

Interview with Tom Adams

Why did you decide to write a book about magic, illusions and deception?

I've always found 'belief' a really interesting part of human behaviour. Why do people believe certain things – whether it's if ghosts exist or if one washing powder cleans your clothes better than another. What is it that's making us come to these conclusions? So a book about deception (people trying to make other people believe something false), illusions (people trying to make other people believe they saw something they didn't see) and magic (deception wrapped up as entertainment) seemed a perfect mix!

Which fact surprised you the most during your research?

I'd never heard the story about the Electrolytic Marine Salts Company before and I thought it was a brilliant con trick. This was a company set up after the founders 'discovered' they could extract huge amounts of gold from seawater. Investors were tripping over themselves to invest in the company when instead they should have been more cautious of the claims. But it was a very good scam. There was just enough truth in the claim to hook people, there appeared to be high returns on your money with very little risk, and the tricksters cleverly added a layer of science in the form of the 'Gold Accumulator', the new piece of kit that extracted the gold. It goes back to the old adage that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

What is your personal relationship to magic? Have you ever performed magic tricks yourself?

A long long time ago I wanted to be a magician. One Christmas, I must have been about 8 years old, I was given a magic set. I can remember it quite clearly. It was called 'Hocus Pocus Magic Set' and it had trick cards, a wand, a rope for knot tricks and a set of tumblers and balls. I loved it. At school that year we had an end of term music hall show where the boys and girls would get up and do a turn in front of all the parents and I was thrilled when I was picked to be a magician. What was amazing was that my teacher knew a professional magician and I got to perform some of his real magic tricks in front of everyone. In one, dozens of (paper) butterflies fluttered out of nowhere. Another saw me pull a bunch of flowers out of thin air which I then handed to my able assistant. Incredible stuff!

How did you come up with the idea of including fake hoaxes in the book?

I was writing about some of the historical hoaxes and saw strong links with what goes on on social media today with scams and false claims about everything from climate change to health supplements. It's easy to think that everything you see online or in print is the truth so I thought throwing in a few of my own hoaxes would make readers sit up a little, force them to not take everything at face value but to exercise their 'incredulity meter'. What I'd

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love to know though is how readers get on with that challenge. Do any of the fakes slip through the net or can readers spot them a mile off? How do I find out?!

What was the biggest challenge in working on this book?

Can I have two? Firstly, deciding what to leave out. There are so many great stories about illusions, deceptions and hoaxes that it was difficult to fit all the ones I wanted to write about in the book. Secondly, I wanted to talk about classic magic tricks and how they were done, but I knew telling secrets about tricks was frowned upon in magic circles. I chatted to a magician friend of mine about my dilemma and he told me that while many magicians might perform a trick that appears the same to an audience, each will have their own hidden method or 'gag', meaning there's no one way to do a trick. For old illusions like cutting a person in half, the gags magicians use today are very different to the original gags so I felt quite happy revealing how they used to be done.

In your work as a children's book author, do you also draw inspiration from your work as a producer?

Absolutely. What I'm doing in television certainly informs ideas for children's books. I've made programmes on a whole host of different subjects from steam trains to the pyramids to Stonehenge to the mysterious statues on Rapa Nui. Many of these subjects have popped up in various books I've written. I'm even writing a book all about trains at the moment, and that draws on some of the research I did for programmes on trains years ago!

Why did you start writing children's books?

I was writing a lot for the television shows I was working on and it seemed a natural progression and something I could do around television. I got a great break from a publisher called Templar. I sent them a book proposal that was a little like a 'Horrible Histories'. They didn't want to publish that book but they did want me to write a series of pop-up science books for which I am forever grateful as that was the start of my career as an author.

What do you enjoy most about working as an author?

Hard to say what I enjoy most – there are lots of things. It's wonderful when the first artwork comes in from the illustrator and you start to see the book take shape. Then there's the first time you see the finished book, and I will also never tire of finding books of mine 'in the wild' - on bookshop or library shelves, or when people post images of their children engrossed in one of my books. But I also get a great deal of satisfaction when I feel I've managed to tell a complicated story in an engaging and understandable way. If I'm happy with the pacing and rhythm of the words, that's even better!