‘A Raging Social Success’
Magic as Home Entertainment

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For me, it all began with this book.

From the late 1920s until the middle 1950s, this book, The Home Entertainer, sat on the bookshelves of many British households.

I certainly remember it always being in our house. Sid G Hedges was a massively prolific writer on topics such as swimming, diving, games, hobbies and lots of other pastimes.

In this book – an early 1930s edition by the fashions in the illustrations, although they never changed into the 1950s editions – he told you how to do so many things including:

How to bake a Hansel and Gretel cake:

How to do a silly walks game:

How to ruin a polished table with a boisterous children’s game:

plus learn community singing, learn to play the ukulele, learn how to play table tennis and scores and scores of other ‘wholesome activities’.
I was, maybe inevitably, always interested in the section ‘simple conjuring and juggling’.

Sid Hedges opens this part of the book by describing an experience he had in Paris. He was sitting in a café with French friends but got bored as they were all talking in French and he had difficulty in understanding. He therefore took some matches out of his pocket and showed some simple conjuring tricks. Within moments he had become, as he put it, ‘A raging social success’. Sounds good to me so, ladies and gentlemen, if you want to stay at the best hotels, eat at the best restaurants, have glamorous partners and be the toast of the town, become a Magician!!  – Maybe!

Back to this living room. Who is this ‘social success’ performing? Is it father (likely), Uncle Jim or Fred, or simply a neighbour? It can’t be a professional or semi-professional magician as that defeats the whole thrust of the ‘do it yourself’ aim of the book. So, he is an amateur maybe doing only one show in his life, or having a few tricks to show family and friends or down at the pub. It could be that his interest continues and he becomes a hobbyist which eventually takes him to the local magic club. But as a real amateur how did he learn his first trick and where did he get it from? That’s what I set to find out.

This illustration shows an adult man, but of course ‘how to do magic’ chapters in home entertainment books could easily be directed to boys and girls as we shall soon see. To find out how any amateur, young or old, male or female, first learned tricks we have to begin our research back in the 16th century – 1584 to be precise.

This was the year that Reginald Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* was published being the first book in the English language to explain in detail sleight of hand tricks. There was, as many of you will know, a political purpose behind Scot’s book. Scot, who was...
also a Justice of the Peace, was appalled at the cruelty of trials and punishments for witchcraft. He believed that if he could demonstrate that miracles could be produced by sleight of hand rather than diabolical means, it would have a powerful effect on justice.

The section on sleight of hand was therefore, not just a primer for magicians, but for the first time put secrets of magic in the public domain. Many of the basic moves and tricks, such as the cups and balls, are still being used today.

Now I could easily spend a lot of time on the bibliographical history of early magic books, but serious scholars such as Trevor Hall have already covered this ground.

I shall therefore skip quickly through the next couple of centuries, concentrating not on the bibliographical details of the books, but clues as for whom they were intended – especially early amateur magicians. Of course these early books with a magical content were only of use if you had literacy. In Britain only around 15% of people could read in 1550, but by

1650 it had risen to 50% and to near universality by the end of the 19th century.

Back to the books - Scot’s descriptions of sleights of hand in his 1584 book were copied by later compilers for over 100 years, the first being The Art of Jugling or Legerdemaine of 1612. We need to consider what these terms mean. Juggling, or ‘Jongleurs’ in French, was a general term used for what we now would call magicians and jugglers. Legerdemain is simply French for sleight of hand.

Importantly, you will note that witchcraft is not mentioned and the book’s intention is simply ‘tending to mirth and recreation’.
The aim of this 1630 book is very clear - it is for reader’s ‘honest recreation and to pass away idle hours’.

The purpose of the book above, *Hocus Pocus Junior* of 1634, is so ‘an ignorant person may learn’ and is important as the first illustrated book in English devoted solely to conjuring. Also, it’s the first use of ‘Hocus Pocus’ as an intonation.

There was little ‘mirth and recreation’ and a dearth of magic books during the 1640s and 50s as the puritan Commonwealth period greatly disapproved of amusements. Indeed the persecution of so-called witches was rife. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Charles II, the Merry Monarch, was very favourably interested in entertainment and pleasure and many more ‘do it yourself’ books on magic and trickery became available.

