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A character trait is a quality or characteristic that describes a person. Examples of traits include brave, kind, and generous. Do you have any characteristics that you think you share with Harry Houdini, the famous escape artist? As you read this story, try to make personal connections that show Houdini's traits. In the Response Notes, write comments and questions you make to them.

A person is like a character trait. Examples of traits include brave, kind, and generous. Do you have any characteristics that you think you share with Harry Houdini, the famous escape artist? As you read this story, try to make personal connections that show Houdini's traits. In the Response Notes, write comments and questions you make to them.



from **The American Story** by Jennifer Armstrong

Beginning in the 1880s, hundreds of thousands of Jews from eastern Europe began flocking to America, the Golden Land. Among those in search of new lives and new luck were the Weiss family from Budapest, Hungary. Ehrich "Ehrie" Weiss, the son, was a strong, athletic boy with a flair for wrestling attention to the ground and standing on its neck. By the time he was a teenager, he was ready to go into show business as a magician, and he took the name of his idol, the great French magician Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, for his stage name. Ehrie Weiss became Harry Houdini.

His stock-in-trade was escapes. No handcuffs could bind him. Straitjackets were no match for Houdini. Before electrified audiences, he freed himself from ropes, chains, locks, sealed containers, boxes, tanks of water. Upside down, naked, manacled, he dropped off bridges into icy rivers to the astonishment of crowds, only to pop up to the surface, free and smiling. He was a sensation, the toast of Europe and the American vaudeville stage.

But no matter how death-defying his act, there was always an imitator waiting in the wings. Houdini's acts became more and more dangerous. In 1912, he was offered a job at Hammerstein's Roof Garden in New York City at the kingly sum of \$1,000 a week. He was determined to come up with a trick for his debut that no paltry copycat could steal.

**Response
Notes**

Response Notes

One morning New Yorkers read the following advertisement with gasps of amazement: "Houdini, securely handcuffed and leg ironed, will be placed in a heavy packing case, which will be nailed and roped, then encircled by steel bands, firmly nailed. Two hundred pounds of iron weights will then be lashed to this box containing HOUDINI. The box will then be THROWN INTO THE RIVER. Houdini will undertake to release himself whilst submerged under water."

Surely even the great Houdini wasn't up to this challenge! Crowds of curiosity seekers packed the East River pier that afternoon as Houdini's assistants readied the crate. Grim-visaged Houdini, in a wool bathing costume, was preparing to enter the packing case of doom when the police arrived in force.

Jumping into the East River from the pier was not allowed, not even for the great Houdini, they announced with a flourish of nightsticks.

But if handcuffs and straitjackets couldn't get the better of Houdini, neither could New York's finest. A nearby tugboat was called into service. Houdini and a babbling escort of newspapermen clambered on, and the boat made its way into the harbor.

Then—handcuffs locked, leg irons locked, the escape artist extraordinaire was placed in the box, the box was secured and weighted, and lowered into the water. Bug-eyed with anticipation, champing at their damp cigars, the newspapermen hauled their watches out of their pockets and began the count.

A mere fifty-seven seconds later, Houdini bobbed up like a cork, scarcely breathing hard. The press corps on the boat went wild. When Houdini repeated the stunt at Hammerstein's that night, the audience was spellbound.

Houdini asked for his first week's salary to be paid in gold. He took it home to his mother and poured it into her lap. The Hungarian immigrant had conquered America, the Golden Land. ❖

