



# PERFORMING DECEPTION

LEARNING, SKILL  
AND THE ART OF  
CONJURING

BRIAN RAPPERT



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## 6. Truth and Deception

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Previous chapters examined how magic is learnt through considering various engagements: reading ‘how to’ instructional books, watching online tutorials, participating in face-to-face tuition and offering small group performances. This chapter turns to another resource that can be formative for novices and adepts alike: autobiographies. Such publications purport to offer aspiring conjurors a peek backstage. More than this, though, they also provide readers with exemplars for what it means to be a magician<sup>1</sup> and a path for how to become one.<sup>2</sup>

As a form of writing, autobiographies are often premised on revealing hidden or little-known truths. Even if the author might be familiar to their readers, the appeal of the genre often rests on disclosing what is surprising, noteworthy, extraordinary and so on. Shared confidences, inner motives and hidden struggles are all commonplace components for life histories. Through doing so, autobiographical insights often rub up against what was hitherto generally understood, or they can offer a view of what was not widely seen—or both. For instance, the journalist Ian Frisch’s *Magic Is Dead: My Journey into the World’s Most Secretive Society of Magicians* not only provides an insider account into a grouping of elite magicians but also their (and his) little appreciated backstories of adversity.<sup>3</sup>

As forms of self-disclosure, autobiographies typically rest on claims to authenticity. Authenticity, though, is an accomplished quality. An author needs to demonstrate their genuineness, lest readers harbor suspicions that their story is a yarn concocted to garner prestige or to settle old scores.

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- 1 Matters both analyzed and enacted in Frisch, Ian. 2019. *Magic Is Dead: My Journey into the World’s Most Secretive Society of Magicians*. New York: Dey St.
  - 2 Or not at times, listen to Shezampod. 2020. *Podcast 54—Catie Osborn on Shakespeare and Tips From an Entertainment Director*. <https://shezampod.com/series/shezam/>
  - 3 Frisch, Ian. 2019. *Magic Is Dead: My Journey into the World’s Most Secretive Society of Magicians*. New York: Dey St.

And yet, in the case of conjuring, much of the fascination and intrigue with magicians centers on their recognized ability to mislead.<sup>4</sup> As conjuring relies on honing forms of guile, dissimulation, deceit, simulation, hoodwinking and the like—even while audiences are expecting guile, dissimulation, deceit, simulation, hoodwinking and so on—attempts by magicians to convince others they are genuinely revealing themselves in autobiographies are built on somewhat shaky foundations.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I offer a reading of the autobiographies of leading figures in entertainment magic that takes the management between authenticity and phoniness as its starting point. In doing so, I consider a few questions that inform a sense of what it means to have skill as a magician: what importance do authors invest in their accounts being truthful? How do they fashion autobiographies such that they can hold together evidence of their genuineness with evidence of their ability to mislead? How do conjurers advance notions of right and wrong, even as they recount how they deceive?

## Cave Historian

As a project of learning, my pathway into the life stories of magicians did not begin with reading autobiographies, but instead reading historical studies of entertainment magic. In the history of Western magic, doubt that conjurers might—just might—have been less than fully earnest in writing about themselves goes back a long time.<sup>6</sup> In his wonderfully rich book *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring*, Michael Mangan spoke to the trepidations that should be associated with relying on the tales of conjurers when he concluded: “The most realistic way to think about magicians’ own accounts of their lives, careers and tricks is to consider them as extensions of their stage acts—as a particular kind of “performative writing”.”<sup>7</sup>

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4 Avner Insider: <https://www.vanishinginmagic.com/insider-magic-podcast/>

5 See Allen, Jonathan. 2007. ‘Deceptionists at War’, *Cabinet* (Summer). <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/26/allen.php>

6 See Steinmeyer, Jim. 2003. *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible and Learned How to Disappear*. New York: Carroll and Graf.

7 Mangan, Michael. 2007. *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring*. Bristol: Intellect.

Perhaps one of the most prominent such instances relates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century French conjuror Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin. Sometimes referred to as the ‘King of Conjurors’, Robert-Houdin has come to be regarded as pioneering the modern style of magic that is still influential today (see Chapter 4). His approach was defined as much by what it rejected as what it embraced. Against the associations in the mid-1800s of magic with the mere entertainment of the street corner or the fairground, Robert-Houdin fashioned a persona of himself as a gentleman of society within the dignified space of an upmarket theater. As a showman, he took the conjuror’s role as that of evoking a sense of wonder. In contrast to the extravagant props, clothing and scenery that characterized much of stage performances during his time, Robert-Houdin’s stage set-up was minimalistic in appearance. Mechanical, optical and electrical gadgets that enabled his onstage effects were hidden from sight.<sup>8</sup> Wonder was generated through blending claims to astonishing powers with references to science, progress, and modernity. For instance, his ‘Light and Heavy’ trick was billed as an experimental demonstration of magical security. It employed a seemingly small wooden box that could both be lifted by a child and then somehow rendered immobile to the strongest adult.

As a performer then, Robert-Houdin combined the mannerism of the modern gentlemen with the inquisitiveness of a man of science, with the shrewdness of an illusionist. The contention that just such a dynamic was at play in his autobiography has been advanced by many scholars ever since. Perhaps the most notorious aspects of his 1858 memoir (*Confidences d’un Prestidigitateur*) relates to a trip to Algeria in 1856. After repeated invitations by the Political Office in Algiers, the conjuror tells of being brought to quell Arab anti-colonial resistance to French rule. Much of this resistance was attributed to a religious tribe called the Marabouts who claimed supernatural powers. In *Confidences*, Robert-Houdin recounts his performance of illusions intended to ‘startle and even terrify’ local Arabs ‘by the display of a supernatural power’.<sup>9</sup> In

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8 Smith, Wally. 2015. ‘Technologies of Stage Magic: Simulation and Dissimulation’, *Social Studies of Science*, 45(3): 319–343. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312715577461>.