*Sports and Pastimes* from 1676 is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is very rare – or even unique. The only known copy is in the Huntington Library in California. It is a 48 page pamphlet with magic taking up about half. The rest is pastimes such as puzzles, recipes and other amusements. It has these jolly illustrations of young men doing magic and other slightly obscure things to our modern eyes – like standing on a log over a fire! It is important for our theme today as it was clearly designed, as it says, ‘for the delight and recreation of youth’. Thus, there was no political message – just young people, almost always male, and as long as they could read, simply learning magic tricks.
In this 1722 book (left) ‘even the meanest capacity may perform the whole art without a teacher’. Note the illustrations – cups and balls again plus the same decapitation trick as in Scot.

As I indicated earlier, I am not going to deal with the historical bibliography of early printed magic in any more depth and we’ll move forward to more modern times. One or two themes however are being established.

Firstly, the popularity of the ‘miscellany’ types of publications which included magic and which were often produced around Christmas time. For example, the one below from 1744: The Merry Melody or Christmas Box for Gay Gallants.

Secondly, a publishing target of boys and young men as potential magicians to entertain their families and, frankly, often to show off to girls!

Both these themes are on display in this book from 1820. The book deals with all sorts of ‘curious problems’ as well as ‘humorous tricks and deceptions’, but look at the boy dramatically showing off to his family or friends.
Or look at the illustrations above. Granted these are from French fashion books showing the latest middle-class fashions for young boys and girls, but the real ‘show off’ is surely the young magician trying to impress the girls. The girls look a bit disinterested but also slightly coquettish.

The theme is international – here is a German boy with adoring fans. The illustration is from a magic set which is clearly intended for the German, English and French speaking markets.
It’s the same again in the little 1864 book above. The book is in fact totally magic in spite of this frontispiece. This boy is demonstrating the latest technology of the time – a Magic Lantern rather than showing an audience tricks. Also, note the title – *Parlour Magic* – exactly the sort that can be done in living room conditions, taking us back to the home entertainment of our starting base.

Around 1866 rotary printing presses became popular and newsprint and periodicals boomed. Although the print runs of the books we have already seen were surprisingly large for their time, rotary presses meant faster printing and larger editions.

Here is an example from 1873: *The Popular Recreator*. Unlike *Parlour Magic*, this book is quite large with magic spread throughout, in between the other hobbies and pastimes. The magic is somewhat surprising.
For example, it contains the sword cabinet trick, for which you would need a gigantic parlour and a somewhat brave assistant for home entertainment.

The other pastimes range from the decorous, such as this lady learning to skate, to downright foolhardy like a man learning to dive. By the look on his face it seems he has just realized that maybe the water is not deep enough for a rapid feet first vertical descent!

We started off this talk with an illustration of a man, maybe a father, entertaining in a parlour or maybe ‘lounge’ in the 1930s, but so far we’ve seen mainly boys, so where are the men? The problem is that illustrations of magicians don’t differentiate between adult professional performers and the adult amateurs we are considering.
This picture ‘Die Taschenspieler’ by the 19th century Austrian artist Carl Schwenninger shows a scene in an 18th century salon. Is the performer a member of his salon set entertaining his friends or a professional? We don’t know. A copy of this picture found in a German magic magazine simply has the translated caption ‘He was able to entertain the salon’.

This 1877 print ‘The Christmas Conjurer’ is from the Illustrated London News and could well be a father or an uncle, although some have suggested it depicts the celebrated magical author Prof Hoffmann whose book Modern Magic was published the year before.
In this scene (above) from a 1920s magazine the performer and the guests at a fashionable party are all in evening clothes, so is the performer an amateur or not? It’s difficult to tell.

The German man on the left is clearly the host – he is saying ‘How do I entertain my guests?’.

By the late 19th century and really up to the spread of radio in the 1920s, home-made family entertainment was the norm. Outside the home there were of course theatres and later cinemas, but in the home the piano was often the centrepiece of entertainment. By 1900 there were 100 piano makers in London alone employing 6000 people – piano production and ownership peaked in the middle 1920s. If we are really honest, you would be more likely to be ‘a raging social success’ at this time if you could play the piano rather than do magic! But playing and singing round the piano was not the only entertainment. Families also played games together, and it is families that are often shown on the covers of game boxes.
By the 1930s girls began to be shown in lead positions in the advertising, as shown here in this Tiddly Tennis game. Note who produced this, which gives our link back to magic. The Ernest Sewell magic sets were what started off many of my generation to magic.

From Edwardian times, here is Table Quoits with a rather old looking boy being yet again the lead player.
Games like these, music in the home, magic lanterns and later home movies are very much a social history diversion we could take, but we had better get back to magic. We’ll look again at magic books and pamphlets later, but now how did those fathers/uncles/boys and girls get their magical apparatus to give the family shows? There was probably always a difference between London and the provinces for this.

