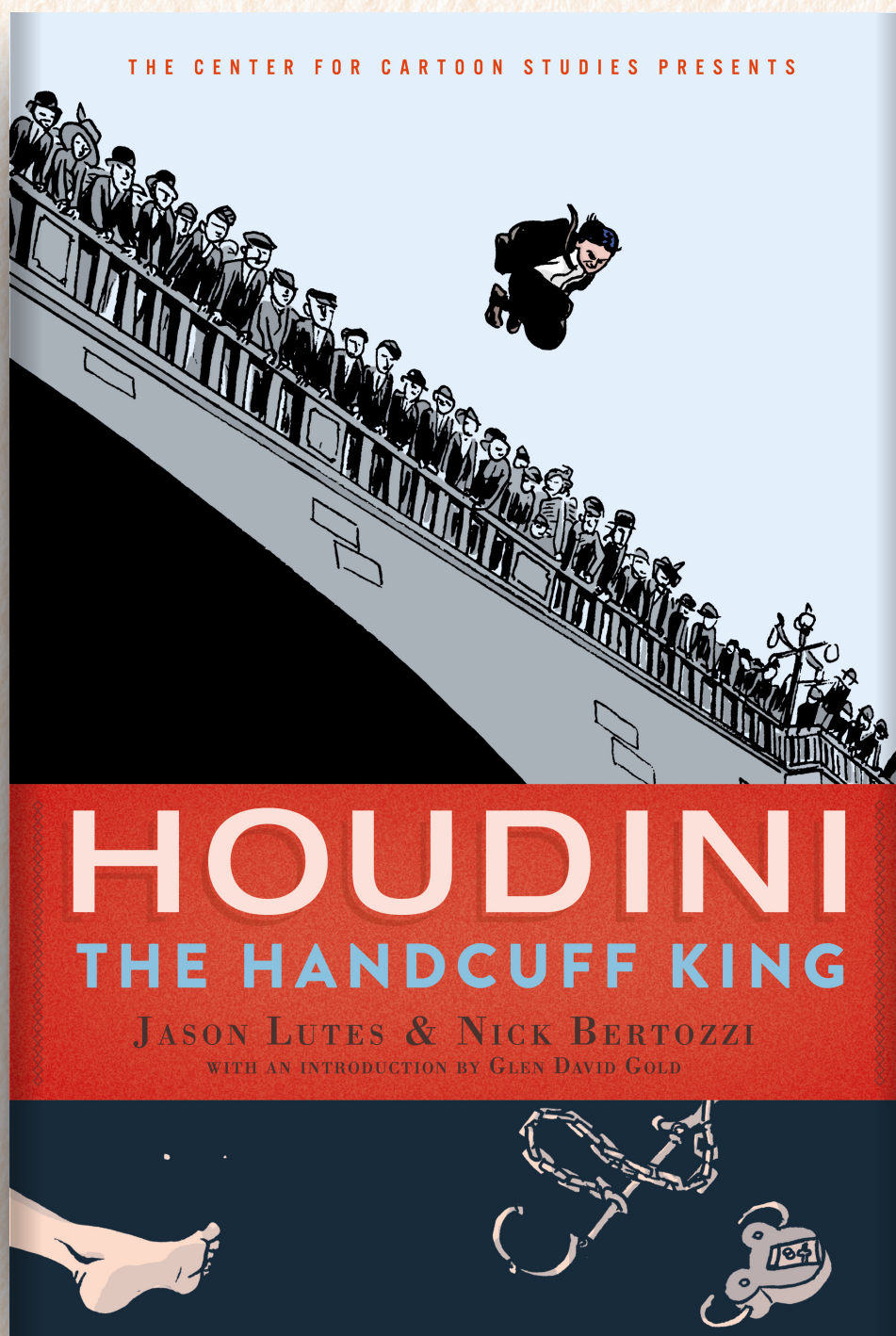


LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

# Educator's Guide | Ages 12 and Up



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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

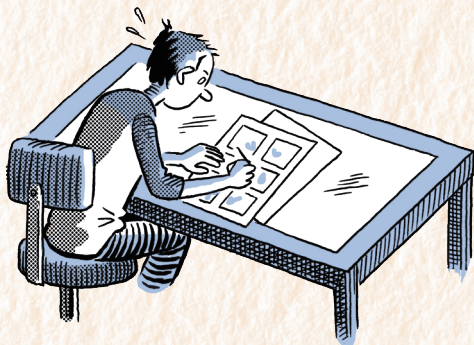
- At the beginning of the book, Officer Hogan mentions that Houdini may have horns on his head. What do you imagine this refers to? Later on, Houdini has Mister Beatty swear a loyalty oath because Houdini is Jewish and Beatty is Catholic. How are the two situations related?
- Houdini chose his stage name from the name of a famous former French magician, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, as a tribute to his idol. However, in his book about Houdin, Houdini reveals that Houdin stole most of his illusions from other magicians. Why do you think Houdini changed his feelings about Houdin?
- Houdini's drive to be the best made him fiercely competitive. He was also very conscious of his public persona and was an intimidating opponent. Where do you think this drive came from? Does he remind you of famous people today? In what way?
- Houdini's wife, Bess, was the love of his life. She was also an integral part of his inner circle as a performer. Unlike many men who are public figures, Houdini was very quick to credit her as his partner. Does this strike you as unusual? Can you think of modern-day equivalents to Houdini and Bess?
- Houdini required his staff to swear absolute loyalty to him for many reasons, but chief among them was to protect his secrets. Today, in the age of the Internet, it's much harder to keep information secret. If you were in Houdini's position, what steps would you take to ensure secrecy?
- Houdini was one of the most popular performers of his day. Audiences of 10,000 or more would come to see him perform in public for free. Who is the modern-day equivalent of Houdini? What makes them appealing?
- In an age where information was circulated by newspaper, handbill, and word of mouth, marketing and publicity were very challenging. Houdini was famous for constantly innovating marketing events (he even had his name written on bald men's heads). Thinking over the past decade, what have been some of the most successful publicity events? Were they reliant on technology like the internet? If you were going to advertise for Houdini today, how would you go about it?
- In this book, the authors conjectured that Bess slipped Houdini the handcuff key while kissing him. In reality, there are no good theories on how Houdini did his tricks. Do you believe Houdini had a contingency plan in case Bess didn't make it in time? If so, how do you think he would have escaped?
- Most of Houdini's tricks depended on his natural agility and athleticism alongside his encyclopedic knowledge of locks. However, he also had to train himself in other ways, such as holding his breath for an unusually long time. What other abilities would Houdini need in order to perform his feats?
- In the later part of his life, Houdini spent time debunking fake spiritualists and showing how the tricks were done during séances. Have you ever seen a spiritualist perform or been to a séance? Did it seem real?
- Public magic feats are still done today. Magicians like Criss Angel and David Blaine have performed widely publicized events for the general public. Would you consider any contemporary magicians or escape artists to be as famous as Houdini? Do you think a modern magician could replicate the career that Houdini had?