9 Published in English as Robert-Houdin, Jean-Eugène. 1859. *Memoirs of Robert-Houdin. Ambassador, Author, and Conjuror*, R. Shelton Mackenzie (Ed.). Philadelphia: George G. Evans.

pursuit of this goal, he recounts performing the aforementioned 'Light and Heavy' trick beginning with the declaration:

From what you have witnessed, you will attribute a supernatural power to me, and you are right. I will give you a new proof of my marvelous authority, by showing that I can deprive the most powerful man of his strength and restore it at my will. Anyone who thinks himself strong enough to try the experiment may draw near me.<sup>10</sup>

Not only was this version of the 'Light and Heavy' trick used to suggest the conjuror could control the native volunteer's strength through his supernatural power, but he also continued by shocking the volunteer through the metal of box handle to drive home his abilities.

As a portrayed confrontation of East-West as well as superstition-rationality, *Confidences* regales in what Robert-Houdin presented as his demystifying of primitive beliefs.<sup>11</sup> As anthropologist Graham Jones has argued, though, independent historical evidence for Robert-Houdin's claimed success in shifting local beliefs is scant. What evidence does exist suggests the Algerian audience regarded Robert-Houdin's performances as a form of entertainment rather than a convincing demonstration of the supernatural.<sup>12</sup>

*Confidences* also posits that, as a young journeyman learning his trade, Robert-Houdin chanced upon the travelling carriage of an aristocrat named Edmond de Grisy; a man that was also an expert magician with the stage name of Torrini. Over several chapters, *Confidences* recounts how Torrini cared for the young conjurer and took him under his wing as an apprentice.<sup>13</sup> While providing Robert-Houdin with a respectable lineage for what was typically regarded as a lowly art, what—if any—place this aristocrat had in the life of Robert-Houdin has come under much scrutiny.<sup>14</sup>

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10 *Ibid.*

11 Leeder, Murray. 2010. 'M. Robert-Houdin Goes to Algeria', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 8(2): 209–225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460651003688113>.

12 Jones, Graham. 2017. *Magic's Reason*. London: University of Chicago Press: Chapter 1.

13 Published in English as Robert-Houdin, Jean-Eugène. 1859. *Memoirs of Robert-Houdin. Ambassador, Author, and Conjuror*, R. Shelton Mackenzie (Ed.). Philadelphia: George G. Evans.

14 Metzner, Paul. 1998. *Crescendo of the Virtuoso: Spectacle, Skill, and Self-Promotion in Paris During the Age of Revolution*. London: University of California Press: Chapter 5.

However, not by all. Despite adopting a stage name derived after reading Robert-Houdin's autobiography, the escape artist that would become known as Harry Houdini (born as Erik Weisz), would later turn against his one-time inspiration. His 1908 book, *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*, attempted to dismiss the Frenchman's contribution to magic; indeed, the argument sought to expose the 'King of Conjurers' as tantamount to a fraudster. Yet, as magic historian Jim Steinmeyer details, while presenting himself as an authoritative historian of magic, ironically Houdini ended up taking the story of Torrini as genuine.<sup>15</sup>

Houdini's efforts to cement a place within the scholarship of magic went beyond criticism of prominent conjurers. Attempting to appropriate the authority of the encyclopedia, he offered entries on magic in the 1926 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that placed himself as the central figure in magic. Mangan characterized Houdini's foray into encyclopedic writing in these terms:

The magician's act depends upon such a sense: people go to see him precisely because of those special powers. And Houdini, of course, being the supreme myth-maker and self-publicist that he was, was hardly going to let an opportunity like writing the definitive encyclopaedia article slip by him. Because the very fact of the encyclopaedia's implicit claims of objectivity, authority and truthfulness work to his advantage: they provide a perfect kind of misdirection, a backdrop against which the textual performance of Harry Houdini can take place.<sup>16</sup>

## A Reading of Autobiographies

The previous section surveyed some of the grounds for caution scholars have identified regarding the truth status of magicians' self-writing. Informed by Mangan's suggestion to treat such accounts as extensions of entertainment performances, the remainder of this chapter turns toward contemporary autobiographies.

Herein, though, attention proceeds with a deliberate tact. As suggested above, a common orientation to magicians' autobiographical accounts is to evaluate them through marshalling a sense of the

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15 Steinmeyer, Jim. 2003. *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible and Learned How to Disappear*. New York: Carroll and Graf: Chapter 7.

16 Mangan, Michael. 2007. *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring*. Bristol: Intellect: xxi.

truth—such as what historical records actually demonstrate. Through doing so, fact can be sifted from fiction, candor from duplicity, reality from appearances, etc.

Settling what's what, however, is not the goal of this chapter. Instead of reading the autobiographies like a historian seeking to establish the truth, I offer a reading of autobiographies as a student seeking to appreciate how performers perform. In particular, I examine how the aim of 'truth-telling' is and is not, made relevant by conjurors in their self-writing. As I will demonstrate, authors themselves can both anticipate and vindicate readers' skepticism about whether they are telling the truth. Not only this, authors can query whether telling the truth matters. This chapter aims to contrast how several leading magicians have positioned truth and deception in their accounts, and in doing so presented images of themselves, their audiences as well as their readers.