By the late 19th century London had shops selling magic – for example Davenports began trading in 1898 and is still in business today.

The history of London magic shops is a major topic for another day! Of course there were, and are, magic shops in the provinces but often new amateurs had to rely on joke shops. This one (below) is in Scarborough but could equally well be in Blackpool or Great Yarmouth or other places. Small scale tricks can certainly be got in such establishments, but sometimes also better quality, more professional, magic such as the Card Duck and Linking Rings as seen in this window display.
Joke shops always sell popular gimmicked decks of cards such as the Svengali Deck and the Mocker Pack. These can also often be found demonstrated by pitchmen at seaside stalls, fairs, racecourses and markets and are often the source of the first purchase of magic by new amateurs.

Celebrated magician and pitchman Joe Stuthard demonstrating the Trilby (Svengali) Deck.
In these Amazon oriented days, the importance of old style mail order catalogues is often forgotten. As well as magic shops, London also had the benefit of large leisure orientated department stores with a magic department and demonstrations.

Here is the famous Gamages of Holborn which operated between 1878 and 1982. The shop – ‘a must for children of all ages’ – had a vibrant mail order business for magic and toys as can be seen here.
Hamleys famous toy shop, originally opened as *Noah’s Ark* in 1760, has traded in Regent Street since 1881. It also had mail order catalogues, although now their catalogue is on line. Both Gamages and Hamleys were also famous for their in-shop magic demonstrations. These are still happening in Hamleys.
For more cheap and cheerful magic and jokes, we must look at Ellisdons which traded between 1897-1980 with the glorious advertising slogan ‘We are only in business for fun’. So many of us of ‘a certain age’ remember these wonderful catalogues with a mixture of great gags and cheaply constructed magic which fitted our youthful pocket money budgets.

I well remember the excitement of sending off a half crown postal order and awaiting a parcel of delights – or more likely disappointments. Nevertheless, Ellisdons was a wonderfully accessible source for the amateur with advertisements for its services in most of the popular press.

I remember I was ‘conned’ into thinking I could learn to play the piano without effort if I bought a vamping chart – here it is – I still can’t play the piano.
Ellisdons stock was taken over as the Joke Shop by Post in 1980 and then became Magic by Post under which title I believe it still trades in Bristol.

Of course the classic method of starting magic has always been the Christmas or birthday gift of a ‘box of tricks’ or ‘magic set’. Many of us started in this way. The history of magic sets could be another major topic for research which I am not exploring today. Nevertheless here are a few examples often linked to famous magicians of their particular era. Most contained, and still contain, the same range of standard magic.
Previously we looked at those early magic books showing tricks you could learn and do at home, but generally speaking there was a scarcity of decent teaching materials on how to perform magic. In 1876 this changed with the publication of Prof. Hoffmann’s *Modern Magic*.

This classic work was the first in the English language to cover magic comprehensively and is regarded as the conjuror’s Bible. This began a trend for the production of complete books of magic by famous, and not so famous, magicians which continues today. But Hoffmann has another significance to my theme. The book was based on articles originally published in Routledge’s *Every Boy’s Paper* from 1874 onwards – thus we now have magic appearing in cheap popular magazines but note, boys only again!

I should also at least make passing reference to another famous boys’ weekly story magazine with a link to magic – *Hotspur*. It was in the small ads in *Hotspur* that budding magicians in the 1940s and early 50s found a reference to the Boy Magicians’ Club of Prestatyn, Wales, run by local magician Mr Rees.

The club had a magazine – Trixy – and also sold tricks through their catalogue. Many well-known British magicians started out by joining this club and buying the advertised magic.
Popular magazines for adults – not just boys – also began to feature magic, puzzles and games especially in the run up to Christmas. *Tit Bits* is a good example of a successful weekly that was very strong on seasonable entertainment. It got mildly salacious in its later days, but at its height was full of news items, believe it or not stories, household hints, sports news and do it yourself entertainment. These are examples from Tit Bits my father cut out and filed. He was not a magician but as you can see enjoyed party games.

*Tit Bits* and similar weeklies or monthlies were leisure-oriented publications but magic for hobbyists did appear in other more serious journals.

This book of 1952 by Norman Hunter was made up of items that had appeared in the monthly *Practical Mechanics*. An unlikely periodical for magic I would have thought. The tricks described were remarkably revealing to be in the public domain.

