

# MAGI-GRAM

Official Newsletter of IBM Ring 50 -- The National Capital Ring Volume 59 No. 11 November 2005



**SPOOKY MAGIC--***Hugh Turley brought along a unique magic stand and a dancing skeleton for our Spooky Magic night in October.*

## Columbus Magi-Fest in February

The 75th annual Columbus Magi-Fest will be held Feb. 2-4, 2006, in Columbus, Ohio, and delegates from Ring 50 are certain to be among the Diamond Jubilee participants.

Rich Bloch will be the master of ceremonies for a Friday night headliner show. Some of the featured performers will be Greg Frewin, Junge-Junge, Kohl & Company, Dale Salwak and Mark Wade.

Among the close-up performers on deck will be John Carney, Tim Conover, Paul Gertner, Patrick Przysiecki and David Williamson.

You can check out the convention highlights by going to <http://www.magifest.org/>.

## Grab Bag magic to test innovative skills

You will be able to test your nuts and bolts skills in November when we stage team competition to come up with unique magic effects using odds 'n ends materials.

We will be doing a Grab Bag Challenge Night by breaking into groups to improvise magic routines from miscellaneous unmagical items bought at a variety of stores.

## Special lecture planned for December

Chuck Hickok, author of last year's widely acclaimed book "Mentalism Incorporated," will be the featured lecturer at the Dec. 7 meeting of Ring 50.

At this lecture, Hickok will teach you several easy-to-learn, entertaining routines from his current corporate act that have been audience tested.



Chuck Hickok

Hickok is a corporate entertainer, mentalist and author. He will share some of the secrets for presenting mentalism to corporate clients.

The lecture is free to Ring 50 members. A \$10 fee will be charged for non-members who attend.

There has been high praise from colleagues about Hickok's

presentation. One said his ideas on showmanship inspire and entertain.

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**International Brotherhood  
Of Magicians Ring 50  
The National Capital Ring**

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### NOVEMBER MEETING

Wednesday, Nov. 2, 2005

HOLIDAY INN  
IN ALEXANDRIA

2460 Eisenhower Avenue  
Alexandria, VA

6:00 Cocktails

6:45 Dinner

8:00 Meeting

# Coming Events

## Dave Shepherd Close-up Magic

Dates: Wednesdays from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Place: Mama's Italian Restaurant, 9715 Lee Highway, Fairfax, Va.

Contact: 703-385-2646 or 703-623-3952.

Web site: [www.daveshepmagic.com](http://www.daveshepmagic.com)

## SAM Meeting

Date: Nov. 16 at 7 p.m.

Place: National Press Club, 529 14th Street NW, Washington, D.C.

Theme: Tubes, boxes, or bags

Contact: Ray Eyler at (410) 798-0176 [ceyler1026@aol.com](mailto:ceyler1026@aol.com) or Dwight Redman at (301) 927-7717 or [dredman@comcast.net](mailto:dredman@comcast.net).

## Bob Little's Super Sunday Convention

Date: Nov. 20 from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Place: Holiday Inn, 3499 Street Road, Bensalm, PA. Phone: 215-638-1500

Cost: \$30

Contact: Bob Little Guaranteed Magic, 27 Bright Road, Hatboro, PA 19040. Call 215-672-3344.

## Magic Collectors Association Convention

featuring a flea market, lectures, dealers, tours.

Date: March 30 - April 1, 2006

Place: Holiday Inn in Rosslyn, VA

Cost: Approximately \$200.

Registration fee still not announced.

Attendees must be members of the MCA. The fee to join is only \$25. A membership form is available through <http://www.magicposters.com/images/strobridge/>

[Preview%20of%20ApplicationMCA.cwk\\_.pdf](#).

Contact: Ken Trombly at [ken.trombly@comcast.net](mailto:ken.trombly@comcast.net) or 202-887-5000.

