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Book Review: Magic, Magicians and Detective Fiction edited by Rebecca Josephy

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The study Magic, Magicians and Detective Fiction: Essays on Intersecting Modes of Mystery offers a variety of perspectives on classic detective novels (particularly ones written by early- to mid-twentieth century American authors) that feature performance magic (and occasionally practical magic). The essays range from historical studies of mystery authors who contributed to the American performance magic community to engaging genre studies of Japanese magical realist fiction. Chapters and an appendix by Neil Tobin and Zi-Ling Yan offer crucial data on underexplored American pulp fiction authors, such as Bruce Elliott and Walter Gibson, who wrote iconic mystery stories while also conducting foundational work to promote the conjuring community.

KEYWORDS: Performance Magic, Harry Houdini, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, John Dickson Carr, William Lindsay Gresham, Neil Tobin, Golden Age of Detective Fiction, Victorian Occult Revival, Arthur Conan Doyle, Bruce Walter Gardner Lively Stacy Elliott, Boris Akunin, Arsène Lupin, Edogawa Ranpo, Murakami Haruki, William Adrian Nordhausen, Skullo-cation magic trick, Diego Domingo, American pulp fiction, International Brotherhood of Magicians, Phoenix conjuring magazine

MAGIC, MAGICIANS AND DETECTIVE FICTION: ESSAYS ON INTERSECTING MODES OF MYSTERY.

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Performance magic has been depicted in various genres with varying results, but has had an especially fruitful history in detective fiction. This study features nine chapters examining the different ways magic (primarily performance magic, but sometimes practical) has appeared in detective fiction, with a particular emphasis on the classic detective story over the hardboiled and noir variants.

Six of the chapters offer studies of particular fictional characters or novels, ranging from Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin novels (pp. 131–154) to Edogawa Ranpo and Murakami Haruki's magic realist novels (pp. 157–176). For performance magic scholars, the most interesting of these six genre studies is probably Beatrice Ashton-Levitt's chapter on Victorian magicians (real-life and fictional) who were equated with criminality (pp. 93–111). Her discussion affirms many points made by Ian Saville (2013) about the paradoxical relationship between magic's lower-class origins and the magician's attraction for the elites. Without drawing too many connections to later debates, her summary of Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin legitimizing magic by disenchanting audiences if necessary to show he had no genuine powers demonstrates how the more famous twentieth-century clashes between escapologist Harry Houdini and conjurers claiming genuine powers are part of an ongoing conflict within the field.

Scholars interested in how the theory of performance magic intersects with the theory of detective fiction will also appreciate Zi-Ling Yan's detailed discussion of how magic is portrayed in detective fiction, demonstrating the categories seen in Robert Neale's five-tier typology of magic (pp. 13–39). Scholars more interested in history than in theory will appreciate Neil Tobin's chapters on twentieth-century performance magicians who wrote detective stories (pp. 40–63) and on detective novels featuring performance magicians who help solve the crimes (pp. 64–90).
As this author has noted in short articles for *Mythlore* and *Fellowship & Fairydust* (see Salter, 2024; Salter 2025), this study puts more emphasis on North American and Eastern authors (the Russian author Boris Akunin, the Japanese authors Ranpo and Haruki) than on British authors, which feels curious given how many British authors wrote novels featuring magic during the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. However, recent work on how the Victorian occult revival informed detective fiction (Ferguson 2025, pp. 138–169) suggests that performance and practical magic intersected so much in the books (and lives) of British authors that it would probably be impossible to only write a few chapters on it. Given the complications involved, it is likely better that this study emphasizes North American authors with a few studies on international voices.

In fact, Tobin's emphasis on American writers from the pulp magazine era proves highly helpful since many of the writers he mentions are rarely discussed in academic literature and difficult to locate much secondary literature on. To give an idea of the difficulties involved, my own research has included exploring one writer mentioned in this study, Houdini biographer William Lindsay Gresham (pp. 49-50, 61; cf. Gresham 1959). I contacted carnival historian Diego Domingo in August 2024 for information on one of Gresham's connections, mystery author and *Phoenix* editor Bruce Walter Gardner Lively Stacy Elliott. Domingo passed my questions on to the Conjuring History Facebook page and informed me that Elliott's archives were given to another noted magician, Bill Nord (birth name William Adrian Nordhausen, as noted in his 1948 copyright for the famous Skullo-cation magic trick [549]). Several of Nord's New York friends recalled that they were socializing in the back room of Reuben's Deli on Thirty-eighth Street and Madison Avenue (a well-known magicians' watering hole before its closure [Green 2002]) when they heard that Nord had died and his belongings were in open garbage bags behind his apartment building. Anything valuable had disappeared by the time they reached the apartment.

Given these sorts of obstacles, the fact that Tobin manages to provide approximately ten pages referencing Elliott's books and articles (pp. 45-50, 55-59) is the researcher's equivalent of gold dust.
Tobin's appendix co-written with Yan, three detailed pages on novels and pulp magazine mystery stories featuring magic, is even more of a treasure for scholars seeking to bridge the gap between magic and detection (pp. 215–218).

As is inevitable when a study explores two emerging scholarship areas, much remains to be explored. For example, Tobin cites some of John Dickson Carr's research on Arthur Conan Doyle (p. 60), famous not only for his detective stories but also for his arguments with Houdini about the validity of paranormal activity. Carr and Gresham were friends and both wrote about Conan Doyle (Carr in his authorized Conan Doyle biography, Gresham in his Houdini biography) while also researching magic throughout their lives. As of this writing, no scholar has published an examination of their joint contributions to Conan Doyle (or magic) scholarship. Perhaps the issue has been the lack of a secondary resource such as this to draw the elements together.

Magic, Magicians and Detective Fiction offers scholars a worthy foundation for studying some of the ways magic and mysteries intersect, leaving many opportunities open for advancing the discussion.

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