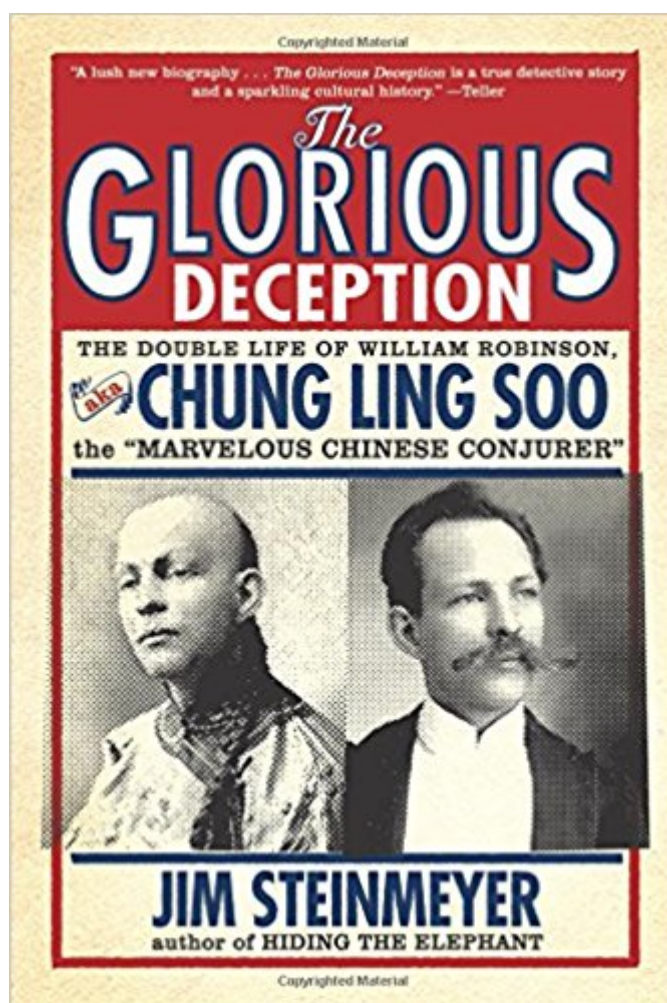


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The Glorious Deception: The Double Life Of William Robinson, Aka Chung Ling Soo, The Marvelous Chinese Conjururer



Synopsis

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 Conjuror" – 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.

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Customer Reviews

In the boisterous heyday of the vaudeville music hall – an era that featured renowned magicians like Herrmann the Great and Harry Houdini – the mysterious and exotic Chung Ling Soo was considered among the greatest. Thus, his shooting death on a London stage in front of a packed house in 1918 was cause for scandal and rumor. In this affectionate and informed biography, Steinmeyer (Hiding the Elephant) tantalizingly picks along the trail of the magician's life

back to his birth— not in China but New York. As a stunned public would discover, Soo was really William Ellsworth Robinson. That Robinson was able to maintain the fiction for so many years in the relentless spotlight of worldwide fame might have been a delicious tale. Unfortunately, there's no rabbit in this hat. Steinmeyer quotes Robinson himself to the effect that the public probably suspected and didn't care. Fans of the magic arts will appreciate Steinmeyer's intimate and colorful portraits of craft. The author is less successful in unraveling the complex riddle of Robinson's personal life; his forensic speculations and judgments are underexplored or simplistic. Who was William Ellsworth Robinson? That question remains unanswered. B&w illus. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

JIM STEINMEYER has created the defining illusions in contemporary magic, such as David Copperfield's vanishing of the Statue of Liberty. He has created special material for the programs of many leading magicians around the world; from Ricky Jay to Siegfried & Roy. He has also designed illusions for six Broadway shows and numerous other productions, such as Mary Poppins, which is currently on the British stage. Steinmeyer was a writer and producer of the A&E network's four-hour history of the art, THE STORY OF MAGIC, and is the author of HIDING THE ELEPHANT. Jim Steinmeyer lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Frankie Glass, an independent television producer.