*If you want to begin receiving this newsletter by E-mail only, please let Editor Jim Flanigan know by emailing him at [jflanigan@aol.com](mailto:jflanigan@aol.com).*

## Wednesday Wizardry at Gaithersburg Arts Barn

Who: Now in its third season, this family friendly magic show suitable for ages 10 and up continues on most Wednesday nights through mid-November. It stars Alain Nu, Mark Phillips and Bob Sheets. In addition to Nu, Sheets, Phillips and his partner Karen Beriss, other top magicians will make guest appearances.

Where: The Gaithersburg Arts Barn at 311 Kent Square Road in Gaithersburg, MD.

Dates: Wednesday night performances are scheduled Nov. 9 and 16.

Cost: Tickets are \$15 for residents and \$18 for nonresidents for Wednesday performances. For information and tickets please call 301-258-6394. Tickets can also be purchased online at [www.gaithersburgmd.gov/RecXpress](http://www.gaithersburgmd.gov/RecXpress).

Contact: For more information and directions, visit the Arts Barn website at [www.gaithersburgmd.gov/artsbarn](http://www.gaithersburgmd.gov/artsbarn).

## Denny & Lee Magic Studio Lectures

325 South Marlyn Avenue, Baltimore

**John Born**, a full-time sleight-of-hand artist out of Kansas City, featuring restaurant and walk-around magic as well as "prepared" impromptu magic and new techniques for the coin enthusiast.

Date: Nov. 2 at 7:30 p.m.

Cost: \$20

**Sonny Navies**, offering something for everyone, including the dancing cane among other effects, with routine tips for some other standard tricks.

Date: Nov. 19 at 7:30 p.m.

Cost: \$20

**Francis Menotti**, introducing the Creativity Show, a magic lecture that incorporates exciting new sleights and effects with fun and entertaining exercises that will empower you with the ability to create genuinely new magic of your own.

Date: Nov. 29 at 7:30 p.m.

Cost: \$20

Contact: 410-686-3914

**"Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire"** is the fourth in a series of films based on the popular books by J.K. Rowling. Date: Movie released nationwide on Nov. 18.

Cost: Check local theater listings.

Synopsis: "The fourth Harry Potter adventure, centering on an inter-school competition, boasts details that are as ingenious and original as ever." -- **Publishers Weekly, Best Books of 2000.**



Warner Bros.

"At the midpoint in a *Harry Potter* projected seven-book series, "Goblet of Fire" is exactly the big, clever, vibrant, tremendously assured installment that gives shape and direction to the whole undertaking and still preserves the material's enchanting innocence." -- **New York Times**

## Ring 50 Schedule

November 2

**Grab Bag Night**

December 7

**Lecture**

January 4

**TBA**

February 1

**What's New At Barry's**

March 1

**Lecture TBA**

April 5

**Auction**

May 3

**Dan Lacey Contest**

**New officers elected**

**Saturday, May 20 (Tent.)**

**MAGI-WHIRL**

June 7

**New officers installed, perform**

## The President's Corner

This has been a busy magic month. The chapter once again supported the Bishop Ireton Magic Show. A good number of our members participated both in the stage show and in performing close-up magic after the performance. Thanks to all who made this night such a success.

We continue to enjoy the hospitality of the Holiday Inn as our new meeting place. The dining room has taken care of us. They set up a buffet dinner at a reasonable price. This makes it possible for all of our members to eat and still finish by the 8:00pm meeting start time. The room that they let us use for our meetings is plenty large for our largest gathering.

At our last meeting, we had a good turnout and participation. Before the meeting, a number of members were demonstrating effects or getting advice on new routines. In at least two cases more experienced members were helping a new member to perfect their magic skills. This comradeship and sharing is what makes us such a strong organization. Keep up the good work.

After the meeting, some people went to the bar. At one table, they were just sharing ideas and experiences. At two other tables different members were demonstrating and teaching some magic effects. In the meeting room there were two different groups of people demonstrating their magic skills and getting and giving advice. Also, a number of members were speaking with the evening performers to get more information about the magic that had been performed.

