

THE HOUDINI INHERITANCE



By Emma Carroll

Ages 9+ Discussion Notes

The activities, notes and reading questions included here are suitable for classroom, library or book group sessions.



Dear Reader,

I'm thrilled to share my latest story, inspired by a man whose real life was stranger than fiction. Harry Houdini's death-defying stunts are legendary; less is known about the complicated, conflicted man behind them. His sudden death in 1926, from supposed appendicitis, is particularly mysterious, and it's this pivotal moment I use as my way into the story of my protagonist: 12-year-old Glory Copperfield.

Glory lives in a Devon seaside town above the tattoo parlour where her mother and elder sister, Effie, work. Glory's family and friends are all ambitious: Effie wants to go to art college, her best pal Dennis is desperate to be on stage and her mother is spending the summer in Coney Island, NY, inking the rich and famous. In contrast, all Glory wants is a pet dog. She's lost count of the times she's asked for one and is getting desperate.

Then Harry Houdini comes to town. A chance encounter at what turns out to be his final show goes badly wrong. When his arch-rival medium Margery Crandon arrives soon afterwards, things take a very suspicious turn. Glory is suddenly left with a huge responsibility. Her loud, mischievous, fiercely loyal personality – often her downfall – becomes a key factor in the fight to protect Houdini's legacy.

The action takes us from the Devon seaside across the Atlantic to Coney Island's amusement parks where, behind the candyfloss and rollercoaster rides, dark deeds are afoot, threatening everything Glory holds dear.

This is a story about friends you'd die for, bossy big sisters, being brave when you're scared, and how the unlikeliest of teams, pulling together, can achieve the remarkable. It's also about how we best remember the people we've lost. Expect magic tricks, seances and some exceptionally cute dogs.

And in case you're wondering, Glory bears a striking resemblance to 12-year-old me.

Happy adventuring!

Emma x



Part I – Pre-Reading: The Mysteries of *The Houdini Inheritance* . . .

Delve into book cover clues . . .

- What do you like about the front cover? What intrigues you about it?
- Who do you think the main character(s) might be? What can you tell about them?
- Can you find any clues on the cover that reveal who Houdini is? What do you know about him already?
- What does the word ‘inheritance’ mean? Why might this be important to the story?
- What genre do you think the book might fit within?
- Are there any clues about where the story is set?
- What questions do you have about the story after seeing the cover?

Discover some daredevil vocabulary . . .

Here are some words and phrases you will come across in the first few chapters of the book. Can you find out what they mean?

inheritance; handcuffs; death-defying; stunt; pier; theatrical; gaudy; showman; escapologist; gobstopper; padlock; dramatic; swooning; admiration; promenade.

Escape to a new setting . . .

- ‘The English seaside, 1926.’ When you read that this is the story’s setting, what do you imagine? Draw a picture.
- *The Houdini Inheritance* begins in the fictional town of Sidford-by-the-Sea. In Chapter 1, Houdini’s stunt takes place on the seafront, where ‘tea shops and amusement kiosks... [line] the promenade.’ How would you feel to be part of the crowds watching Houdini?

- Part 2 of the story is set on the *Aquitania*, a ship taking passengers from Southampton to New York. The advertising posters along the dock describe it as 'The Ship Beautiful'. Re-create one of these posters advertising this luxury journey across the Atlantic.
- Part 3 of the story takes place in Luna Park on Coney Island, America. Carry out some research into Luna Park. Where is it? What is its history? Imagine you have visited Coney Island; write a postcard to your friends back home, explaining what it is like. Then read Chapter 6. How does your postcard compare to the one sent from Dennis's mum, Shula?
- Create your own imaginative setting for an incredible death-defying stunt or magic trick!

Part 2 – During Reading: TOP SECRET themes . . .

Themes are the main ideas that lie beneath the surface of a text. Use this ‘Top Secret Theme Record’ to note down ideas as you read *The Houdini Inheritance*. How is each theme explored? Which are the most important? Why? Try to add at least two themes of your own.

