





DAVID COPPERFIELD'S

History of Magic



DAVID COPPERFIELD

RICHARD WISEMAN

DAVID BRITLAND

Photographs by

HOMER LIWAG

Simon & Schuster

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI



Simon & Schuster
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2021 by David Copperfield's Disappearing, Inc.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information, address Simon & Schuster Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition October 2021

SIMON & SCHUSTER and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Interior design by Paul Dippolito

Manufactured in China

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Copperfield, David, 1956- author. | Liwag, Homer, photographer.

Title: David Copperfield's history of magic / David Copperfield, Richard Wiseman, David Britland; photographs by Homer Liwag.

Other titles: History of magic

Description: First Simon & Schuster Hardcover Edition. | New York : Simon & Schuster, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2021016783 | ISBN 9781982112912 (Hardcover) | ISBN 9781982112936 (eBook)

Subjects: LCSH: Magic tricks—History. | Magicians—History. | Magic—History. | Magic—Pictorial works.

Classification: LCC GV1543 .C67 2021 | DDC 793.809—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021016783>

ISBN 978-1-9821-1291-2

ISBN 978-1-9821-1293-6 (ebook)

*To my family, Chloe, Sky, Audrey, and Dylan
for their unwavering love, and for everyone searching for magic,
challenging the impossible, fighting for your dreams.*