One of my goals for this year has been to increase our membership. I'm very pleased by what I have seen. Three new members submitted their applications at that meeting. There are a number of people waiting to get their IBM International membership approved or reinstated. I encourage you all to make them feel welcome. To these new people, don't be afraid to join in any of our discussion both the formal and the informal ones. I am also glad to see some of members who haven't been active over the last few years getting more involved this year.

Some of our members, who were regulars when we met downtown, have not yet shown up at our new meeting place. I hope those who have not yet tried this new location



**Don Freedman**

will do so soon. It is a little harder for some Marylanders to get to Alexandria. We are trying to make the trip worthwhile by trying to do some different things this year. Our November Grab Bag Magic theme is one thing that hasn't been done recently. You will find our December lecturer both entertaining and enlightening. Why don't you try to make one or both of these meetings.

## **Spooky magic filled with mystery, skeletons, magic chests, ESP cards**

Louis Hofheimer, who performs under the name Captain Token the Magician, opened our October meeting of Spooky Magic by firing off several retorts from a shooting wand. He kept up his fast-paced act with a flaming hat and other fireworks. He concluded with an illusion in which a board of lethal spikes was shoved through a volunteer's arm without any noticeable harm.

Dwight Redman placed a Kennedy half dollar in the hand of a volunteer. After a few waves, the coin mysteriously flipped over.

Rucj Uffelman demonstrated his psychic powers with a set of ESP cards when he correctly picked one of the symbols that a young woman selected after she thoroughly shuffled the cards.

Geoffery Weber baffled everyone next with an "out of body" experiment in which he was able to stop his own heart from beating. To conclude his demonstration, he invited a male member from the crowd to relax in a chair. The spectator's heart also stopped briefly. "I felt calmness," the man admitted afterward.

Hugh Turley was a hit when a skinny skeleton he brought along assisted him in a clever rising card routine. He also

Finally, I am looking for some help. Rucj Uffelman, our treasurer, told me that there has not been a financial audit in the last three years. We both agree that there should be one done annually. All that is involved is reviewing the books to determine that we are adequately accounting for income and expenditures. We need a three-person audit team to do this review. You don't need an accounting background or experience in auditing. If you can balance your checkbook, you are qualified. Please send me an email if you would be willing to serve.

Also, Rucj has asked me to find a replacement for him as treasurer. He has been the treasurer for three years. There is not that much work involved. If you would like to know more of the details, email or call Rucj.

Here is hoping to see you all at our next meeting on November 2<sup>nd</sup>.

entertained everyone with a delightful dancing skeleton puppet whose appendages and skull went flying in various directions.

Ring 50 President Don Freedman introduced us to an invisible apparition named Willy The Wizard. When a microphone was held next to a drinking glass under which an attached nut and bolt were placed, the audience could see as well as hear Willy unscrew the pieces and then put them back together again.

James Munton displayed a locked tea chest in which some audience members were asked to drop wedding rings and watches through a small slot in the top. He produced a glass filled with keys which might unlock the box. Eventually, everyone was able to get their donated valuables back when the box was opened with the last remaining key.

Rick Beatty, who was the evening's host, provided several interludes of magic himself between acts. He offered one impressive feat at the end in which sheets of drawing paper were handed out to a half dozen people. Their works of art were sealed inside double sets of manilla envelopes. When Rick drew a sketch himself, his pumpkin face perfectly matched the drawing inside one of the envelopes selected.



**ILLUSIONIST**--*Greg Clements placed clear panels around a crystal casket before producing several plush toy tigers and then a real life tigress.*



**RISING CARD**--*Dwight Redman watched a chosen card rise out of a deck of cards he sketched on a drawing pad.*



**EMCEE**--*Bob Carnathan was master of ceremonies. He also performed.*

## Stage show benefits Ring 50

Proceeds from a classy stage show at Bishop Ireton High School in Northern Virginia in October will be shared by two area magic organizations.