Fascinating story and clearly told. The chain of events that led Will Robinson to come to work in the very place that fabricated the secrets for the world's best magicians is better than fiction. Then he becomes the assistant, to both of the best magician's in the world and learns and creates their secrets as well. How fate led him to create his persona, and why, is again, better than fiction. I could not put the book down. One of my favorite books and stories. He failed countless times, and continued to try when others would have given up or remained behind the scenes. Buy this book and read it! A story to rival Houdini's.

This book has been on my "to read" list for a couple years and was able to finally read it. It's an amazing historical record from a time long past in the world of magic and live entertainment. Chung Ling Soo was an intriguing figure I remember reading about as a kid. But, in my opinion at that the time, he was one of those "not as famous as Houdini" magicians. He was in fact a major draw, innovator, and showman earning a fat living and touring the world. All of these illusionists were

thieves and liars to some degree...but Chung Ling Soo carried out the ruse on and OFF the stage. A quick check of his Facebook page would have blown the lid off all his nonsense! But alas...Yes, Steinmeyer shares several secrets of these century old magicians, but not for revelation's sake. The secrets are part of the story and the era. Audiences in the 1900's really wouldn't be able to tell the difference between a live tiger and a man wearing a tiger skin?? Well..I guess not. They also couldn't tell the difference between a white dude wearing yellow grease paint and a real 'Chinaman'! This was a time before magicians had to remind an audience that there's "nothing up my sleeve" because that level of exposure hadn't occurred yet. As the story unfolds, it seems as though ALL of these magicians took turns being 'the Masked Magician' of their era. Hire their rival's assistant so they could steal his tricks or...sell his secrets to magic magazines and book publishers. 4 stars because once he gets shot in the first chapter, it takes a while to get going. Over the next few chapters, there are so many names and stories thrown at the reader, it gets overwhelming and hard to follow. But, the pieces fall into place making this a fascinating read!

I don't give out a lot of 5 star reviews. This book gets 5 stars from me because of 3 reasons: 1) It's a great story about a complicated and interestingly flawed person. Will Robinson was an ambitious showman, who recognized the flaws in his professional self and worked tirelessly to overcome them, but failed to overcome the flaws in his personal self, leaving an estranged wife and an abandoned son behind him. That he's a world-class illusionist and turn of the century entertainer makes him a lot more interesting. 2) The author is a great historical writer, and he brings turn of the 20th century vaudeville to life in a real page-turning way. He does a great job exploring not just the main character and his wives and children, but the giants of magic at the time. Will Robinson spent a lot of time going back and forth between the two greatest magicians of the day, who were also bitter rivals. You learn so much good stuff about Kellar and Herrmann that the book feels like it's two or three books in content, without being two or three books in length. The author must've worked really hard to keep the book this packed and this short and accessible. 3) And to me, this is what earned the 5th star in a big way: the author actually explains how the cutting edge (at the time) illusions worked. In detail. With no warnings about how "the brotherhood of magicians would kill me if they knew" or other such blather. He warns us at the beginning that illusionists don't protect the secrets from the audience, but the audience from the secrets. Once you know how it's done, you a) don't enjoy the trick anymore and b) feel foolish for not figuring it out yourself. So, knowing that ahead of time, when he reveals all the ingenious stuff the magicians build and skills they learn, he does it in a way that makes you feel like an insider, like a performer or production assistant. It

makes you (well, it made me... your mileage may vary) feel like a part of the story somehow, since the discovery, invention, and espionage behind illusions is an important, sexy, and treacherous part of being a professional conjurer in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Anyway, that's why I love the book and give it a perfect score. Can't wait for his next one.

For anyone interested in an in-depth look at the life of Chung Ling Soo. Mr. Steinmeyer makes this biography come alive with his knowledge of the subject and his good sense of humor. Although Soo (William Robinson) lived at the turn of the century, his magic is very contemporary in the way that he presented his shows. The author also goes into detail regarding Soo's personal life and ability to fool a number of people into believing that he was in fact of Chinese origin. A great read!!

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