

## ARTS & BOOKS

### Biography of a mystery

By Claire PESLHERBE & Ségolène PRADEAU

**One thing is for sure: Harry Houdini's life is still shrouded in mystery. From the day the famous magician was born in 1874 to the day he died on Halloween night 1926, many things remain shadowy.**

William Kalush and Larry Sloman, the authors of Harry Houdini's new biography, share a real interest in the history of magic. Kalush studied the art of magic for years, and Sloman assisted magician David Blaine when writing his memoir "Mysterious Stranger" in 2002. Kalush and Sloman's new book, "The Secret Life of Houdini: the Making of America's First Superhero," came out on 31 October 2006 in the U.S..

Born Ehrich Weiss in Hungary in 1874, he arrived in the U.S. in 1878, and changed his name to Harry Houdini (after the famous French magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin) at the age of 17.

Houdini's popularity was as strong as his magic powers: he swam across the Niagara Falls, he could free himself from any ropes, handcuffs, chains and straightjackets while hanging by his feet and under water! He is still one of the most famous magicians worldwide.

Kalush and Sloman's biography is full of new discoveries.

For instance, they suggest that Houdini was a spy, not only for the British crown but also for the U.S. government. His skills in escape acts were highly valued by both.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he might have been recruited by William Melville, a British law enforcement officer but also the first chief of the British Secret Service. Houdini's worldwide tours enabled him to get information on the activities of foreign governments.

Kalush and Sloman then investigate Houdini's relationship with the Russian Czar Nicholas. This true admirer of the magician's powers, wanted to have Houdini as a confidante, a proposition Houdini declined several times.

The authors elaborate on their thesis about Houdini's death. Houdini officially died of peritonitis in Detroit in 1926 but many details remain unclear. Kalush and Sloman, along with many others, tend to think it was the spiritualists who had something to do with the strange circumstances in which he passed away. Houdini was mixing with Spiritualists although he did not share their beliefs. According to the authors, Houdini's friendship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes and fervent spiritualist, ended after Houdini wrote an article claiming he didn't believe in the communication with the dead. Doyle's wife being a medium, Sir Conan surely didn't appreciate these public jibes. But was this article enough to raise the anger of the whole spiritualist movement and eventually decide them to have the magician poisoned? The mystery still remains.

#### Sources:

"Master of mystery: Houdini fascination continues 80 years after his death," *Wisconsin State Journal* 31 October 2006.

"Was Houdini a British Spy?," *Chicago Tribune* 31 October 2006.

Wikipedia: [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) "Harry Houdini"