Ring 50 of the International Brotherhood of Magicians and the local assembly of the Society of American Magicians will benefit along with the school's student stage crew.



**WATCH THE DOT**--*Eric Henning hypnotized the audience into believing he had a big head.*



**ALL TIED UP**--*Noland Montgomery convinced two young men to tie him up, but he was quicker than Houdini when he escaped from the ropes.*

Michael Taggart, another featured performer, premiered his new suspension illusion in which he slowly rose several feet off the stage while creating a snow storm of confetti using a large oriental fan.



# Encore!

Popular show makes comeback



After a three-year hiatus, the Psychic Ghost Theatre above Barry's Magic Shop in Wheaton, Md., returned for an encore of a half dozen shows in October to sold-out audiences. The three-act production featured Barry Taylor and Suzanne Kang.

The three-act show began with flashy magic, including stunning dove productions, and mentalism followed by a terrific rendition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Spirit Cabinet. The last segment involves an intensely spooky séance with the final moments taking place in a darkened setting.

The show, which ran successfully from 1998 to 2002, received critically acclaimed reviews. Lloyd Rose, a theater critic for the *Washington Post*, loved it as did Sarah Kaufman of the newspaper's *Weekend Section*. Tony Perkins, of Good Morning America, interviewed Barry and Susie. And the Psychic Ghost Theatre was listed as one of the top 10 magic shows to see in the United States along with Lance Burton and Seigfried and Roy. The show was even recommended for a Helen Hayes Award nomination.

The show, which took place in an intimate 25-seat theater, will be repeated for private groups in November. Meanwhile, Barry and Susan are considering bringing it back for more public productions.

A combination of theatrical, physical and psychological techniques, mixed with a nice balance of humor to ease the more tense moments, helps make "things happen" for the audience.



## Magical Profiles

# Innovative Oregon magician widely cited

Jerry Andrus, one of the most original thinkers in magic, was profiled in his home town newspaper in Albany, Ore., in October. Reporter Cara Roberts Murez went to the home of the octogenarian performer to see many of his new and old favorites of legerdemain. Andrus calls his domicile the "Castle of Chaos" because it is filled with years of magical gadgets he has collected or developed.

Andrus has spent much of his life changing others' ideas and making up many on his own. What has changed in the last 20 years is that he has more of them. "I have lots of new ideas in here and lots of them I haven't developed yet," said Andrus, who will soon have his own Web site.

Andrus is probably best known as an illusionist who created an eye-defying "paradox box" among other effects. "I've fooled with magic ever since I was in my teens, and I invent all of my own magic now," Andrus told his interviewer.

One might be surprised to learn he is also a bit of an inventor and a poet with an aspiration to be published. "I can take

dictation while I'm walking on the treadmill," said Andrus, who has rigged his computer to his exerciser. He carries around a portable tape player to record his ideas and transcribes them onto his



**DISAPPEARING BALL**--*Jerry Andrus performs his disappearing ball trick at his home in the mid-Willamette Valley of Oregon.*

laptop. He has written a book of card illusions with a companion volume of sketches of the tricks. He also writes a lot of free verse, something he is doing more of lately, and he has written about 400 poems. He has compiled four books filled with magic, philosophy and poetry.

Andrus has appeared on television in 11 different countries. He has performed at the Magic Castle in Hollywood for one week twice each year for more than 20 years. He sometimes gives lectures and performs in other venues.

Andrus' creations include the Tri-Zonal Space Warper. That's a black and white disc with spiral designs going in two separate directions. When he spins it, observers keep their eyes on the center. When they look at a large photo of mountains and clouds, the clouds appear to be drifting.