Contents

Introduction 1

CHAPTER 1

Secrets of the Conjurors Revealed

REGINALD SCOT'S *THE DISCOVERIE OF WITCHCRAFT*

– 9 –

CHAPTER 2

The Pastry Chef

ROBERT-HOUDIN'S MAGICAL AUTOMATA

– 15 –

CHAPTER 3

Prestidigitation and the Presidency

WYMAN THE WIZARD'S CAP AND PENCE

– 27 –

CHAPTER 4

Will, the Witch, and the Watchman

JOHN NEVIL MASKELYNE'S TRUNK

– 35 –

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 5

The Man Who Knows

ALEXANDER'S TURBAN

– 43 –

CHAPTER 6

“P” Is for Private

PROFESSOR HOFFMANN'S NOTEBOOK

– 51 –

CHAPTER 7

This Is My Wife

BUATIER DE KOLTA'S EXPANDING DIE

– 59 –

CHAPTER 8

We're Off to See the Wizard

HARRY KELLAR'S NEST OF BOXES

– 65 –

CHAPTER 9

The Queen of Magic

ADELAIDE HERRMANN'S DRESS

– 73 –

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 10

The Palace of Magic

MARTINKA'S THEATRE

– 81 –

CHAPTER 11

Author Unknown

THE EXPERT AT THE CARD TABLE

– 89 –

CHAPTER 12

**Notes on Steam Engines, Pumps,
Boilers Hydraulic, and Other Machinery**

MAX MALINI'S PECULIAR PARAPHERNALIA

– 97 –

CHAPTER 13

Condemned to Death by the Boxers

CHUNG LING SOO'S GUN

– 105 –

CHAPTER 14

Escaping Mortality

THE HOUDINI COLLECTION

– 113 –

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 15

The Magician Who Made Himself Disappear

HOWARD THURSTON'S DISEMBODIED PRINCESS

– 123 –

CHAPTER 16

Lighter Than Air

OKITO'S FLOATING BALL

– 131 –

CHAPTER 17

Divided

DANTE'S SAWING ILLUSION

– 137 –

CHAPTER 18

Free Rabbits

THE HARRY BLACKSTONE COLLECTION

– 145 –

CHAPTER 19

The Suave Deceiver

CARDINI'S TUXEDO, MONOCLE, AND PLAYING CARDS

– 153 –

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 20

The Human Index

ARTHUR LLOYD'S GOWN, MORTARBOARD, AND CARDS

– 161 –

CHAPTER 21

If They Don't Know You, They Can't Book You

DELL O'DELL'S GUILLOTINE

– 167 –

CHAPTER 22

In Pursuit of Perfection

CHANNING POLLOCK'S VANISHING BIRD CAGE

– 175 –

CHAPTER 23

Blood on the Curtain

RICHIARDI'S BUZZ SAW

– 183 –

CHAPTER 24

The Man Who Fooled Houdini

DAI VERNON'S DEAD LIST

– 191 –

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 25

The Mystery Box

TANNEN'S MAGIC STORE

– 199 –

CHAPTER 26

The Magic in Your Mind

AL KORAN'S MEDALLION

– 207 –

CHAPTER 27

The Magician Who Believed in Real Magic

DOUG HENNING'S COSTUME AND METAMORPHOSIS TRUNK

– 215 –

CHAPTER 28

On the Shoulders of Giants

DAVID COPPERFIELD'S DEATH SAW

– 223 –

Sources and Further Reading 237

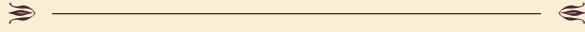
Acknowledgments 249

Image Credits 250

Index 251

DAVID COPPERFIELD'S

History of Magic





Introduction

Magic matters. It transports people into a world in which the impossible appears possible. Precious items appear out of nowhere, objects defy gravity, and people are sawed in half and magically restored. Watching a great magic show opens people's minds and inspires them to achieve the extraordinary in their everyday lives.

Magic has also changed the world. Throughout history, inventors, engineers, and scientists have been fascinated by the conjuring arts. For instance, Leonardo da Vinci frequently collaborated with Luca Pacioli, the fifteenth-century mathematician who helped to lay the foundations for modern-day accountancy. Pacioli created one of the earliest known European books to be largely devoted to magic (*De Viribus Quantitatis*) and described the secrets to several impressive miracles, including how to bathe your hands in molten lead and have an egg walk across a tabletop. Similarly, one of the pioneers of modern-day cinema, Georges Méliès, was a great stage illusionist, and drew heavily on his background in magic and storytelling to create his innovative and influential films. In 1902, Méliès made a film about traveling to the Moon and just over sixty years later that fantasy became fact. Over time, many other magicians have inspired visionaries and technologists to transform illusion into reality.

Magic can also reveal fascinating insights into the human mind. Every magic performance is a field experiment in psychology, and magicians have to know how to influence an audience's attention, awareness, and memory. Indeed, some of the founding figures in modern-day psychology—such as the French psychologist Alfred Binet and American Joseph Jastrow—worked with some of the most famous conjurers of their day in an attempt to understand the mysteries of perception.

In each generation, a group of people have devoted their lives to furthering the art of conjuring. I am proud to follow in their footsteps.

INTRODUCTION

My real name is David Seth Kotkin and I was born in Metuchen, New Jersey. My mother worked in insurance and my father had a menswear store. I was a shy only child. From an early age I was a dreamer with a big imagination, and I was immersed in movies and television as they offered a tremendous sense of escape and hope. I was also a big fan of an innovative ventriloquist named Paul Winchell, and when I was around eight years old I received a vent puppet as a gift. I mastered the basics of ventriloquism and put together an act. It wasn't the greatest act in the world, but it got me in front of an audience.

I enjoyed performing and eventually asked my parents for a new ventriloquist figure. My mother took me to a magic store in New York City and the moment that I set foot in that special place I felt as if I had arrived home. I never did buy that new puppet but instead I became spellbound with magic. All these years later it's still the driving passion in my life.

When I was ten years old I adopted the stage name Davino the Boy Magician, and just two years later I became the youngest person to be accepted into the Society of American Magicians. Around the same time, I invented an illusion that was published in a classic series of magic books, the Tarbell Course in Magic. At the age of sixteen, I became a professor at New York University and was teaching a course on the art of magic. For some reason magic came naturally to me.

I eventually decided to have a career in the arts. A friend suggested that I take inspiration from the much-loved Charles Dickens novel and change my name to David Copperfield. My first major engagement came when I was offered the lead role in a musical comedy about a turn-of-the-century magician who exposed a fake psychic. The show was called *The Magic Man* and the producers at first wanted me to sing and perform magic. But after they heard my voice, many of my songs mysteriously vanished.

It was a great show and I thought that it was going to be the springboard to success. I was wrong. After the show closed I found it difficult to get work, and my girlfriend and I struggled to pay the bills. I used the downtime to think about how I could combine my love of magic with my passion for film and theatre. My heroes were creators like Orson Welles, Frank Capra, Gene Kelly, and Fred Astaire. All of them understood how to use their art to move an audience emotionally and I wanted to do the same through the medium of magic. I found that stories and

INTRODUCTION

context added meaning to my work, and I devised illusions that focused on love, friendship, and acceptance. I levitated an assistant to Gershwin's "American in Paris" and created an imaginary game show called *Let's Burn a Deal*, where I appeared to destroy and restore money. Looking back, it was actually a surprisingly happy period of my life. I had no idea where the next dollar was coming from, but I enjoyed the blank page and had the freedom to create and develop.

