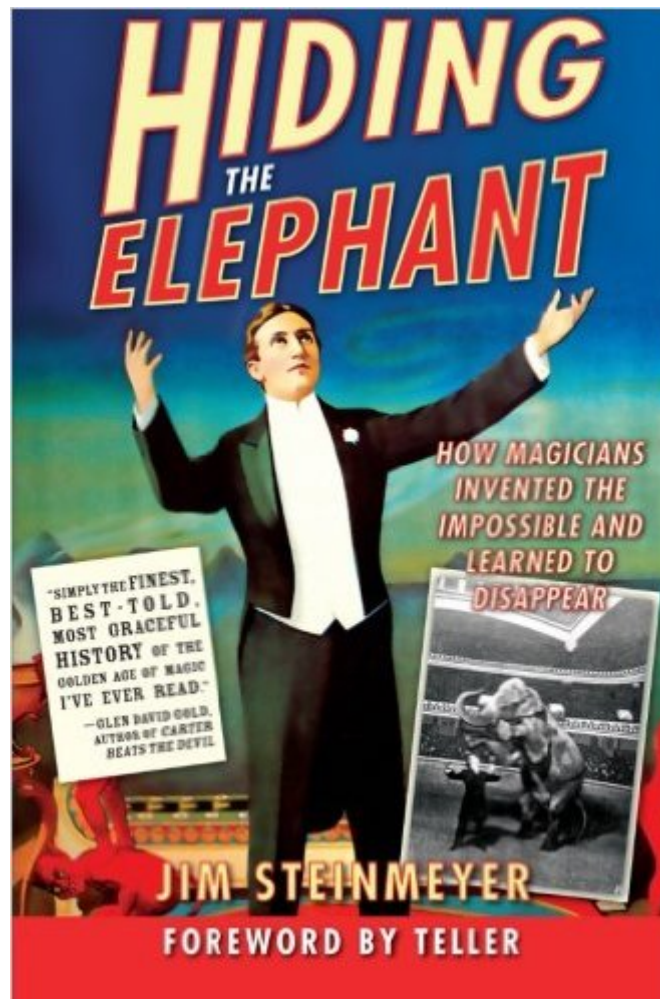


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Hiding The Elephant: How Magicians Invented The Impossible And Learned To Disappear



Synopsis

Now in paperback comes Jim Steinmeyer's astonishing chronicle of half a century of illusionary innovation, backstage chicanery, and keen competition within the world of magicians. Lauded by today's finest magicians and critics, *Hiding the Elephant* is a cultural history of the efforts among legendary conjurers to make things materialize, levitate, and disappear. Steinmeyer unveils the secrets and life stories of the fascinating personalities behind optical marvels such as floating ghosts interacting with live actors, disembodied heads, and vanishing ladies. He demystifies Pepper's Ghost, Harry Kellar's Levitation of Princess Karnak, Charles Morritt's Disappearing Donkey, and Houdini's landmark vanishing of Jennie the elephant in 1918. The dramatic mix of science and history, with revealing diagrams, photographs and magicians' portraits by William Stout, provides a glimpse behind the curtain at the backstage story of magic.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The magic duo Penn and Teller have a trick called "The Honor System." Instead of putting a curtain around the box from which Teller is to escape, they simply invite onlookers to keep their eyes closed, and open them once he is out. Those who take them up on the deal see Teller locked into a secure wooden box, and after a spell of eyes closed, they see him magically, inexplicably free. Those who peek see just how easily the trick is worked. Penn and Teller know that they can give away the secret of this or other tricks and there is still a show. The gadgets used in the illusions aren't the story, the performance is. Jim Steinmeyer knows this, too. He has designed illusions for magicians and Broadway shows, so he knows all the hardware. In his book *Hiding the Elephant*:

How Magicians Invented the Impossible and Learned to Disappear_ (Carroll and Graf), he has given away lots of secrets. But he is not the stupid Masked Magician, revealing tricks for notoriety and fortune. What he has given us is an appreciation of magic history and the refinements in fooling people by clever stagecraft, but he has never forgotten to remind us of the dazzle of the performance. The elephant of the title is one named Jennie, who, at the New York Hippodrome in 1918, vanished from her box on stage, under the direction of none other than Harry Houdini. The hardware he used to make Jenny disappear was surprisingly simple (as are most of the gadgets that make magical effects). It was a product of a boom in the art of conjuring that had started around sixty years before.

In an extremely entertaining and insightful new book, Jim Steinmeyer has explained the world of the magicians. How they do it, how they entertain audiences, and how, throughout the years they struggled for their careers, begged, borrowed or stole people, secrets and ideas. Imagine a cross between Longitude and Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women and you'll have a good idea of Hiding the Elephant. It's a fun, lively and well-written read, a page-turner organized like a mystery to keep pulling you from story to story. This book is a combination of history, biography and science, a tribute to the art of magic. Some of the most interesting parts of the book are the accounts of magicians like Davenport, Maskelyne or Devent, who changed what magicians did on stage and the way magicians went about deceiving people. The author's "cast of characters" have fantastic stories. Robert Houdin was asked to perform magic for the French government and stop an uprising in Africa. Magicians Devent and Melies discovered cinema. Houdini became a star by turning to dangerous escapes. Morrit reinvented the way tricks were accomplished. Jarrett decided to publish a book of all his secrets, explaining his best tricks for a few dollars. Some of these stories end in triumph, some in tragedy. Many magicians found that their careers ended when movies became popular. One famous magician, at the height of his fame, tragically lost control of his hands and ended his life as an invalid. The author points out that the greatest magicians were successful because they were partly artists and partly scientists.

For years we've heard that it's all done with mirrors. Hiding the Elephant is the story of just how it's done. Why we insist on looking here while they're doing something else over there. Starting with Houdini's greatest feat, attempting to make a live elephant disappear, the author has tracked and explained the discovery of various optical illusions, like how to become invisible by using mirrors. For example, a magician in Paris actually made transparent ghosts, who performed in plays that

terrified his audiences. (I was surprised at how clever and simple this could be done: again, think "mirrors.") Two spiritualist brothers also produced the illusion of ghosts, although their version was much less optical and much more psychological. These secrets are often easy to understand, although I noticed that some secrets are explained in deliberately sketchy form and remain concealed by the end of this book, like a discussion of the famous "Sawn in Half" illusion. (Once a magician, always a magician?) The author concentrates on why various secrets were useful and how some were stolen or hoarded over the years. (Through some detective work, he does manage to explain how Houdini did the elephant trick.) This backstage element of the book might be the most interesting part. For example, there were magicians who thought that secrets were worthless and actually told audiences how they did it, because they thought that made their magic tricks even better! The book is fast moving and well written, leading us from one mystery to another and re-introducing characters from the past or hinting about what's just around the corner.

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