### Penn & Teller: Playful Hustlers

Penn Jillette and Teller have provided prominent faces for American entertainment magic for decades. With their complementary mannerisms and appearances, the duo has garnered both considerable popular attention (including through their TV program *Fool Us*) and professional praise for their performance sophistication.<sup>17</sup> One dimension of that sophistication is how they artfully and selectively reveal their methods. Their first book, *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends*, speaks to both how they pulled off some of their celebrated effects, as well as their autobiographical journeys into this tradecraft.

The matter of truth-telling is made relevant in *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends* from the start. The book is about how to deceive. The first chapter, 'The No-Work, High-Yield, All-Electronic Computerized Card Trick' specifies step-by-step instructions for how to identify a randomly chosen card from a deck through calling a special telephone number set up by Penn & Teller. As they write, the:

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17 For instance, see Neale, Robert E. 2008. 'Illusions About Illusions'. In: *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Francesca Coppa, Lawrence Hass, and James Peck (Eds). London: Palgrave: 217–230.



...telephone number is hooked into a computer system which enables the tones of your Touch-Tone telephone to control a digitally recorded random-access compact disk. This permits you to do the ultimate card trick, in which virtually all the work of the magician is done with an electronic off-on flow-chart. To be sure you understand how to do the trick, do a dry run (without betting) on a trusted friend.<sup>18</sup>

As promised, after the seven-step dry run, the reader will be able to triumph over a 'sucker'.<sup>19</sup>

More than simply telling readers about how to scam, *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends* plays with truth-telling through its physical construction. The book consists of three different kinds of printed pages. As the authors explain on page 108:

Did you notice these pages are a bitch to turn? [...] It wasn't your fault. The book is made that way. All of the pages are specially cut. If you play with this book a little, you'll notice that if you put your thumb on the edge and flip it front to back, all the pages look like itty bitty tiny irritating psycho-print with patterns printed over it, and if you flip from back-to-front it's all big stupid print.<sup>20</sup>

As the authors elaborate, these two formats, in addition to the third standard one, serve as the apparatus for pulling off an elaborate ruse designed to 'make a friend of yours look like a jerk'.<sup>21</sup>

Form and content come together in the disclosure on page 102 that all the 'attention-grabbing red instructions throughout this book are bogus. They are lies for you to use. Lies that will be your new friends'. Included within the considerable amount of red text in *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends*, for instance, is the above quote for the 'The No-Work, High-Yield, All-Electronic Computerized Card Trick'. Indeed, almost all of the text for this trick is in red. In this way, directions to the readers about how to fool and deceive *others* are themselves eventually divulged to be instances of fooling and deception on the *reader*.

While some of the stories told in *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends* are clearly or suggestively fictitious, others are written in a realist style. In the entry

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18 Penn, Jillette and Teller, Raymond. 1989. *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends*. New York: Villard Books: 4.

19 *Ibid.*: 4.

20 *Ibid.*: 108.

21 *Ibid.*

'The Scleral Shells', Teller recounts the back story behind an appearance on the early morning US television program *Today*. As part of the appearance, a *Today* presenter selected a card from a deck held by Penn. After Penn's failed attempt to identify the card, the suit and number of the card were shown to be written on Teller's eyes. The entry details the step-by-step procedures whereby the duo realized their initial idea, most notably visiting an ocular prosthetist to obtain sclera eye covers. The entry includes photos of Teller in the prosthetist's examination chair before, during and after the application of casting paste over his eyes. This crafted behind-the-scenes story ends with Teller's recollection of his response to the prosthetist's query about how the 'woman-sawed-in-half' trick gets done:

A magician's sacred obligation is to keep the secrets of his brotherhood. Nothing brings about the ruination of the art form more quickly than low scum who betray their brethren and expose the methods of classic tricks.

"Two women", I said. "One curls up in the head half of the box. The other is hidden in the tabletop and sticks her feet out when they are turning the box around. You don't notice the thickness of the tabletop because it's beveled. Anything else you want to know?"<sup>22</sup>

In this way, Teller exposes the mechanics of a trick, while calling into question those that expose tricks, as part of a matter-of-fact exposition of a trick.

*Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends* offers various revelations about the world of entertainment magic, Penn & Teller's performances of magic, as well as Penn and Teller as individuals. No simple claim to open disclosure is on offer, however. What is disclosed and what is yet concealed is a topic of explicit commentary, at least at certain points. Moreover, Penn & Teller admit they have lied in the past. But they go much further than this too; *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends* includes statements that undermine Penn & Teller's trustworthiness and credibility. This takes place because they openly admit that they lie, they lack remorse about their deceptions, and they tell the hidden truths about their art.

Their follow-up book, *The Unpleasant Book of Penn & Teller or How to Play With Your Food*, likewise blends autobiography with 'how-to'

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22 Penn, Jillette and Teller, Raymond. 1989. *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends*. New York: Villard Books: 78.

explanations. The effects in question include past stage performances, but also pranks, gags and general mischief-making.

As part of these stories, again, what is on offer are claims whose truth status gets explicitly called into question. For instance, concerning telling one experience from his youth, Penn warns readers 'it's impossible to reconstruct the real facts, I've told this story so many times the real facts have disappeared'.<sup>23</sup> More pervasively in *How to Play With Your Food*, the authors repeatedly undermine their trustworthiness by explicitly rejoicing in how they scam the credulous for a living, how they seek to keep up a bad boy persona through breaking professional conventions, as well as how they encourage others to lie.