"I do my own magic and my magic is without misdirection," Andrus said, explaining that he does the tricks himself without getting observers to look away. "It's not visual misdirection. You can call it mental misdirection if you want." He believes his magic is an illusion based on how the retina is seeing a shape. Andrus does not believe in the paranormal. "So many things people believe without any proof. I can't, even if I wanted to," he said.

# Math wizard says brain beats computer

Dr. Arthur Benjamin is both a professor of mathematics and a magician. He has combined his two loves to create a dynamic presentation called "Mathemagics," suitable for all audiences.

The mathematical wizard provided an audience in Washington, D.C., an entertaining afternoon in October demonstrating and explaining his secrets for performing rapid mental calculations faster than a calculator. He was a guest lecturer for the Smithsonian Institution's Resident Associates program.

He has been called "America's Best Math Whiz" by Reader's Digest magazine. He has presented his high energy talk on more than a thousand occasions to groups throughout the world.

Benjamin has appeared on many television and radio programs, including



**MATHEMAGICS**--*Dr. Arthur Benjamin, a professor of mathematics at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, Calif., was a guest lecturer in October for the Smithsonian Residents Associates.*

The Today Show, CNN, Amazing Discoveries! and National Public Radio. He has been profiled in The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, Scientific American, Discover Magazine, Omni Magazine, Esquire Magazine, People Magazine and Reader's Digest.

The mathematical genius also will be on the program "Da Vinci Declassified" on The Learning Channel on Sunday, Oct. 30, at 10 p.m. The show will also air on Oct. 31 at 2 a.m., Nov. 3 at 8 and 11 p.m., and Nov. 6 at 3 p.m. He will appear at the Magic Castle in Hollywood from Dec. 12-18.

Magic Squares are among the topics he says that have fascinated mathematicians and magicians for centuries. Albrecht Durer came up with the first one in a book published in 1514.

# Forbes profiles magician of rich and famous

Steve Cohen, who is known as the Millionaires' Magician, gives demonstrations of mind-reading and sleight-of-hand at society parties and corporate events throughout the world, for audiences that have included David Rockefeller, Jack Welch, Andy Grove, and Michael Bloomberg.

When he is not traveling, Cohen can be found at New York's famous Waldorf-Astoria Hotel performing his public show: "Chamber Magic." Cohen recreates the intimacy of 19th century parlor performances by baffling his guests in the close quarters of a private suite.

Cohen's public and private appearances have become a must-see phenomenon. He has performed at a wide variety of gatherings from the White House Correspondent's Dinner to numerous Fortune 500 corporate events, trade shows and private functions.

Cohen has received widespread media recognition, including NBC's *The Today Show*, CBS *Early Show*, CNN, *Martha Stewart Living*, CBS *Evening News*, *The History Channel*, *The New York Times*, *New York Post*, *The London Sunday Times* and *The Evening Standard*.

Forbes Magazine profiled Cohen in its Oct. 10, 2005 edition. The publication caught up with him at the Waldorf Towers Hotel in Manhattan where he was "casting a spell over the room."

Dressed in a tux and horn-rim glasses, Cohen, 34, "sidled up to a few people and asked if they'd lend him some one-dollar bills." He crumpled up the bills in his fists and, when he opened his hands, out came a few hundreds.

The magazine noted that Cohen made \$1 million last year performing at the homes and corporate events of America's richest people. "He's been flown in private jets all around the country, from Aspen to Cape Cod, playing at the homes of Forbes 400 members Martha Stewart (where he made three spools of thread pop out of a loaf of bread), New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Reebok



**TOP OF HIS CLASS--***Steve Cohen performs at Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.*

founder Paul Fireman (where he miraculously pulled some freshly torn-up \$20 bills—intact—from the toe of a sneaker). His fee: \$10,000 to \$25,000," the magazine reported.

The article continued, "Cohen was raised in the posh Westchester County town of Chappaqua, N.Y., where he was taught the secret arts by his great-uncle,

who had studied under none other than Harry Houdini. When he was 10, Cohen performed his first paying gig, working a kid's birthday party."

