

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Death Defying Acts (2007)

Gillian Armstrong (1950-)

OVERVIEW

Director Gillian Armstrong was born in 1950 and raised in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia. While studying directing at the newly established Australian Film and Television School, she made several much-lauded short films. With Peter Weir, Armstrong was one of the first Australian directors to be recognized internationally, beginning with her first feature film, *My Brilliant Career* (1979), which competed at Cannes. Armstrong went on to make other films in Australia (including *Starstruck* [1982], *High Tide* [1987], *Oscar and Lucinda* [1997], and several documentaries) and in Hollywood (including *Mrs. Soffel* [1985] and *Little Women* [1994]). Internationally acclaimed throughout her career, Armstrong has won numerous awards in Australia and abroad.

Film *Death Defying Acts* is Gilian Armstrong's last feature film as of this writing (2026). It dramatizes an episode late in the life of Harry Houdini (1874-1926) the world-famous magician. The film is partly based on Houdini's real experiences, while also fabricating some characters and events. It is narrated by Benji, a young Scottish girl who meets Houdini in Edinburgh.

Background The film was shot in London and Edinburgh. Armstrong worked with stars Guy Pearce as Houdini and Catherine Zeta-Jones as his con artist love interest, as well as a young Saoirse Ronan as Benji. *Death Defying Acts* was shown at the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival but did not have a substantial commercial release in many large markets (such as the US and UK). It received mixed reviews.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Harry Houdini – American magician; global superstar
Mary McGarvie – Edinburgh woman, single mother, psychic performer
Benji McGarvie – Mary's daughter, fellow psychic performer
Mr. Sugarman – Harry's manager

SYNOPSIS

In 1920s Edinburgh, Scotland, a single woman named Mary McGarvie and her preteen daughter Benji earn a living with a mostly-fake psychic act that they perform at McTavish's Palace. Famous magician Harry Houdini comes to town as part of a world tour. Houdini's mother has recently died, and he has just issued a challenge to the world's psychics: he will give \$10,000 to anyone who can tell him the dying words that his mother whispered only to him. Mary and Benji set out to win this prize. Separately, they break into Houdini's hotel room and his dressing room to try to find clues to the mystery words.

When Mary "auditions" for the chance to try her psychic powers on Houdini's challenge, she and Harry Houdini are obviously attracted to each other. Benji, too, forms her own rapport with Harry, and with his no-nonsense manager, Mr. Sugarman. Harry puts Mary and Benji up in his hotel to await the psychic trial (which will be performed in front of live and broadcast audiences). Mary and Harry flirt with the possibility of having a romantic relationship, even as Mary and Benji keep looking for clues with which to fool him. Mr. Sugarman wants Harry to avoid drama and stay with his wife, so he attempts to get rid of Mary and Benji by telling them the truth: that Harry did not hear his mother's dying words because he was doing a show when she died. Ultimately, even though she gets as far as appearing onstage, Mary cannot bring herself to lie to Harry. Benji, though, immediately steps in for her mother—seemingly actually channeling the ghost's words, as well as predicting Harry's death. Mary and Benji get the \$10,000, and

Mary and Harry do have a sexual encounter before he leaves Edinburgh. Harry then dies just as Benji predicted; Mary and Benji tearfully watch a newsreel report of this together.

SCENES

Feats – In voiceover, a young girl with a Scottish accent says that she used to see things other people did not see. Meanwhile, a man wrapped in chains rises up through a body of water. On a nearby boat, a man in a suit checks a stopwatch. The man breaks the surface of the water and smiles as a crowd on the shore cheers.



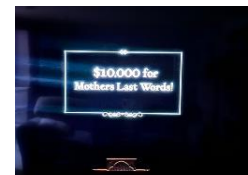
Trickery – A young girl and a woman walk away from a pawn shop together. The girl reports in voiceover that she and her mother lived together by their wits, ranged against the rest of the world. They walk toward a theater with a sign outside that says “McTavish,” where dozens of people stand in line to buy tickets. The girl steals a pocket watch from a man in line and shows it to her mother, who reads an inscription on it: “To Charles, with never-ending love. Your Violet.” The mother then goes to a library, where an older man checks records for her and says that Violet Robertson died of heart failure. He addresses the woman as Mary McGarvie.



Double act – A vaudeville-style performance is underway at McTavish’s. A man comes onstage and introduces “the tantalizing Princess Kali and her dusky disciple,” who are in fact the woman and girl from earlier in the film. The woman performs a suggestive dance while the girl, in brownface and dressed as a Middle Eastern or South Asian servant boy, stands behind her; Mary addresses her as Benji. “Princess Kali” then begins a performance of preternatural knowledge of those in the audience, culminating in offering a message from Violet to Charles (the man whose pocket watch Benji stole earlier). Charles, tearful, is convinced of its authenticity.