Such destabilizing efforts are combined with other conventional forms of narration that take what is written in the text and shown in the photos as unproblematic. As with *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends*, readers are given step-by-step walkthroughs of prominent and lesser-known effects. Except for the odd reference to lewd details, left out because they are inappropriate for a 'family book', the orientation is repeatedly taken that readers are being presented with all of the pertinent information to know how effects were done.<sup>24</sup>

Such matter-of-fact orientations are given alongside more overtly playful presentations and reconstructions. For instance, one entry describes how to look like you are tying a cherry stem with your tongue, as Sherrilyn Fenn did on the cult TV show *Twin Peaks*. Within this entry, a close-up photograph is given of a mouth with a cherry stem sticking out, purported to be of Fenn. Turn over the page, however, and a photo is given of Penn with lipstick on and a cherry stem sticking out of his mouth. The caption provided states: 'Okay, so it's not really Sherrilyn Fenn. When photo rights get tough, the tough put on lipstick.'<sup>25</sup>

As part of explicitly questioning what is being disclosed, Penn & Teller distinguish different kinds of readers. For instance, the back cover states that the instructions on page 58 will enable readers to get back the cost of *How to Play With Your Food* from a single meal. In fulfillment of the claim, the two authors describe how to get others to pay for your

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23 Penn, Jillette and Teller, Raymond. 1992. *The Unpleasant Book of Penn & Teller or How to Play with Your Food*. London: Pavilion: 14.

24 *Ibid.*: 94.

25 *Ibid.*: 56.

lunch in one entry. The entry includes photographic illustrations with descriptive captions. Within the course of the text, however, they warn:

Read the directions, but pay no attention to the illustrations. All the illustrations (and captions) on the next two pages are bogus. They are intended to mislead semiliterate freeloaders who browse the book in a store and try to steal the valuable information you have paid for.<sup>26</sup>

The attention to who is paying for what is in line with much of the rest of the book. Whether to perform tricks and whether to divulge their secrets are decisions frequently pitched by Penn and Teller in terms of the monetary rewards on offer.<sup>27</sup>

And yet, despite the playful ways in which the extent of truth-telling is blatantly called into question or reduced to monetary calculations, on occasion, bright lines are drawn in *How to Play with your Food* about what counts as transgressive. As with *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends*, for those that profit from some claimed actual psychic or supernatural powers—such as the ability to bend spoons with their minds—Penn & Teller offer scathing condemnations. While the authors offer step-by-step details of multiple ways to appear to be able to bend spoons with one's mind or to possess other extraordinary powers, they also suggest readers should disclose to audiences the trickery used to accomplish such feats...eventually, at least.

The previous paragraphs have offered a characterization of how truth-telling figures as a theme in Penn & Teller's writing. As writers, they demonstrate their abilities as performers not simply by recollecting past dissimulations, but by engaging in them as part of the books. Doing so successfully, however, amounts to traversing a tightrope. If their forms of deception were not detectable, then readers would not recognize their prowess as crafty storytellers. Conversely, if everything they wrote was regarded as pure fiction by readers, the books would likely be treated as nothing more than a flight of fantasy. Instead of either course, Penn & Teller opt for mixing kinds of telling in such a way that seems to necessitate that readers wonder about just what is going on.

In doing so, Penn & Teller do not just talk the talk about how concealing and divulging are skillfully employed in magic, they walk

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 59.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, *ibid.*: 200.

the walk through exemplifying their onstage performances in their writing.

Let us pull back from magic for a moment. While we might normally assume that people tell the truth, or at least what they believe to be true,<sup>28</sup> when it comes to someone that has admitted lying, such a starting assumption becomes more problematic. Yet just because a person lied on some occasion in the past does not mean they are lying now. Thus, the question of whether the truth is being told is something that needs to be worked out, again and again.

Michael Lynch and David Bogen examined how an admitted liar related to truth-telling, using the 1987 testimony of Oliver North at the Iran-Contra US Congressional Hearing. The truth status of North's testimony came up as a topic for consideration at the hearing by some Committee members as well as North himself, not least because by this point in time North had already admitted to misleading Congress. Congressional Committee members seeking to piece together how US officials secretly and illegally sold weapons to Iran in order to fund the Contras in Nicaragua were faced with a quandary in assessing North's testimony. To be taken as a credible witness, too, North had to pull off presenting himself on this occasion as a 'sincere liar'.<sup>29</sup> Lynch and Bogen characterized the tensions of North's testimony by arguing it set out these paradoxical contentions:

1. Lying is justified to prevent our adversaries from knowing our secrets.
2. Our adversaries have access to this very testimony.
3. I am not now lying. *And I really mean it, honest!*<sup>30</sup>

Such overt tensions about the truth status over those who have admitted lying are not uncommon. Michael D. Cohen, the former attorney for Donald J. Trump, testified before the Committee on Oversight and Reform of the House of Representatives in 2019 regarding its investigation

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28 Grice, Paul. 1989. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

29 Within magic, the notion of an 'honest liar' is commonplace, as in Measom, Tyler and Justin Weinstein. 2014. *An Honest Liar*. Left Turn Films.

30 Lynch, Michael and Bogen, David. 1996. *The Spectacle of History*. London: Duke University Press: 43.

into President Trump. As Cohen had pleaded guilty the previous year to eight counts including campaign finance violations, tax fraud and bank fraud, it is hardly surprising that whether and when he was telling the truth before the Committee were matters that both Cohen and the Committee members repeatedly revisited. His opening statement attempted to divorce this specific testimony from the backdrop of his previous criminal violations:

For those who question my motives for being here today, I understand. I have lied, but I am not a liar. I have done bad things, but I am not a bad man. I have fixed things, but I am no longer your “fixer,” Mr. Trump.<sup>31</sup>

While acknowledging his past misdeeds, Cohen made the case for the sincerity of his testimony by arguing:

I am not a perfect man. I have done things I am not proud of, and I will live with the consequences of my actions for the rest of my life.