After studying psychology at Cornell, Cohen told the magazine, "There were some lean years, just like every entertainer getting their start."

Forbes said that Cohen persuaded the Waldorf in 2001 to give him a suite to perform in every Friday night. "The shows created word of mouth among the well-off who frequent the grandiose hotel, and Cohen's career began to flourish," the magazine said. "People still pay \$55 each to see him perform weekly at the Waldorf."

"Event planners come and immediately book me for their corporate entertainment," Cohen said in the magazine interview.

Cohen, who spends one week a month on the road, is putting together a new show highlighting some of the custom tricks he has performed privately for the ultrarich and powerful, Forbes said.

# Abracadabra

**Magic, mischief and maybe even murder. Believe it. Or not.**

*Reviewed by Anne Ursu*

Soon after he emerged on New York's magic scene in the 1920s, Dai Vernon revolutionized card tricks, transformed them into art. He was, in the words of Karl Johnson, author of "The Magician and the Cardsharp," "magic's Picasso, its Hemingway, its Duke Ellington"; he handled cards "with a gentle grace, coaxing such startling effects from them that even the most experienced magicians were flummoxed."

Vernon achieved his mastery through careful study of the methods of the greatest card artisans of them all — cardsharps, for whom sleight-of-hand is very serious business. Johnson's book is the story of Vernon's quest for one of these sharps, a man who was said to perform a maneuver so difficult that it may as well have been real magic: the center deal.

Whereas traditional card-dealer sleights involve sliding the second or bottom cards from a deck while appearing to deal from the top, dealing from the center would require extraordinary — if not impossible — skill. Vernon heard of the center deal occasionally as he traveled among magicians and gamblers while honing his craft. "Even among the most gifted of the cardsharps," Johnson writes, "this virtuoso remained just a rumor, a fairy tale. . . . With a single deal from the center of the deck, this cardsharp could make all the rules and the very laws of chance itself vanish." But Vernon didn't believe the fairy tale; the center deal was impossible.

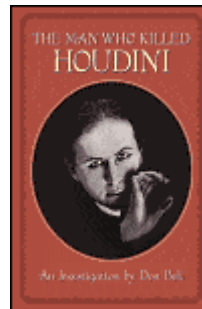
Then in 1932, the magician went to visit a Mexican cardsharp in a prison in Wichita, Kan., to see if he had any good sleights. He asked the cardsharp — who was in jail not for gambling but murder, "You've played cards all your life, have you ever seen anything you don't understand?" He had. "In Kansas City," he said, "I see a fella. He deals cards from the center of the pack." After a long search, Vernon found the virtuoso; his name was Allen Kennedy, and he worked as a dealer in the gambling paradise of Pleasant Hill, Mo.

With the verve of a master storyteller, Johnson follows Vernon and Kennedy through their development as artisans, pausing here and there to dip us headlong into the

vibrantly portrayed worlds of the magician and the cardsharp. "Magician" is part biography, part portrait of an age and part quest narrative. Mostly, though, it is a celebration of the simple ideas that great beauty can be created from something as ordinary as a deck of cards and that the pursuit of that beauty is a project worth a lifetime's dedication.

A card trick approaches true magic in Vernon's hands, but it isn't the kind of magic that journalist Christine Wicker is looking for in "Not In Kansas Anymore." Wicker begins her tale at a vampire ball, telling us, "I had come to this costume party looking for magic, not the tricks of conjurers but the real stuff, the kind of magic that bends reality to a wizard's will." Wicker sees more and more Americans involved in magic, and she believes these people have something to tell us. "Serious journalistic looks at what today's magical communities might have to say to us," she writes, "are rare to nonexistent. It is into that void that we will now step."