Houdini’s challenge – Mary and Benji go to the cinema, where they see a newsreel about Harry Houdini. It says that he is grieving his mother’s death. It also says that she whispered her last words to him, and that he is trying to find a psychic who can repeat those words to him. He is offering a reward of \$10,000. The newsreel announces that Edinburgh is the next stop on Houdini’s world tour. Benji reacts with excitement.



More trickery – Harry Houdini rides in a car through the rainy Scottish countryside with a middle-aged man he addresses as Mr. Sugarman. He is then greeted by a cheering crowd (including Benji) in Edinburgh. A large man approaches Houdini and challenges him to a punch in the stomach. Houdini agrees and takes the punch, to which he reacts only with a smile. The crowd cheers. Houdini and Mr. Sugarman go into a fancy hotel. Houdini speaks sharply to an employee. He goes into the bathroom of his suite, takes off his shirt and a pad around his trunk, then spits blood into the sink, wincing.



Psychic experiment – Houdini reads a letter from a psychic offering her services. He gets dressed in fancy clothes while discussing psychic powers and science with Mr. Sugarman. He insists that his psychic experiment is science, not mere show business.

Sneaking in – Mary sneaks into Houdini’s fancy hotel wearing fancy clothing from McTavish’s costume department, although she is almost caught when an employee notices her dirty shoes. She changes into a maid’s outfit and sneaks into Houdini’s suite, where she looks around for clues as to what his mother’s last words might have been. She finds a portrait signed “your loving wife.”



Benji's foray – Benji, meanwhile, has sneaked into Houdini's dressing room, where she examines various food items. Mr. Sugarman reacts angrily to her presence, but Houdini is kind to her, saying she is part of his audience. She tells him about her act with her mother. He gives her a ticket to his performance that night. As Mr. Sugarman pushes her out the door, she tries to convince Houdini that her mother really does have psychic powers. Benji attends the performance, during which Houdini escapes from a water tank while wearing chains.



Comparing notes – Benji returns home bursting with news of the performance. Mary is angry with her for getting caught. But she admits that she learned nothing from her own break-in at his hotel. She says there was a locked trunk with his initials on it, so perhaps they could learn more if they found the key.

Audition – Houdini interviews psychics claiming to have his mother's last words. Benji and Mary arrive. Mary says that in her act, she pretends to see people on the other side, and sometimes she really does. Mary convinces Houdini of her legitimacy.



In the fold – Mary and Benji enter a fancy hotel room, clearly funded by Houdini. Benji skips around happily. Mary receives a note from Houdini inviting her to luncheon.



Tension – Benji goes to the zoo. Mr. Sugarman finds her there and tells her that she is not going to take the \$10,000 from Houdini. Meanwhile, Mary meets Houdini for lunch. He tries to give her a pair of earrings, which she views with suspicion. She walks out.



Breaking in – Mary tries to pick the lock of the trunk in Houdini's room while he is out. He finds her there and offers her the key. She accounts for her presence by saying that a personal item is helpful for channeling psychic energy but she was embarrassed to ask for one. Mary and Harry go out to a pub together for a drink, while Benji lingers nearby looking bored. Harry tells Mary about his background studying magic tricks and locks.

Playing hooky – A crowd of people take their seats for Houdini's next performance, with Mr. Sugarman looking on. But Harry has run off with Mary and Benji; they break into a majestic old building and race up the stairs to the roof, complete with flying buttresses and gargoyles. Harry steps out on a ledge, scaring the McGarvies. He leaps down, but it turns out he has simply landed on a lower ledge. The McGarvies laugh with relief. Meanwhile, Mr. Sugarman announces to a disappointed crowd that Mr. Houdini has taken ill.



Prophetic dream – Benji has a dream in which she falls into Houdini's water tank. She sees a red-haired angel as she screams for help; a clock strikes twelve. When she wakes up, she asks her mother whether she got the key from Harry. Mary says she's not sure she wants the key anymore. Benji in voiceover says that she realized at this moment that her mother was in love.



Mr. Sugarman's disapproval – As Harry exercises, Mr. Sugarman angrily confronts him about his failure to perform and his neglect of his wife back in the United States. Benji sneaks into the hotel suite and looks for the key. She watches Harry practice escaping from a locked straitjacket. Mr. Sugarman goes to the McGarvies' room and confronts Mary about her relationship with Harry. She asks him what he wants. He offers her 500 Scottish pounds to disappear, which she refuses.