Top Secret Theme Record

Theme	Notes
Magic	
Secrets	
Danger	
Rivalry	
Adventure	
Family	
Friendship	
America	
Mystery	

Part 3 – Reading Questions: Codes, Distractions, Swaps and Stunts . . .

Chapters 1–7: The Handcuff King

- What is the relationship between Dennis and Glory?
- Which of the children most admires Harry Houdini? How can you tell? Does this change by the end of the book?
- How does the author, Emma Carroll, build tension when Houdini performs his stunts and tricks (for example in Chapter 1)?
- How would you describe Harry Houdini based on Chapters 1–5? What words would you use? Create a poster advertising Harry Houdini’s stunt on the Sidford-by-the-Sea pier.
- Glory says in Chapter 2 that she has ‘a vague feeling of not being quite complete, as if something was missing.’ What sort of character is Glory? What are her fears, hopes and dreams? Create a character profile for her.
- How does Glory feel about her mum’s departure to America? Write a diary entry in the role of Glory.
- What sort of character is Effie? How is she different to Glory?
- What is a ‘family hierloom’? How does Glory’s family history become entangled with Harry Houdini’s story?
- What is hidden inside ‘trunk number eight’? What does Houdini try to keep secret? Why?
- Imagine you had a secret trunk of your own. What would you call it? What would you hide inside?
- Houdini is aiming to become a ‘Vaudeville King’ with a daring new trick. What is his trick?
- If you could invent an exciting new trick or daredevil stunt for Harry Houdini, what would it be?
- Who is Margery Crandon? Why does Houdini dislike or distrust her?
- Why do you think Harry Houdini has many enemies?

- In Chapter 5, Houdini tells Glory that he has ‘devised a test with code words’. What is this test? How does it come to be important?
- What does Glory discover in the library? What other suspicious events happen in Sidford-by-the-Sea after Houdini’s departure?
- What are your first impressions of Mrs Crandon in Chapter 7? Pick out key words or phrases that the author uses to describe her.
- Are there any similarities between Harry Houdini and Mrs Crandon? If so, what are they?
- What is the effect of placing Houdini’s death in the middle of the story? How did you feel when you found this out?

Chapters 8–13: The Coffin Trick

- Can you summarise ‘the distraction technique’ and ‘the swap’, and give examples of how to use them? (Chapter 8).
- What does Effie reveal in Chapter 8 about the trunk in their possession? How does this make Glory and Dennis feel?
- Glory suspects that danger might be afoot on their journey from Southampton to New York. Why does she suspect this?
- Why does Glory find Magic Mae’s act unsettling? Why doesn’t she ‘get a good feeling’ about Mae and her brother, Raven?
- Glory and Dennis’s friendship becomes more and more strained on the boat journey to New York. Why do you think this is?

Chapters 14–25: The Vanishing Elephant

- What does the author, Emma Carroll, do to keep the story suspenseful? What techniques does she use?
- How does Glory defeat Mrs Crandon? What motivates Glory to face her?
- Why is Shula finally crowned the Vaudeville Queen? Why is there a ‘beautiful, purposeful rightness to her winning’?
- What secrets has Glory’s mum been keeping from her? How does this make Glory feel?
- Are there any other secrets that are revealed by the end of the story?

- Glory grows as a character as the story progresses. Can you identify key moments or events where she learns something or overcomes an important obstacle?
- How are dogs important in the story? Create a timeline of events where dogs are involved.
- What do you learn about the motivations of the different characters: Glory, Dennis, Effie, Glory's mum, Houdini, Mrs Houdini, Mrs Crandon, Mae?
- On reflection, which are your favourite characters, descriptions, or moments in *The Houdini Inheritance*? Why?
- Read the author's note at the end of the story. What elements of Houdini's story has Emma Carroll taken from real life and what has she made up?
- Emma Carroll describes Harry Houdini as 'an enigma.' What does this mean? Do you agree?
- How would you describe your experience of reading *The Houdini Inheritance*? What would you say to recommend it to a friend?