Certainly, talking to people who believe in and practice magic is a fascinating proposition, but Wicker quickly shows that her definition of magic encompasses a lot more than the "real stuff." In her view, magic was "going mainstream" in the '70s and "went even more mass-culture" in the '80s with positive-thinking seminars and the self-help movement. "We're uncovering our inherent potential, our



## *THE MAGICIAN AND THE CARDSHARP*

*The Search for America's  
Greatest Sleight-of-Hand Artist*

**By Karl Johnson**

*Henry Holt. 349 pp. \$26*

## *NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE*

*A Curious Tale of How Magic  
is Transforming America*

**By Christine Wicker**

*Harper San Francisco. 275 pp.  
\$24.95*

## *THE MAN WHO KILLED HOUDINI*

**By Don Bell**

*Véhicule. 260 pp. Paperback,  
\$17.95*

**Washington Post Book Reviews**

Oct. 7, 2005

inner wisdom . . . That's magical," she writes. "Every bit of that is magical thinking."

Her investigation, too, proves much more personal than she had initially let on. A few chapters in, Wicker tells us she suffers from a tremendous fear of bad magic, the type that means if you say the wrong thing as your husband walks out the door, something terrible will happen and he won't come back. In the course of the book, she asks a hoodoo practitioner for a charm to make her less afraid to travel, she looks to a Wiccan festival to help her banish self-flagellating thoughts that creep up on her in the dark, and by the end, she is searching to experience real magic for herself.

The book's subtitle is "A Curious Tale of How Magic Is Transforming America," but the tale really amounts to how magic transformed Wicker. That's not necessarily an uninteresting project, but the book cannot decide whether it is a "serious journalistic look" or a personal journey; as a result, it ends up being neither. A book about magic should challenge your notions of what is possible, tickle your sense of wonder — leave you, Horatio, confronted with the hard limits of your philosophy. And while Wicker's book certainly has these moments, they're too distilled to enchant us.

Don Bell, in "The Man Who Killed Houdini," is on a much more concrete search. Bell, a Canadian journalist who died in 2003, was fascinated with the strange death of Harry Houdini. In his introduction, Bell writes that his purpose is to "inquire into the mystery of the magician's death," though one page earlier he describes his project rather more vividly as a "hunt for Harry Houdini's assassin."

Yes, assassin. In the last decade of his life, Houdini devoted considerable energy to exposing fraudulent spiritualists, and according to some, those spiritualists schemed to send Houdini beyond the veil. Was Houdini's death a "spiritualist contract

killing?" If so, the assassin — a college student named J. Gordon Whitehead — certainly chose an unconventional method. Houdini died of peritonitis — an infection of the lining of the abdomen, often caused by a ruptured appendix — nine days after Whitehead punched him in the stomach.

Though he hedges his bets, Bell clearly wants to prove that this was an assassination, and he is willing to make any number of leaps of logic to do so. But the book is not an argument; it is the chronicle of Bell's investigation, all recorded in meticulous detail, as if he had reproduced his datebook. Most of the narrative is focused on dryly reporting the mundane details of his search for anyone who might have known Whitehead — calls to directory assistance, phone conversations reproduced in their entirety over several pages, travel arrangements, meals and snacks, summaries of letters of inquiry, even a supposedly prophetic dream. While Bell litters his narration with portents of explosive revelations to come, he's unable to find any real evidence that Whitehead was trying to kill Houdini. So Bell turns to rather dubious sources to support his theory. He takes Whitehead's signature to a graphologist, who determines that the loops on his "J" are "unpredictable, covert, maybe sinister, like he has a hidden agenda." He describes Whitehead and his fatal punch to a psychoanalyst, who suggests the young man may have been "also trying attacking [sic] the stomach of his mother. . . . Was he trying to kill his unborn self?" The most substantial evidence he can find — evidence Bell seems to consider quite compelling — is an assessment from a contemporary of Whitehead's that he was a bit of a jerk. Unfortunate, yes, but, alas, that's not a crime.

*Anne Ursu is the author of "The Disapparation of James."*