But today, I get to decide the example I set for my children and how I attempt to change how history will remember me. I may not be able to change the past, but I can do right by the American people here today.<sup>32</sup>

Those questioning Cohen’s allegations that the US President was a racist, a con man, a cheat and much else besides included Donald J. Trump. And yet, Trump did so in a manner that did not seek to completely cast doubt on Cohen’s testimony or character. Responding to a reporter’s question about the claims made against him by Cohen, Trump said:

And he lied a lot, but it was very interesting because he didn’t lie about one thing. He said, “No collusion with the Russia hoax.” And I said, I wonder why he didn’t just lie about that too, like he did about everything else. I mean, he lied about so many different things. And I was actually impressed that he didn’t say, “Well, I think there was collusion for this reason or that.” He didn’t say that, he said, “No collusion,” and I was a little impressed by that, frankly. He could’ve gone all out. He only went about 95 percent instead of 100 percent.<sup>33</sup>

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31 Testimony of Cohen, Michael D. 2019. Committee on Oversight and Reform U.S. House of Representatives, February 27. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/feb/28/trump-says-cohen-lied-testimony-congress>

32 *Ibid.*

33 Rupar, Aaron, “Trump is “Impressed” that Cohen said “No Collusion.” But Cohen Didn’t Say that’, *Vox*, 2019, February 28. <https://www.vox.com/2019/2/28/18244483/trump-cohen-testimony-vietnam-news-conference-collusion>

Herein, even for someone on the receiving end of damning allegations, whether an admitted liar is lying on a specific occasion is a matter presented as needing to be worked out.

To return to the accounts of conjurors, in contrast to attempts to draw clear boundaries around the truth, Penn & Teller engage in a much more varied and playful telling. At stake in this telling is both whether they are providing the truth and whether it matters.

While bright lines are set out at times about what counts as a transgression, falsehood, etc., Penn & Teller combine such appraisals with many other claims that offer grounds for doubting whether truth or lies are being told, to who and when, as well as how the tellers ought to be regarded. At points in their books, it matters whether the truth is being told; at other times this seems less relevant. Against the rampant humor and playfulness evident in *Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends* and *How to Play With Your Food*, an attempt by readers to get to the bottom of the truth status of what is written seems like a misplacement of energy at best. At worst, it is a profoundly misguided pursuit. Like an entertaining yarn, the question of what is going on seems much less important than enjoying the ride.

In short, then, the vision enabled by Penn & Teller is kaleidoscopic. One, but just one, of the kinds of argumentative contradictions they set out could be portrayed as:

1. Lying is justified to suckers that don't understand tricks;
2. You bought our book because you didn't know how to do tricks;
3. We are not now lying to you. *And we might not mean it, really!*

### Derren Brown: An Authoritative Card

In the early 2000s, Derren Brown rose to notoriety in the United Kingdom through his television series *Derren Brown: Tricks of the Mind*. This series and many subsequent television and stage performances presented him as mixing 'magic, suggestion, psychology, misdirection and showmanship' as part of accomplishing baffling mental feats of prediction, mind reading, influence and much besides. Brown not only performed such deeds but occasionally discreetly taught members of the public how to do them.

In his 2007 book *Tricks of the Mind*, Brown offered a learned survey of a range of topics relevant for his tradecraft, including magic, hypnosis and unconscious communication. From the start of *Tricks of the Mind*, ‘truth-telling’ was made relevant. In its most blatant form, the book contains a sub-section early on entitled ‘Truth and Lies’. As part of this, Brown raised what he characterized as the:

rather embarrassing question of how honest I’m going to be with you when discussing my techniques. Some areas of the gutter press and of my own family seem convinced that amid the wealth of unmistakable candour, even-handedness, incorruptibility, rectitude and probity that has characterized my work to date, there might lie the occasional false or disingenuous datum designed to throw the careful seeker off course. Well, as my great-grandmother once said: rectitude and probity, my arse.<sup>34</sup>

The mix of truth-telling with humor that features in this excerpt features elsewhere in the book. As with Penn & Teller, Brown combines candid language with a nod and a wink, tongue-in-cheek style of writing that suggests readers ought to be on guard.

The ‘Truth and Lies’ sub-section concludes with Brown promising that: ‘For reasons of space, practicality and retaining some mystery I cannot explain everything here; so in return for not being impossibly open, I promise to be entirely honest. All anecdotes are true, and all techniques are genuinely used’.<sup>35</sup> The importance of truth-telling is evident in other respects. From its front to back cover, *Tricks of the Mind* defines and debunks bad thinking and pseudo-scientific beliefs. The detailed exploration of the techniques and psychology of magic, hypnosis and much besides is not meant to ‘make a friend of yours look like a jerk’ or to hustle some money from an unsuspecting mark. Instead, *Tricks of the Mind* aims to provide a way of thinking clearly about often hazy topics. The list of topics ranges from Christianity to relativism to New Age spiritualism to environmentalism to alternative medicine.

However, more than simply being an effort to tell readers where the line exists between proper and improper thinking, *Tricks of the Mind* sets out instructions whereby the reader can *demonstrate to themselves* the psychological principles underlying Brown’s performances. Want to see the power of suggestion? By just fashioning a rudimentary

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<sup>34</sup> Brown, Derren. 2007 *Tricks of the Mind*. London: Channel 4 Books: 14–15.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.



pendulum and following some brief instructions, readers can witness for themselves how objects can be made to move through the power of thought alone.