This was one of the first books in my magic collection and is still worth consulting. Hunter himself was a well-known children’s author of the Prof. Branestawm series but also many books on simple conjuring. Less serious than *Practical Mechanics* are children’s comics. They were often an exciting source of magical information for budding magicians.
Here is a *Beano* of 1991 with a ‘Dennis the Menace’ trick linked to a product promotion. It was not only publishers that saw the advantages of product promotion with magic books or give away tricks, but also other commercial companies.

Here is a good early example from the Quaker Oats company. It is a book published by Quaker Oats in 1935 and it is still sought out by collectors today. J C Cannell was a journalist and amateur magician who was criticised by The Magic Circle for revealing secrets in this book.

Another Quaker Oats edition, also from 1935. Note it is boys again.
Actual small packet tricks or mini instructions were give-aways often found within cereal packets. I only read in *Linking Ring* recently that Bev Bergeron in the USA started his magical career with cereal box tricks from Skinner’s Raisin Bran Cereal. Bergeron actually defines the whole idea of ‘give a trick’ with product merchandising as ‘Cereal Box Magic’.
Also from the USA is a promotion from Pillsbury Flour. If Mom bought a suitable sized packet of Pillsbury Pancake Mix, then a new trick would arrive in the mail.

And at last, here are the girls. Another US flour promotion by Fleischmann with maybe a subliminal message – girls, flour, baking, sales...

Magic also appeared on cigarette cards – but cigarette card advertising is another major topic for investigation.
Small magic and puzzles were available in retail outlets through what was called Gumball Vending – in effect the same principle as bubble gum machines. This was well established in the USA but also over here – Richard Cadell recently described in Key Ring how his first magic came from Gumball machines.

So far we haven’t considered the actual tricks in the various books, catalogues and boxes of magic. This is deliberate as to do so would be yet another major diversion requiring more research and could easily be the subject of another lecture, but we can discern some common and interesting themes. Most of the published books never begin immediately with actual tricks, but begin with the book’s purpose and magical advice.

Thus, in the preface to this 1820 book the magic and puzzles are ‘to relieve the ennui of winter evenings’. Indeed, in pre-electric days, winter evenings must have seemed endless so any form of entertainment was a welcome diversion. The Victorian books especially stress that they are (to quote) ‘to amuse and entertain brothers, sisters and school fellows’. They also stress that ‘you must have patience and practice each trick thoroughly’. This is still true today of course.

Card tricks tend to dominate most of these books. Mostly they are easy and self-working such as ‘You do as I do’ or mathematical such as the ‘21 trick’ but there is also a tendency to begin magical teaching with quite complicated sleights. For example, in Parlour Magic which I showed you before, the first page deals with The
Pass. Indeed there was quite a bias towards learning the Pass as the basis for all good magic for many years. It was still prevalent in my early days in the 1950s.

The trouble is the Pass is not always the Pass as we know it. In the Parlour Magic book, I would describe it as a Top Change. It has rather unlikely misdirections. At the moment of the change it suggests you slap the pack and shout ‘Presto Begone’ – not what I would call subtle.

Contrasting approaches to ‘first tricks’ can be seen in these books by two early television magicians. Geoffrey Robinson of early children’s TV Whirlygig fame, begins his book with the old wobbly pencil trick with a loosely held pencil. Harry Green, better known as a Jewish entertainer and raconteur rather than magician, has a complicated palming a card as the first lesson in magic. I personally, would not say that palming a card is the absolute first thing a new budding magician should learn.

Ever since the publication of Prof Hoffmann’s book in 1876, there have been scores and scores of books of magic for the layman, often very revealing. Magic was also a topic in the many ‘teach yourself’ or ‘how to do it’ series of books.

The well-known series Teach Yourself with their distinctive yellow jackets was very popular in the 1950s. You can tell how diverse the topics were – of the two copies I possess, one is Magic and the other Archaeology! Looking at my own magic copy again after many years, I was struck how much good material there is in it.

A similar series from the 1970s is Illustrated Teach Yourself – you can see the range of topics below. The author of the magic volume was Robert Harbin and it contained excellent, easy to do, tricks.
Two other such series were the Lions Make It Easy series, and the famous Lady Bird children’s series with their Tricks and Magic.

Coming up to date, we have The American Dummies series. Well known for help with all aspects of computing, it surprisingly also has magic as a topic.

We began with Sid Hedges in Paris and his match sticks, items that in his time might be in your pocket. Cards were still to the fore in most magic books, but also ideas using items found in the purse or pocket which were especially suitable for performing impromptu magic, or maybe scams or quasi-puzzles. These are the sorts of items that Paul Daniels used to do in his Bunko Booth on TV.