Eager for work, I persistently knocked on doors until one of them opened. In 1977 I hosted a show for ABC, and the following year CBS offered me my own television special. I can remember my father putting up posters in his store window, saying, "Please watch our son. Make his mom happy." Fortunately, the show was a hit and became an annual event. I was just twenty-two years old.

One network television special followed another, and over the years I have appeared to walk through the Great Wall of China, escaped from Alcatraz, caused a jet to vanish, and made the Statue of Liberty disappear. Throughout it all, stories and meaning remained the bedrock of my magic. Vanishing the Statue of Liberty symbolized what the world would be like without freedom and democracy, and celebrated the opportunities that America has offered to those coming to the country to make a new life for themselves. Years later, people still talk about that event.

On the face of it, my job is to perform the impossible. But when I see audience members being moved by my magic, I am moved, too: magic has the power to redirect people away from their worries and concerns and, perhaps most important of all, to inspire and to provide hope. Creating my illusions takes hard work—I think of it as "glorious torture"—yet being able to bring a sense of wonder to people makes all of that effort worthwhile.

For more than thirty years I've had a secret project. It all began with an American magician named John Mulholland. Born in 1898, Mulholland led an unconventional life that included him being recruited by the CIA in the 1950s and asked to write a training manual that taught spies how to use magical techniques in their covert work. Mulholland was also an avid historian and collector, amassing an impressive library of more than 20,000 magic books and journals. He died in 1970 and when his amazing library came up for sale in 1991, some magicians were worried that this important collection would be broken up. My friend, magician and historian Mike Caveney, suggested that I buy the collection and ensure that it remained intact.



The International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts is housed in a secret location on the outskirts of Las Vegas and contains more than 300,000 artifacts, ephemera, and books.



INTRODUCTION

At the time, I wasn't a collector or historian of magic. Instead, my focus was to invent and perform new illusions, and so I gave the matter a considerable amount of thought. The Mulholland collection is one of magic's greatest historical resources, and I knew that being its custodian would involve ensuring that it was properly housed and cared for. In the end, I took the plunge and acquired the collection. Since that time, I have collected historical material six times the original size of the Mulholland archive, creating a secret museum dedicated to preserving the history and art of magic for future generations. Now known as The International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts, this hidden treasure trove of illusion is home to countless books, posters, apparatus, and ephemera. This collection is housed in a gigantic building on the outskirts of Las Vegas. It's not open to the general public but researchers are always welcome and I regularly give tours to interested parties.

The tours often begin after my last show of the night and so I frequently arrange to meet visitors around midnight. The street address takes them to a men's clothing store called Korby's. Somewhat confused, they step inside and discover that it's a replica of the store once owned by my father. It's a small space with a decidedly vintage atmosphere, and they find themselves surrounded by jackets, pants, and shirts hanging on racks. We make our way into the store's changing room, and they see a shirt and tie hanging on the wall. I ask them to pull gently on the tie and suddenly a secret door swings open. They walk through it and find themselves in a wonderland.

The museum is massive and contains dozens of rooms on several levels. Every inch is packed with amazing props, dazzling posters, and fascinating photographs from history's greatest conjurors.

In this book, I am going to guide you through my magical world. When you see magic, you see only what the magician wants you to see, but I am about to take you backstage and uncover the reality behind the illusion. During our time together we will encounter the most historically important items in this vast collection along with a few of my personal favorites, including a sixteenth-century manual on sleight of hand, Houdini's straitjackets and handcuffs, mechanical wonders devised by one of France's greatest magicians, beautiful trunks and boxes from the huge touring shows of American illusionists Harry Kellar and Howard Thurston, and even some coins that may have magically passed through the hands of Abraham Lincoln.

Together, we will discover how magic influences popular culture, adapts to social change, reveals insights into the human mind, embraces the latest technological and scientific

INTRODUCTION

discoveries, and alters the course of history. Perhaps most important of all, we will explore how each exhibit has helped satisfy humanity's seemingly endless appetite for wonder. Along the way we will encounter a colorful cast of characters, including the illusionist who believed in real magic, the man who fooled Houdini, and the performer who paid the ultimate price for his love of conjuring. They plied their entertainment in the streets, theatres, and palaces. Some of these master magicians found great fame and fortune, while others lived only for applause. Nevertheless, they all shared my passion for making the impossible seem possible.

