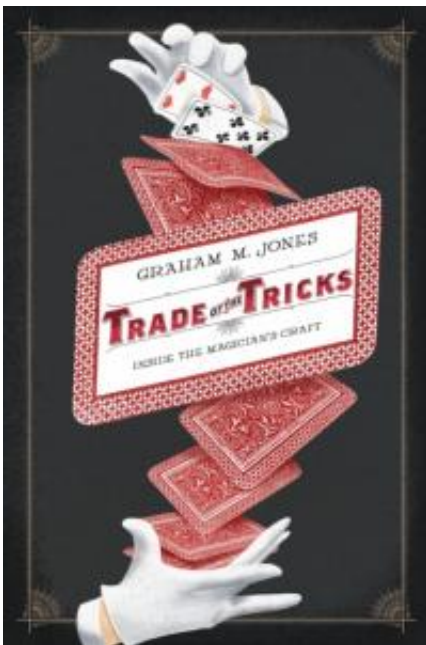


Pulling back the curtain: MIT anthropologist peers into the mysterious world of professional magicians

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The cover of *Trade of the Tricks*, written by Graham Jones, an assistant professor of anthropology. Image: University of California Press

Magicians can make cards appear and people disappear. But the greatest trick any magician pulls off may be acquiring the knowledge needed to perform such acts in the first place.

After all, [magic tricks](#) are largely secrets; they wouldn't entertain

audiences half as much otherwise. Thus [magicians](#) closely guard their trade's knowledge. And yet the craft would die if the techniques of magic did not transfer to promising practitioners.

“The paradox of all secrets, including those in magic, is that they are produced through concealing information, but for them to have any value, they also have to be shared to some extent,” says Graham Jones, an assistant professor of anthropology at MIT, who has extensively studied the social world of magicians. “So there is a balance between concealment and revelation in the circulation of these tricks.”

To find out how the craft works, Jones spent two years inside Paris' thriving world of magic. He acquired mentors, passed an examination to join France's largest magic association, and has emerged with a new book about the experience, *Trade of the Tricks*, published this month by the University of California Press.

By studying magicians, Jones believes, we also gain insight into the seemingly eternal realm of crafty people who make a living by fooling others. “Many cultures have mythologies that involve archetypical trickster figures who are always getting into trouble and using their cunning to get out of it,” Jones says. “Magicians embody this trickster figure in the Western imagination.”

Engineers of deception

Several things about magicians only become fully apparent after the curtain is pulled back on their world. The best magicians are also accomplished performers with keen psychological insights about what blend of patter, joking and surprise their audiences will tolerate.

“Magic is more than illusions,” Jones says. “It's a whole repertoire of crafty interactions.”

Indeed, Paris is where modern magic emerged as a performing art, largely thanks to the pioneering magician Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin in the 1840s and 1850s. “Robert-Houdin created the persona of a magician as the sophisticated gentleman in evening wear with white gloves,” Jones says. “He took magic from the street to the stage and made it fashionable entertainment for the nascent bourgeoisie.” The legendary American magician Ehrich Weiss even paid homage to Robert-Houdin when choosing his stage name: Harry Houdini.

But magicians also use sharp analytical skills to construct new tricks. Many of the French illusionists Jones met have training in computer science or engineering. For decades, scientists have used magicians to debunk claims of the paranormal, since magicians can often detect how pseudoscientific results are contrived.

The magician’s dilemma

But how does one acquire the high-level techniques of professional magicians? Historically, these tricks are shared among a close-knit group of performers. First, an aspiring magician needs some basic competence to win trust from others. “One challenge was to become a good enough practitioner,” Jones says of his experience.

Even when experts teach their tricks, they do not always reveal the entire technique, forcing aspirants to figure out illusions for themselves. For his part, Jones could only gain entrance to the French national magicians’ association by performing an original stage show. His centerpiece became a trick in which he made pastries appear on demand, an homage to a Robert-Houdin routine.

In a sense, magicians are inventors. They are less interested in textbook tricks — pretending to saw someone in half — than in dreaming up new illusions. “Magic is a generative system,” Jones says. “New methods and

techniques are being produced every day.” But magicians cannot keep innovations up their sleeves forever; they want credit for those advances before other magicians create similar tricks. “Revealing secrets is the only way magicians can establish themselves as innovators and build reputations,” Jones says.

In France, the magicians’ association helps facilitate this by releasing an annual DVD called *Secrets of the Year*, where magicians can stake claim to authorship of breakthroughs. Alternately, one French illusionist, Christian Girard, who invented the use of reversible images on playing [cards](#), has partnered with prominent magicians to circulate his innovations; they get new tricks, and he gets the credit.

Peter Nardi, a sociologist at Pitzer College and long-time amateur magician, calls *Trade of the Tricks* “a very insightful and creative book,” in part because it illuminates this tension. In Nardi’s view, Jones “understands the dilemma about how magic is a sharing society, and people bond through the secrets of magic, but at the same time you have this proprietary notion that some secrets can’t be shared yet. You have to save extra stuff for yourself to make a living performing magic.”

As a result, Nardi says, “there are times when the magician performing will not just be doing the magic for the general public, but occasionally will add something new to throw off other magicians. And the magicians watching will say, ‘What happened there?’”

The Internet: making magic stores disappear

Yet as with so many other spheres of life, the Internet is disrupting some conventions of magic. Since Jones started his research several years ago, some of Paris’ magic shops, which doubled as meeting places for serious magicians, have gone out of business. Online retails and instructional videos are becoming more popular.

“The Internet and DVDs allow the sphere of circulation to be wider,” Jones says. “Secrets are no longer always moored in personal relationships.”

Still, even if more tricks appear online, new ones will always be in the pipeline. “Certainly some magicians have a crisis mentality,” Jones says. “But there are other people who might not be doing magic if it weren’t for the Internet, and for them it’s a boon. It will take time to figure out. A hundred years ago, magicians were having the same conversations about the publication of mass-market magic books. As bad as it seemed to them at the time, it didn’t wreck the practice of magic.”

Provided by Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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