John Fisher collected many of these in his classic book Never Give a Sucker an Even Break. These were a major part of the Christmas entertainment sections of magazines we have mentioned before – just the thing for fun around the table after Christmas lunch or later down in the pub.
Scams, together with a few basic tricks, were also the major part of the publicity give-aways or cheap pamphlets for sale by professional magicians. Here are a few examples starting with one of the best known from the Polish/British performer Horace Goldin.
Dunninger, the famous US radio mentalist had a more robust publication which sold in 1954 for 75 cents. Unlike the others it has some remarkably revealing material in it. Note the use of Houdini’s name to help sell copies.

I must confess I had never heard of Little Johnny Jones until I found this 1940 pamphlet. Unlike the Dunninger pamphlet, it has more traditional scams/puzzles which anyone can do, such as the old joke of slicing a banana without removing the skin.

Ironically, I found exactly the same banana gag in the latest Dynamo publication – no floating above the Shard or walking on water – just slicing a banana! Things do not change.

It would surely seem that our original Father/Uncle or whoever would have been spoilt for choice in finding magic suitable for his home performance. Whether this guy (below) got it right for home entertainment is open to debate!
Some fathers made their purchase of magic even easier – here is Charles Dickens entertaining his family at his son’s birthday in 1843. He simply bought magic directly from the Viennese magician Ludwig Dobler whom he saw in London. Such purchases were not available to everyone, but as we have seen, amateurs had plenty of other opportunities to find magic.

But could our amateur have avoided all this choice if he had simply performed the magic or gags shown in Sid Hedges’ original ‘Home Entertainer’ book? Unlikely in my view as it was a rum collection. It begins reasonably with a few basic card tricks but then changes direction into some odd and frankly worrying material, such as asking a randomly chosen assistant to hide a pot egg in his mouth in order to enable the magician to perform an ‘eggs from mouth’ routine. In the USA magician John Calvert and comedian Red Skelton did a similar routine with billiard balls, but they were professionals and knew what they were doing. Health and Safety officers would rightly object to using an assistant in this way today!

Sid Hedges was by no means alone in this cavalier approach to assistants. Home entertainment books and the many so-called ‘Fun’ encyclopaedias incorporating magic were not always much fun for the unsuspecting guests at parties, in fact some ‘fun’ with a magical context was positively cruel.
Here is the late 19th century so-called Art of Amusing by Frank Bellow and it begs the question, amusing for whom? For example, in one routine an unsuspecting assistant gets covered in blacking. Another ‘amusing’ idea is to deliberately frighten young girls with a pretend giant hidden in the coats in a hallway. The perpetrator of these so-called magical gags might have found them amusing, but I am not sure the recipients would have agreed. Some were humiliating and some quite scary.

Making a pretend giant is fun, but surely not to frighten a little girl?
We are coming to the end of our investigation and I couldn’t find a reason to put in this next slide, so I have done so anyway! It is not magic, but maybe does demonstrate that house parties could always be a source of devilment. Maybe this game and others could be the start of a beautiful friendship – who knows?

This is not magic but similar – a puppet theatre. It is a scene from the Alan Ayckbourn play Season’s Greetings. The character Uncle Bernard performs a puppet show every Christmas much to the annoyance and indifference of his family. Chaos ensues with hilarious and tragic results as is often the case with Ayckbourn plays.

A too enthusiastic amateur can also cause domestic problems within a marriage or partnership. There may be more truth in this cartoon than we like to admit!
As we have seen, our amateur home entertainer has had plenty of opportunities and sources – books, pamphlets, magic magazine articles, mail order etc – to create his own magic act. But for amateurs now all has changed. First film, then video, then DVDs and from 2005, YouTube. Now you can see, hear and learn magic any time of day or night. Web sites exist explicitly targeting the new budding magician. This is just an example of the many, many that are out there.

Maybe it can be summed up in this illustration:

Here is a little boy with his Christmas magic set. He is following instructions, not from a book or pamphlet, but on a TV screen. He can easily follow all the necessary moves. Will he continue with his magic, I wonder? We shall see – he is my grandson.

So like our amateur here, budding magicians should certainly learn tricks, learn how to present them and hopefully entertain people and not bore them – and yes, you could become a social success, but don’t bank on it.

However, here’s a final awful warning for magicians from the writer Somerset Maugham:

*Do you like card tricks? He asked.*
*No, I hate card tricks, I answered.*
*Well, I’ll just show you one.*
*He showed me three!*

Be warned.

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