



The Glorious Deception: The Double Life of William Robinson, aka Chung Ling Soo, the "Marvelous Chinese Conjurer"

Jim Steinmeyer

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In a biography woven from equal parts enchantment and mystery, master illusion designer and today's foremost magic historian, Jim Steinmeyer, unveils the astonishing secrets behind the enigmatic performer Chung Ling Soo, the "Marvelous Chinese Conjurer" — a magician whose life of intrigue and daring remains unparalleled to this day. He learned his art during a revolutionary era in show business, just as minstrel, circus, and variety saloons were being stirred together and distilled into a heady new concoction: vaudeville. Soo's infamous death in 1918 astonished the world: he was killed during a performance of "Defying the Bullets," his popular act in which he caught marked bullets on a porcelain plate. After his death, the deceptions began to unravel. It was discovered that he was not Chinese, but rather a fifty-six-year-old American named William Ellsworth Robinson, a former magicians' assistant, and the husband of Olive Robinson. But even William Robinson was not who he appeared to be, and for the first time, Jim Steinmeyer has uncovered the truth behind Robinson and the magic world's most glorious deception.

The Glorious Deception: The Double Life of William Robinson, aka Chung Ling Soo, the "Marvelous Chinese Conjurer" Details

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From Reader Review The Glorious Deception: The Double Life of William Robinson, aka Chung Ling Soo, the "Marvelous Chinese Conjuror" for online ebook

Fred says

I really enjoyed this book, being a magician myself, I have always been fascinated with William Robinson. Highly recommended.

Tamra says

The Glorious Deception is a great title for a book examining the life of William Robinson, as his life was always a deception on some level or other. For much of the time reading the book, I felt that the deception was actually glorious, but by the end it was just pathetic. Turns out that creating a chaotic, complicated personal life doesn't lead one to happiness. Shocking.

This book is not full of great prose. If you're looking for some amazingly written, fun-to-read non-fiction, look elsewhere. Jim Steinmeyer's writing is good enough to move the story along, but often his word choices feel forced and calculated. It was a smidgen distracting for me. He did a good enough job describing the magic and the stage in a way that felt factual, but I never felt like I was THERE.

Writing style aside, the book is a glimpse into the fascinating, successful, tragic, pathetic life of a great magician during the golden age of magic. You know, back in the day when they used to pretend that magic was real and people totally bought it. William Robinson might have been the most skilled, learned magician who couldn't make it as himself on stage. So he invented a character and almost overnight became a star. Genius.

When I started learning about this guy's life, I assumed that it would be cleaner than it really was. But no. The guy had a wife and kid he abandoned. His parents raised the daughter that he sired just months after marrying his first wife. He ditched the devoted life partner that he'd been with for all of his stage career in favor of some young pretty thing. He became a father of 3 children that he didn't care to spend much time with (though he did actually financially support this batch). And as if all that wasn't enough, he was treacherous, dishonest, short-tempered and untrustworthy in his professional life! It's a bit much.

By the end I just felt bad for the guy. What a spectacularly pathetic life.

Nick says

Interesting biography of William Robinson, a true-to-life Victorian/Edwardian-era magician/illusionist who lived a life of deception, on and off stage. Great side stories concerning the other magician/illusionists of his day -- The Great Lafayette, Houdini, and Ching Ling Foo who became his greatest enemy in the competitive world of magicians after "Rob" took on the persona of "Chung Ling Soo" in England (together with an overwhenlmingly succesful tour to Australia).

Nathan says

Honestly, I bought this book because of its cover. I had no clue that this book was about the life of a magician. And the double life of the same magician in question. Well, I guess I could've guessed it based on the title, but like I said, I bought the book because of its cover.

It was a good book, nonetheless. A biography about a magician from the beginning of his career in the late 19th century to his **Spoiler Alert!** death. A lot of illusions' secrets are revealed in the book, too, if you ever watched David Copperfield in the 90s and wondered, "How did he do that?"

Zachary says

A stunning piece by the multi-talented Jim Steinmeyer. This piece covers one of the most exciting, and fascinating times in the history of magic. Through Steinmeyer's historical lens we get to witness the shows of previous masters such as Alexander Hermann, and Harry Kellar. Following the exploits of a failed professional magician turned stage manager, this book lays out a slice of life in show business, circa the early 1900s. A colorful voyage, and one supremely worth taking, especially for fans of magic, vaudeville, and excitingly written biographies.