Dance – Harry rents out a ballroom and hires several musicians, who perform blindfolded so that they do not know who he is. He dances with Mary. Benji dances with Mr. Sugarman, then they sit on the sidelines together frowning at Harry and Mary. Mr. Sugarman slips Benji the key to the trunk. She runs off—following her mother, who has left in a huff herself after her conversation with Harry became tense when he discussed his home life.



Revelation – Mary and Benji open Harry's trunk. They find an old wedding dress and a framed picture of his mother. Mr. Sugarman appears, commenting that Mary looks like Harry's mother. Mary says she is not going to back down from trying to get the \$10,000. Mr. Sugarman reveals that Harry actually was not present at his mother's death because he was doing a show, so he does not know what her last words were.



Psychic trial – Various technicians and officials set up a room for the psychic trial. Mary is told to put on Harry's mother's wedding dress to better channel the psychic energy. Reporters follow Harry to the scene. A representative from the Scottish Institute for Psychical Research opens the proceedings, saying that they will take place under the strictest scientific conditions. Houdini then reiterates that his mother's last words were spoken directly to him, and that if there is an afterlife, his mother will repeat those words to Mrs. McGarvie today. Mary and Benji approach; Mary, wearing the wedding dress and veil, sits in a chair. Harry begins to speak to her as if she is his mother, but she says "I can't do this. I can't take your money" and gets up to leave. But then Benji begins to shake, falls on the floor, and speaks in a combination of German and German-accented English, saying things like "Your mama is so alone. Where are you?" Harry tearfully says that he had to finish the show and asks her to forgive him. In her ordinary voice, Benji says "he's waitin' for you—the angel with fire-red hair. Clock says noon. Sun goes black" and then collapses.



Romance – Harry comes to Mary and Benji's house. She coldly thanks him for the money. He says he only made her fall in love. She says she doesn't think he really wants her but only his mother. But he says he loves her and is afraid of it. Softening, she says that it's nothing to be afraid or ashamed of. They have sex. Benji, upstairs, has another dream about the angel with red hair.



Parting – Mr. Sugarman drives to the McGarvies' house to pick up Harry. Mary and Harry kiss and he walks away. He goes to Benji and embraces her, then leaves. Mary and Benji stand together. Benji repeats the line about the angel with fire-red hair and says she simply gave Mr. Houdini what he wanted—all showbiz mumbo jumbo. "That's my girl," Mary says, but there are tears in her eyes. When she walks away, Benji, too, tears up. In voiceover, she repeats what she had said at the start of the film, saying that she used to be able to see things other people could not see but lost the gift later, just like her mother said she would. "But mam was wrong," Benji says this time.



Houdini's death – In Montreal, Houdini greets the crowd. The punching routine done in Edinburgh is repeated, but this time, Harry collapses, saying something is wrong. The clock strikes twelve. The redheaded man who punched him is dragged away. Mr. Sugarman tells Harry he will be fine. He admits that he told Benji and Mary the information about his mother; Harry says he already knew that. Harry dies in Mr. Sugarman's arms as the crowd looks on in dismay.



Mary and Benji grow closer – Mary and Benji watch a newsreel about Houdini's death and funeral. Benji weeps, and Mary embraces her, also tearfully.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Mary McGarvie

A single mother earning her own living, Mary is driven by determination and has cultivated a strong cynicism when it comes to moral and romantic ideals. Her loneliness, though, pushes her to explore her relationship with Harry Houdini.

Cynical – Mary has largely given up on all forms of idealism—romantic, moral, or otherwise. She is focused on making a living to support herself and her daughter. Harry's attempt to give her a pair of earrings early in their acquaintance, for example, arouses her contempt.

Determined – Mary works hard; she and Benji devote whole days to researching audience members for their psychic act. She also is not easily deterred; her determination is stronger than Mr. Sugarman's efforts to scare her away (or pay her away) from Harry.

Lonely – Though cynical and determined, Mary is not without an emotional side, and she is ultimately quite lonely. We see no evidence of family or friends in her life apart from Benji. Mary's connection with Harry, therefore, is not easy for her to shake off.

Benji McGarvie

Although Benji's tomboyish attire distinguishes her on a surface level from her more glamorous mother, the girl has absorbed much of her mother's influence. Benji parrots Mary's cynical statements and stays focused on the cash prize at stake. But Benji is also filled with a zest for life that comes out in her enthusiastic responses to Houdini's performances.