Such instructions have been taken as a straightforward 'how to' manual by some commentators on Brown.<sup>36</sup> However, it is possible to advance another way to interpret the instructions. This is the case because, at times, the try-it-yourself directions are overtly presented as limited disclosures too. The basics of ideomotor movement, hypnosis and card magic are elaborated, but the precise relationship between such descriptions and Brown's televised performances are often not drawn. Instead, readers are openly asked by Brown to take him on trust: for instance, in relation to how general explanations that Ouija boards rely on participants unconsciously moving its piece to the expected letters could account for how he used the same principle when the letters were *concealed* from participants.<sup>37</sup> As a result, method explanations are given in *Tricks of the Mind*, but some are highly limited in what they reveal.

*Tricks of the Mind* also places the seeds of doubt for what trustworthiness should be invested in Brown. In the 'Truth and Lies' sub-section, for instance, Brown both shared confidences about his past performances whilst noting that readers might have been duped by them, offered facetious self-boasts whilst stressing the need for self-deprecation from magicians, and portrayed honesty in magic as inherently problematic. Tongue-in-cheek portrayals of himself, his fans and the reader are abundant in *Tricks of the Mind*.<sup>38</sup> Through such combinations, readers are positioned as needing to be able to distinguish for themselves what is actually meant from what is literally written.

One of the argumentative contradictions that could be derived from *Tricks of the Mind* is thus:

1. Distinguishing truth from falsehood is difficult as delusional thinking is rife;

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36 Hill, Annette. 2010. *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits, and Magic in Popular Culture*. London: Routledge: 142–149. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203836392>; and Mangan, Michael. 2017. 'Something Wicked: The Theatre of Derren Brown'. In: *Popular Performance*, Adam Ainsworth, Oliver Double and Louise Peacock (Eds). London: Bloomsbury: Chapter 6.

37 Brown, Derren. 2007. *Tricks of the Mind*. London: Channel 4 Books: 48.

38 For examples, see pages xv, xvi, 5 and 7.

2. My work has sought to tap into delusional forms of thinking to persuade and deceive;
3. You can tell for yourself what is true from what I am telling you now, *and I mean it, really!*<sup>39</sup>

Contrast, then, *Tricks of the Mind* with a second autobiographical book written for the general public by Brown in 2010 entitled *Confessions of a Conjuror*. Whereas the former reviews magic, hypnosis, memory and unconscious communication through drawing on his experiences, the latter book squarely starts from autobiographical experiences to speak to the shared fallibility of our minds. In *Confessions of a Conjuror* Brown presents himself as susceptible to flawed ways of reasoning: snap judgements, blinkered perceptions, confirmation seeking and so on. Even as a professional conjuror with years of experience in befuddling audiences, his thinking is presented as imbued with chains of personal associations and questionable lines of inference. Where does his dislike of blue playing cards come from? Why does he feel the need to impress

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39 Some commentators on magic have identified parallels in Brown's performances to the ambiguities identified above in *Tricks of the Mind*. Whilst seeking to counter belief in spiritualism, superstition and much more, in his television programs Brown has provided more or less elaborate explanations for his feats related to principles of psychology, hypnotism and subliminal messaging. Yet, as some have argued, such lines of explanation have themselves served as misleading forms of misdirection that work to distract audiences from the true methods employed. (For a discussion of the ambiguity sought, see Brown, Derren and Swiss, Jamy Ian. 2003, June 29. *A Conversation in Two Parts: Part I*. Available at <http://honestliar.com/fm/works/derren-brown.html>). In placing a scientific explanatory gloss on effects achieved with 'little more than clever magic tricks' (Singh, Simon. 2003, June 10. 'I'll Bet £1,000 That Derren Can't Read my Mind', *The Daily Telegraph*), the criticism levelled at Brown has been that he too has promulgated pseudo-beliefs (see as well *Magic, Charlatanry and Skepticism*, SOMA Workshop. <https://scienceofmagicassoc.org/blog/2021/4/29/magic-charlatanry-skepticism-webinar-cd6cy>). In response, in his more recent work, Brown has noted to audiences how his scientific glosses of tricks have served as a means of ruse (see Mangan, Michael. 2017. 'Something Wicked: The Theatre of Derren Brown'. In *Popular Performance*, Adam Ainsworth, Oliver Double, and Louise Peacock (Eds). London: Bloomsbury: Chapter 6). Yet another line of criticism that has been made against him, however, is that even when he exposes his own pseudo-explanations, the actual effects of his performances on audiences might be to reinforce pseudo-beliefs (see Malvern, Jack. 2019, January 2. 'Magicians Accused of Casting Pseudoscience Spell on Audiences', *The Times*, and for a more general analysis of these issues for magic overall see Jay, J. 2016. 'What do Audiences Really Think?' *MAGIC* (September): 46–55. <https://www.magicconvention.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Survey.pdf>).

his family and the famous? Why does he keep falling for crass sales techniques?

Yet reasons can be offered for thinking that the extent of self-reflection is limited. Even as *Confessions of a Conjuror* 'invites you on a whimsical journey through his unusual mind'<sup>40</sup> in a manner that emphasizes self-admission, in other respects the degree of disclosure seems to have been decidedly pushed to the margins. For instance, *Confessions of a Conjuror* is structured through Brown recounting an extended card effect he performed for a group at a restaurant table in Bristol. A not-insignificant amount of the 327 pages of the paperback version is dedicated to a clear-cut description of the minutiae of the encounter: the moment-to-moment subtle and gross verbal and non-verbal expressions of the three spectators; the precise mechanics of his performance in response to their expressions and actions; the train of mental associations launched in his mind at the time; the physical details of the scene, and so on. Certainly, in reading this extent of detail about this one encounter, I was left wondering how the exactitude and degree of disclosure could be possible. This was especially so given the repeated contention in *Confessions of a Conjuror* that human recall is defective.