We are about to encounter a series of astonishing objects that have made hearts beat faster, jaws drop, and eyes stare in disbelief. Each object has a tale to tell and together they provide an unprecedented insight into the history of wonder, magic, and illusion.

Welcome to my world.

SCOT'S
DISCOVERIES
OF
WITCHCRAFT

LONDON

CHAPTER 1

Secrets of the Conjurors Revealed

» REGINALD SCOT'S *THE DISCOVERIE OF WITCHCRAFT* «

In the sixteenth century, witch hunters scoured Europe in search of those who they believed were dabbling in the dark arts. In 1584, one man spoke out against this toxic mix of superstition, fear, and ignorance. In doing so, he helped shape history and also produced the first book in the English language to present detailed descriptions of magic.

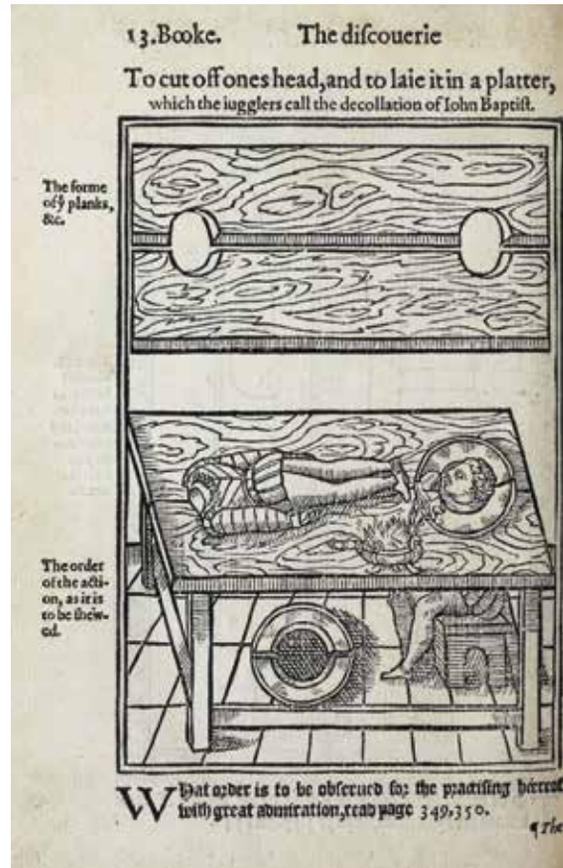
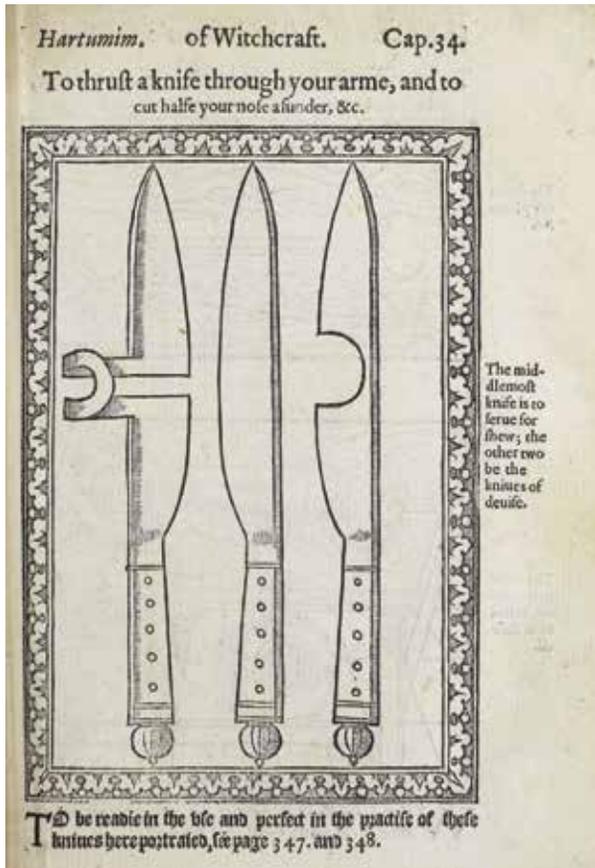
Born in the 1530s, Reginald Scot appears to have come from a relatively affluent family and to have spent most of his life in southeast England. Although little is known about his earlier years, many historians believe that Scot acted as a justice of the peace and had probably spent time studying law. In 1574 he produced a book on how to grow hops. Around a decade later he turned his attention to a much more serious and sober subject.