## Houdini: The Handcuff King

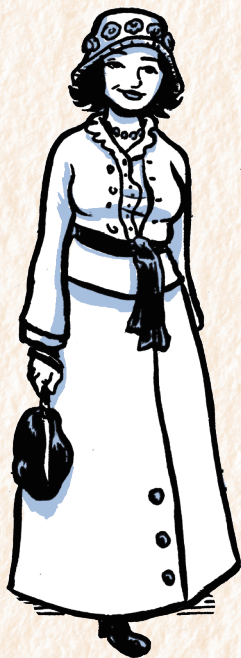
- Based on the portrait of Houdini in the book, do you think he was an admirable person? If you met him, do you think you would have gotten along? Why or why not?

### ACTIVITIES



- Have students interview a classmate (or a family member or a community leader, etc.—be creative!) and then create a mini-biography for that person. Encourage students to think beyond the written word. They can craft a collage, make a video, write a performance piece, set ideas to music, or create a graphic novel. (Social Studies, Vocabulary, Language Arts, Art, Music, [Writing, Speaking and Listening])

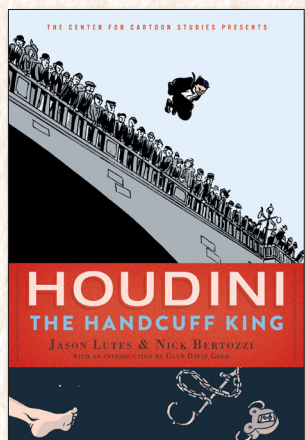
- Have students choose a historic figure they have heard of but don't know much about. Have them do research on that person and then create a simple graphic novel in the style of this series on their subject. You can also have them work with other forms of media, as suggested above. (Social Studies, Vocabulary, Language Arts, Music, Art, [Writing, Speaking and Listening])



- Have students pick a character from any of the graphic novels. Then have them dress up and act like that character. They can interact with one another or you can have a class interview with each individual character. (Social Studies, Arts, Language Arts, Vocabulary [Writing, Speaking and Listening])



## About the Book



9781368022316 HC  
9781368042888 PB

Semitism Houdini fought, to the adulation of the American public; from his hounding by the press, to his loving relationship with his wife Bess, from his egoism to his insecurity; from his public persona—to the secret behind his most amazing trick! And it's all in graphic form, so it's fresh, original, and unlike anything previously published about this most fascinating of American showmen.

## Praise for the book

2008 YALSA Great Graphic Novel for Teens  
2008 *Booklist* Top Ten Graphic Novel for Youth

★ "Bertozzi's illustrations are simply spectacular."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

★ "Avoiding overt, showy tricks themselves, Lutes and Bertozzi use clean, simple storytelling and crisp, clear black-and-white art to create not only a portrait of the man but also that sense of suspense and anticipation Houdini generated in his performances." —*Booklist*

"Lutes and Bertozzi successfully offer a tiny snapshot as a way into a very large life." —*Publishers Weekly*

Kelly Johnston created this guide. He taught high school and college English for over ten years in addition to being the founding artistic director for the Arizona Shakespeare Festival. He currently lives and works in New York City as a freelance theater director and screenwriter.

## About the Author



**Jason Lutes** has been an admirer of Houdini for most of his adult life, and his celebrated graphic novel for adults, *Jar of Fools*, also pays homage to the Handcuff King. His most recent book is *Berlin*.

Jason lives with his partner and two children in Vermont, where he teaches comics at the Center for Cartoon Studies.

## About the Illustrator



**Nick Bertozzi** is an award-winning cartoonist. Some of his most notable works include *The Salon*, *Lewis & Clark*, *Persimmon Cup* (drawn by Pierce Hargan), the *New York Times* best-selling *Shackleton: Antarctic Odyssey*, and the *New York Times* best-selling *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait* (written by Boaz Yakin).

He has received the Ignatz Award and multiple Harvey Awards, and has taught cartooning at the School of Visual Arts for fourteen years. Nick lives in Queens, New York, with his wife and daughters. Visit him online at [nickbertozzi.com](http://nickbertozzi.com).