### Layered Truths

The autobiographical accounts surveyed so far in this chapter have identified, named and organized events and experiences to present an understanding of authors, their crafts and the world. As with other types of memoirs, and indeed much of what gets told secondhand in everyday life, evaluating the reliability of the claims given is challenging. As authors recount events for which few readers will have any direct knowledge, concerns that spinning, slanting and the like might be at play in authors' portrayals of themselves cannot be completely quashed.

In this chapter, I have proposed that, in the case of modern conjuring, such underlying grounds for doubt are complemented by specific concerns about magicians as authors. Since their credibility as practitioners in part derives from their ability to skillfully deceive, dissimulate and simulate, readers have specific reasons to wonder about

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40 As on the back cover of Brown, Derren. *Confessions of a Conjuror*. London: Channel 4 Books.

what conjuror-authors are getting up to in their writing. In recognition of the justification for suspicion by readers, authors such as Penn, Teller and Brown actively pulled back (at times) from treating their accounts at face value. Such pulling back itself was positioned as a marker of their skill, not a refutation of it. In short, these three authors portrayed themselves as credible authors not by overlooking potential concerns about their reliability and genuineness, but by acknowledging and finding some way of working with suspicions. At least, that is, to some extent.

Not all prominent figures in magic have opted to explicitly cast doubt on their truth-telling. Within the pages of *Nothing Is Impossible*, the British magician Dynamo gives readers an off-stage account of his meteoric rise to fame.<sup>41</sup> His life story includes a description of the struggles he experienced growing up, the influences on his magic, as well as the hard graft of becoming known. The style is one of opening up to the reader about his life. At times though, too, it is clear that Dynamo is not being fully forthcoming. Especially relating to how he accomplishes his effects, details are scant. For instance, in describing his feat of walking down the side of the building of the newspaper the *Los Angeles Times*, he writes 'I knew that if my magic didn't work, there was no way I would survive the fall'.<sup>42</sup>

And yet, besides these discretions surrounding methods, there is little by the way of overt acknowledgement of the need for caution about what is printed. Instead of drawing attention to the limits of his trustworthiness as an author, *Nothing Is Impossible* brings readers backstage to witness the unappreciated story behind Dynamo—just as it happened.

In his later 2017 book *Dynamo: The Book of Secrets*, Dynamo offers detailed instructions for dozens of effects whilst also providing autobiographical insights. Rather than advocating scamming others or debunking those that scam, *Dynamo: The Book of Secrets* sets itself out as enabling readers to emotionally affect people through playing cards, rings, pens and other everyday objects.<sup>43</sup> As with *Nothing Is Impossible*, not only then does the truth matter, the instructions and the

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41 Dynamo. 2012. *Nothing Is Impossible*. London: Ebury Press.

42 *Ibid.*: xx.

43 Dynamo. 2017. *Dynamo: The Book of Secrets*. London: Blink Publishing.

autobiographical notes are treated as placing truthful insights before the reader. In this way, *Nothing Is Impossible* offers a mirror to reality.

And yet, though distrust is not treated as warranted, neither is everything presented at face value. *Dynamo: The Book of Secrets* presents itself as layered in a play of secrecy. As set out in the introduction, while 30 powerful effects are sketched, 'if you read between the lines, there are even more secrets to uncover'. The latter part of this sentence is underlined with an arrow leading away to a text written in a different font stating 'I'm serious about this'.<sup>44</sup> With such an invitation, instead of casting doubt on the sincerity of the contents along the lines of Penn & Teller in *The No-Work, High-Yield, All-Electronic Computerized Card Trick*, readers of *Dynamo: The Book of Secrets* are encouraged to hunt for even deeper truthful confidences hidden within the text. Evoking another, unelaborated level of secrets not only reinforces the veracity of what is presented. Delving deeper provides a basis for some (diligent) readers to set themselves apart from the (surface level) sense-making of more casual readers.<sup>45</sup>

With the purported employment of this literary technique of layered truths, *Dynamo* adopts the position of someone skilled in mixing disclosure with concealment. Such a layered presentation of truths is evident elsewhere. David Blaine first rose to international prominence in the late 1990s with television shows such as *David Blaine: Street Magic* and then later for his feats of endurance. His first book, *Mysterious Stranger*, mixes 'how-to' instructions for readers with recollections from his early and later years. What is it like to be immersed in a block of ice or encased underground? How do you convince others you are psychic? *Mysterious Stranger* provides answers to such questions and does so without supplying overt grounds for doubting the trustworthiness of Blaine or the literalness of what is presented.

The adequacy of how this was done is open to question. For instance, in *Mysterious Stranger*, Blaine's career trajectory is recounted through situating his performances within the traditions of gurus, escape artists, pillar saints, con artists and the like. In doing so, Blaine placed much credence in the abilities of such individuals and regaled in their claimed exploits. And yet, whether this overall deference is warranted might

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: 10.