Julian Walker says

From an early age, many people have a fascination with magic and those famous 19th/20th century performers, who really created many of today's grand illusions.

The tale of the notoriously dangerous bullet catching trick, which took the life of Chung Ling Soo on a London stage in 1918, was legendary in my schooldays.

Jim Steinmeyer tells his life story, which proves to be even more deceptive than his tricks. Interweaving the history of stage magic with tricks from contemporary greats, this is an absolute must for anyone who still hankers after the great age of conjuring.

Immerse yourself in the magic as he spirits you away to another world.

Evan says

It's not art, and I doubt it helped me grow any as a person, but this book was a fun read.

It launches in Sunset Boulevard fashion, as the central character is shot to death onstage while performing a trick involving the catching of bullets. The rest of the story is told chronologically, as William Robinson—born in New York—learns his art at the feet of the 19th century's greatest magicians, eventually

becoming a top draw himself as the allegedly-Chinese sorcerer “Chung Ling Soo.”

Throughout the book, author Steinmeyer (who has designed magic tricks professionally for David Copperfield and many others) also provides detailed explanations of how the era’s most popular tricks were performed—information that, I’m embarrassed to say, was utterly lost on me.

As interesting as Robinson/Soo’s life was, my favorite detail in the book concerned “Beauty,” a dog owned by rival magician “The Great Lafayette.” Beauty was a mixed-breed mongrel, found by Harry Houdini in a Nashville, Tennessee animal shelter and subsequently given to Lafayette as a gift. Lafayette promptly incorporated Beauty into his magic act—but not before padding her pedigree considerably, billing her as an exotic Gheckhound from the remote (and, by the way, completely imaginary) island of Gheck in the Azores.

Meghan Wilson says

Maybe I'm too easy on books like this because I am absolutely fascinated with the subject matter in general so I suppose I am a little biased, but I loved this book. I love that its real. And it doesn't just give you a biography of William Robinson but it starts you off with the history of vaudeville...the true beginnings of the industry. Its one of those non-fiction books that reads like fiction rather than a school text book. I would read this book again...just might.

Carrie says

This was an absolutely fantastic read. Highly recommended.

Peter Salva says

An all encompassing history of one of the most duplicitous conjurors of all time. Fascinating!

Joanne Clarke Gunter says

This is an interesting and very in-depth book about the life of William Robinson aka Chung Ling Soo, a famous American magician (and friend of Harry Houdini) posing as a Chinese magician in the late 1800's and early 1900's. In this case, by very in-depth I mean overly long. While I did find the book interesting and well-written and many of the magic tricks fascinating, I think it could have been cut by a hundred pages or so. I tired of such detailed description of every trick, no matter how fascinating they were. Still, if you are interested in magic tricks, there are some great ones described in this book.

Major take-aways from this book: 1) Magic is very hard work, especially the big-stage extravaganzas with many props that William Robinson staged all over the world. And you better be sure everything is in exact working order BEFORE you hit the stage. Even so, there will be accidents. 2) Magicians are very secretive and not just about their magic. William Robinson's private life was every bit the complicated mystery (to the

public) that his magic was. 3) Under NO CIRCUMSTANCES are tricks involving loaded guns a good idea, even with fake bullets, tricked-out guns, and trusted assistants. People make mistakes. Deadly mistakes.

This book is a good read if you are of a mind to understand more about magic and some of the famous magicians who paved the way for the magicians of today.

Fred says

I enjoyed the story and magic.

Damian says

one of the most interesting biographies I have ever read

Laura says

I wanted to read this ever since Teller of Penn & Teller recommended it. I know next to nothing about magic and I found this book very interesting.

It does reveal how some tricks back in the day were performed, but I don't think this sours anyone's expectations of a magic show. We're not stupid, we know there's a trick to the performances.

The fact that this was a non-fiction story about a white American man who portrayed himself as a Chinese sorcerer was incredible. It's also fascinating that he ended up being killed in the Catch the Bullet trick, which had killed a couple other magicians prior, too.

The short part of the book that reveals how Robinson/Soo was killed was especially interesting, but maybe that's because I'm a nerd. :)

Jake Cooper says

Dramatized biographies are caught between dry and fake, between "In March 1885..." and "The door slammed with a bang." I much preferred Steinmeyer's Hiding the Elephant.
