

Was Sir Conan Doyle behind Houdini's death?

RANDY BOSWELL CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

It's a sensational, 80-year-old murder plot with a globally famous victim, a dramatic Canadian climax and an alleged gang of conspirators worthy of a Sherlock Holmes novel – including, if the theory holds, the master of mystery himself, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

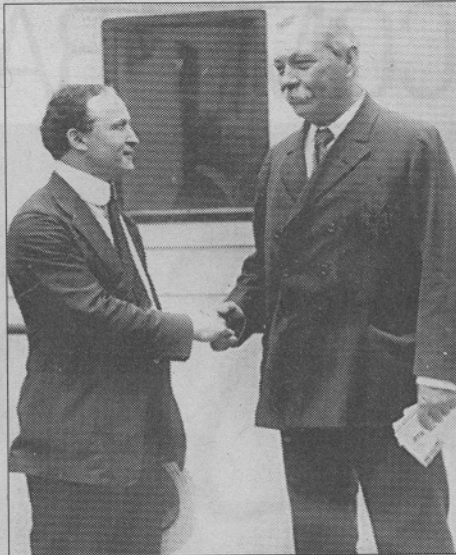
Such are the stunning assertions in a new, "rigorously researched" biography of Harry Houdini, the legendary escape artist who helped define the cult of celebrity before his untimely demise in October 1926 – only days after he received a series of fatal punches to his abdomen after a magic show and a controversial lecture in Montreal.

The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero, written by U.S. authors William Kalush and Larry Sloman, builds a tantalizing case against Conan Doyle and his fellow defenders of spiritualism. It suggests a shadowy network of psychics and mediums orchestrated the Montreal attack as revenge for Houdini's high-profile debunking of the otherworldly arts as a monumental fraud.

The book's suggestion that Houdini worked as a British spy has received widespread attention, but the authors' most startling conclusion is that the surprise stomach blows delivered by two mysterious Montrealers might have been part of a secret plan to put Houdini out of commission before his crusade against spiritualists put them out of business.

The theory even draws links between the supposed plotters and such notable disciples of the spirit world as Canada's then-prime minister, Mackenzie King.

Houdini – born Ehrich Weiss in Hungary in 1874, but raised in Wisconsin from the age of 4 – gained international renown by the 1920s for his daring escapes and feats of magic. His rise to fame coincided with growing interest, particularly in elite social circles, in life after death and other supernatural phenomena.



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Harry Houdini (left) talking to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Initially a darling of such spiritualists as Conan Doyle because his stunts were suggestive of magical powers, Houdini – who credited only sleight-of-hand and physical prowess for his escapes – campaigned against all self-proclaimed mediums, clairvoyants and their like as psychic sham artists.

Among those Houdini exposed was Doyle's wife, Lady Jean, who once claimed to have channelled Houdini's dead mother during a seance the magician dismissed as laughably contrived.

By the time Houdini arrived in Montreal in October 1926 during a tour of North American cities, he was widely reviled by spiritualists and the target of numerous lawsuits from aggrieved mediums.

Kalush and Sloman note Houdini's Oct. 19 lecture at McGill University prompted a sto-

ry in the next day's Montreal Gazette about his crusade against Lady Doyle and other "fake" conjurers of the dearly departed.

After a performance on Oct. 22, in the well-known incident believed to have led to Houdini's death from a ruptured appendix in Detroit nine days later, a peculiar McGill student named J. Gordon Whitehead asked the illusionist if it was true he could withstand strong blows to the stomach.

Houdini invited Whitehead to test the claim, but witnesses reported several painful punches were delivered before Houdini could brace himself.

Later, the authors recount, a burly stranger landed another surprise punch to Houdini's gut as he read a newspaper in the lobby of the Prince of Wales hotel.

Kalush and Sloman paint Whitehead and the unknown attacker in the hotel as possible agents of angered mediums and their supporters.

"Was the wry smile that crossed Houdini's face after the pummelling a realization that the spiritualists had gotten to him? Was the bizarre assault in the lobby of the Prince of Wales hotel part of a spiritualist plot?"

The authors note, too, that Whitehead was later linked to Beatrice Marler – a prominent Montreal socialite married to Liberal politician Herbert Marler; a member of King's cabinet – who shared with her friend, the prime minister, an abiding interest in the occult.

"Lady Marler was said to be extremely close to the devout spiritualist prime minister. How she got to be close to Whitehead was never determined."

But the book's speculation about Houdini's death focuses on Conan Doyle, who the authors describe as a man who was "not above using threats to enforce his will" and who once warned a skeptic that if he continued "spewing sewage" about phony spiritualists, he would meet the same fate as Houdini.