At the time, many people in Europe believed in the existence of witchcraft. According to this worldview, witches were able to summon evil spirits and to carry out various supernatural misdemeanors, including making people ill, rendering animals infertile, and causing crops to fail. These beliefs allowed self-proclaimed “witch hunters” to travel from town to town trying to eradicate this perceived threat to society. The late sixteenth century saw a surge in witch hunting across England and Scotland, with governments in both countries passing laws against witchcraft in 1563. Evidence of alleged wrongdoing often involved something as simple as an unusual birthmark, an unfortunate growth, or erratic behavior. Unperturbed, witch hunters and others extracted false confessions, encouraged unreliable eyewitness testimony, staged show trials, and were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people. The majority of those accused were women.

Scot investigated the matter and in 1584 published his contentious conclusions in a book titled *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. Containing over five hundred pages, Scot’s book displayed remarkable scholarship and drew upon the writings of more than two hundred other authors.

At a time when many people supported witch hunts, Scot bravely argued that these events were little more than the barbaric persecution of the vulnerable, old, and ill. His controversial text frequently proposed more rational approaches to these seemingly supernatural phenomena, arguing that those appearing to be witches might merely be superstitious or uneducated, that the effects of seemingly magical potions were due to chemical causes, and that those claiming to have been visited by nighttime demons were instead victims of a sleep disorder.

The Discoverie of Witchcraft was also the first work in the English language to present a detailed description of sleight of hand and conjuring. Several chapters of the book contained the secrets to illusions, including some principles that are still employed by modern-day magicians.



(Left) An illustration from *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* showing the apparatus that allowed performers “to thrust a knife through your arme, and to cut halfe your nose asunder.”

(Right) Scot explains how “to cut off ones head, and to laie it in a platter, which the jugglers call the decollation of John Baptist.”

Scot’s final chapters on conjuring discussed several illusions using boxes with false bottoms before moving on to more gruesome and shocking stunts, including how to appear to thrust a bodkin needle into your head, place a knife through your arm, stab yourself in the stomach, and cut off your head and lay it on a platter (“The decollation of John Baptist”). Once again, all of the secrets to these illusions were described in considerable detail and sometimes accompanied by vivid woodcuts. When it came to placing a bodkin needle through your head, for instance, Scot recommended the use of a bodkin with a retractable needle and a small sponge soaked in red wine (if spectators discover the wine, Scot informed his readers that “you may saie you have drunke verie much”). Similarly, performers wishing to stage the chest-stabbing illusion were advised to place a protective plate on their chest,

followed by a bladder of blood, and then a flesh-colored pasteboard designed to resemble your actual chest. During the performance, the conjuror plunged a dagger through the pasteboard and bladder, but was protected from harm by the back plate. Performers were advised to make the pasteboard appear as realistic as possible (including the use of chest hair) and to use the blood of a calf or sheep (“but in no wise of an oxe or a cow, for that will be too thicke”). Scot warned readers that such feats may carry a genuine risk, describing how one performer became drunk, forgot to don the protective plate, stabbed himself in the stomach, crawled into a nearby churchyard, and died.

Scot’s radical approach to witchcraft proved highly influential and resulted in him making several powerful enemies. In 1597, King James VI of Scotland produced his own book in which he passionately argued in favor of witch trials. At the start of his book, James explains that one of his main motivations for putting pen to paper was to argue against the “the damnable opinions of . . . the one called SCOT an Englishman,” who James described as being “not ashamed in publike print to deny, that ther can be such a thing as Witch-craft.”

Scot died in 1599, but his ideas lived on. Over time, the belief in witchcraft began slowly declining throughout Europe and the barbaric witch hunts eventually came to an end. Many historians have argued that *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* played a key role in making this possible.

Scot’s book also had a tremendous impact on conjuring, with some of the material from *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* being reproduced in two later magic books: *The Art of Juggling or Legerdemain* (1612) and *Hocus Pocus Junior: The Anatomie of Legerdemain* (1634). The popularity of these works encouraged other authors to produce similar manuals and, over time, these manuscripts of magical secrets have come to form the bedrock of modern-day conjuring.

The Discoverie of Witchcraft is highly sought after by both book collectors and historians of magic, and I am proud to have a copy in my museum. It helped lay the foundations for magic and so provides the perfect starting point for our journey into the art of conjuring.