<sup>45</sup> And, it seems worth noting, I never found any deeper secrets.

well be doubted. Robert-Houdin's claims regarding the effects of his magic show on the native uprising in Algeria noted above, for instance, are repeated by Blaine without critical scrutiny or recognition of their contentious status within the history of magic.<sup>46</sup> Also concerning truth-telling, Blaine embraces actions that other magicians question. Not only are financial scams told without moral condemnation, but Blaine also advises readers how they can play on (rather than dispel) audiences' superstitions.<sup>47</sup>

Layered meaning comes into *Mysterious Stranger* but in a different way than in *Dynamo: The Book of Secrets*. *Mysterious Stranger* is presented as a puzzle. As printed on the jacket cover, 'Hidden throughout the Book are secret signals, codes and clues, that once understood and deciphered will lead to the discovery of a TREASURE which has been hidden somewhere in the United States of America'.<sup>48</sup> Blaine offered a reward of \$100,000 to anyone that could find the treasure. In this way, *Mysterious Stranger* echoed the long history of magicians advertising substantial prizes to those able to discern their hidden secrets.<sup>49</sup>

### Legit Cave

Previous sections of this chapter have provided my reading of the diversity of stances prominent magicians have taken regarding truth-telling. In adopting such stances, the autobiographies of modern conjurors cut a complex relation to established genres of writing involving truth-telling about the self. They are not simply confessionals. As contended by Roth and De Man, confessionals are typically presented as motivated by feelings of guilt and shame over one's misdeeds.<sup>50</sup> Despite the forms of deception involved in magic, such inner sentiments of shame were not aired by Penn, Teller, Brown, Blaine, Dynamo or Robert-Houdin. As

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46 For instance, see Blaine, David. 2002. *Mysterious Stranger*. New York: Villard: 146.

47 Blaine, David. 2002. *Mysterious Stranger*. New York: Villard: 16 and 34.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Practices not completely divorced from the aims of garnering publicity as well as promoting performers' repute.

50 Roth, Ben. 2012. 'Confessions, Excuses, and the Storytelling Self: Rereading Rousseau with Paul de Man'. In: *Re-thinking European Politics and History* (Vol. 32), A. Pasieka, D. Petruccioli, B. Roth (Eds). Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences; and De Man, Paul. 1979. *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

a rule, magicians do not express shame over their efforts to misdirect, deceive or dissimulate.

Moreover, though, confessions typically assume that the truth can be definitely established (or, at least, the truth as understood by the writers). At least some of the authors surveyed in this chapter, though, labored to sow doubt regarding whether they were providing a straight account.

But if the autobiographies are not well characterized as confessionals, they sit uneasily with the alternative label of excuses. Excuses are attempts to explain away responsibility for behavior that is likely to be regarded as transgressive.<sup>51</sup> As elaborated above, the authors surveyed rarely admit to engaging in questionable moral conduct. When they do so, as in the case of Penn & Teller, they often revel in the transgression rather than try to excuse it.

Justifications are more common than excuses. Herein, authors accept responsibility for their actions, but offer grounds as for why those actions should not count as morally dubious. Dynamo, for instance, justified why he was able to tell magic's secrets in *Dynamo: The Book of Secrets*. In line with a refrain that figured within his television series in the 2010s, early on in the book he underscores the importance of keeping secrets. This is done through recounting a formative experience when his grandfather performed an enchanting piece of magic on him that he states he still cannot figure out today. Against these considerations though, the introduction sets out why he is correct in telling secrets in *Dynamo: The Book of Secrets*:

Magicians aren't supposed to reveal their secrets, right? That's true—I keep many of the effects in my repertoire so secret that I haven't told anyone how I do them. But the pieces in this book are different. I have picked effects that are perfect for people new to magic to learn because they are easy to do but get reactions. There is a world of difference between teaching magic and exposing it and I am teaching these effects because they are the perfect starting point to a life (or even a career) in magic.<sup>52</sup>

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51 De Man, Paul. 1979. *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

52 Dynamo. 2017. *Dynamo: The Book of Secrets*. London: Blink Publishing: 11.

In this way, the secrets of magic can be told because the effects themselves are those for beginners and the purpose of telling is to teach, not to divulge.

Instead of making a plea for absolution, Penn & Teller adopt multiple orientations to truth-telling that invite readers to speculate about the ultimate truth status of what is being told, as well as whether their inner selves are being revealed. At times they embrace the certainty that they have done wrong and they most certainly *are* blameworthy. Brown, as well (at least in certain respects) overtly acknowledges the artfulness of his self-presentation. Through doing so, these authors cut against the grain of the play for authenticity that typically characterizes self-narratives.<sup>53</sup> Whatever might be lost in term of authenticity, however, the mix of truth and deception is presented as enhancing their credibility. Penn, Teller and Brown display playfulness and wit to the readers. In talking the talk, they walk the walk regarding their ability to simulate and dissimulate.

Through surveying what we might call the ‘skilled revelation of skilled concealment’<sup>54</sup> that constitutes the autobiographies of leading conjurers, my aim in this chapter has been to convey learnt sensitivities associated with how truth and deception are alternatively marshalled within one genre of writing. Within this, one sub-goal has been to explore how motion and mix—in what is laid before and what is still occulted away, as well as the way ‘things are what they seem’ and ‘things are not what they seem’—*together* create autobiographical revelations. That motion and mix can extend to the identity of the authors, who can varyingly be presented as trustworthy, reliable, stable, elusive and so on. Motion and mix also extend to the image of readers. As contended, readers of autobiographies are varyingly told that we are being brought into the fraternity of those in on a gag; we are being offered a partial glimpse through a keyhole, and we should wonder whether we have been left out in the cold.<sup>55</sup>

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53 Atkinson, Paul and Silverman, David. 1997. ‘Kundera’s Immortality’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3: 304–325.

54 To borrow a phrase from Taussig, Michael. 2016. ‘Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism’, *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6(3): 455. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau6.3.033>.

55 The arguments of this chapter might well encourage some readers to reflect on how I as an author-magician have been crafted in this book. For an example of how I as author-magician engaged in such forms of playful writing, see Rappert, Brian. 2021. ‘Conjuring Imposters’. In: *The Imposter as Social Theory*, Steve Woolgar, Else Vogel, David Moats and Claes-Fredrick Helgesson (Eds). Bristol: Bristol University Press: 147–170.