Cynical – Benji is Mary's daughter, and she has absorbed her teaching. Throughout the film, Benji expresses a cynicism beyond her years. Though initially excited to meet Houdini, she is very suspicious of his conduct with her mother, and it is ultimately she who decides to go through with the psychic trial in order to claim the \$10,000.

Enthusiastic – For all the cynicism, Benji is still a young girl, and she approaches the world with enthusiasm—enthusiasm for Houdini's visit to Edinburgh, enthusiasm for the fancy hotel in which she and her mother get to stay for a while, enthusiasm for Houdini's performances.

Harry Houdini

Superstar magician Harry Houdini has become rather disenchanted with his own life. He has become jaded, contemptuous of charlatan psychics and tired of his own performances. He is also burdened with massive guilt about missing his mother's death because he was performing.

Jaded – Though originally from a poor family, Houdini now has been a wealthy, world-famous magician for some time. He is jaded and tired now, going through the motions but no longer so excited about what he is doing. He even skips a performance in Edinburgh.

Guilty – Harry is ultimately driven by guilt to undertake the psychic trial. Though he is interested in the scientific purport of the trial, he mostly wants to hear from the beyond that his mother forgives him for being absent at her death.

THEMES

Class Social class is a defining feature in the lives of all the major characters in *Death Defying Acts*. We first see Mary and Benji walking out of a pawn shop, where Mary has pawned a ring. The constant basic struggle for survival is central to Mary and Benji's lives; although they do not live in squalor, their financial situation is obviously precarious. They work all the time. Ultimately, the plot of the film is set in motion by the McGarvies' need for money: they come into contact with Houdini because they are pursuing the \$10,000 prize for succeeding at the psychic trial. Meanwhile, Harry Houdini has changed his class position: born to a poor immigrant family in America, he has become immensely wealthy through hard work, luck, and fame. However, Harry clearly feels insecure and ambivalent when it comes to social class. He tries to tell Mary that he understands her poverty, and he seems genuinely more comfortable with her and Benji than with upper-class people. Harry's tragedy—missing his mother's death while giving a performance—encapsulates how torn he feels.

Illustrative moment: While discussing his upbringing with Mary, Harry explains that he used to share one bed with multiple siblings. This explanation pivots to nostalgia, though: Harry muses that he has never slept so well as he did when he was nine years old. He feels strange having a whole bed to himself so much of the time now.

Desire The attraction between Harry Houdini and Mary McGarvie is a crucial element in the film. As soon as Mary first appears before him to audition for the psychic trial, Harry is obviously attracted to her. He picks her for the trial even though she has not really demonstrated anything in the way of psychic ability, and he soon invites her to a fancy lunch in his suite. At the lunch, he attempts to give her a pair of earrings. Mary rejects them and leaves; at this point, she is primarily driven by the pursuit of the \$10,000 prize and does not want to confuse the situation. Mary too, though, starts to feel attracted, and eventually she says to Benji that she's not sure she wants to fool Harry for the \$10,000 anymore. Another problem is Harry's marriage to another woman; Mary knows there is no future in her relationship with Harry, and she comes to resent him for toying with her. Still, ultimately Mary refuses to go through with the fake psychic performance because she cannot bear to trick Harry. And ultimately Harry comes to her house and they have a sexual encounter. Neither seems to regret this, though there are tears in the end. Ultimately, desire is not treated as a shameful or destructive force in the film.

Illustrative moment: When he comes to Mary's house near the end of the film, Harry confesses that he feels afraid and ashamed of his desire for her. Mary replies that there is no need to be ashamed of something so natural. Sometimes, she says, sex can even generate real love.

Love Love, more broadly, is another theme in the film. In addition to romantic love, there is a strong focus on parental and filial love. Harry Houdini expresses great love for his mother. It turns out that he feels guilty because he was absent from her deathbed—something he clearly sees as a failure of filial love. He reports feeling a great deal of parental love from her and now feels that he has repaid that love inadequately. Meanwhile, Mary and Benji have a somewhat odd relationship. They are not particularly affectionate with one another; Mary in particular is standoffish with her daughter and rarely initiates physical contact. Mary's love for Benji is shown primarily through her dedication to providing for them materially. After Houdini's departure and the news of his death, Mary and Benji finally seem to grow closer. The film clearly champions this development: the "brief encounter" between Mary and Harry facilitates the *rapprochement* between Mary and Benji.

Illustrative moment: In the film's final scene, Mary and Benji sit in a movie theater and watch a newsreel about Houdini's death and funeral. They both weep, and they embrace each other. This is more physical contact we have ever seen them express, and more emotional vulnerability. Their love for each other, though not new, is newly accessible now.

Grief Harry Houdini's actions throughout the film are driven by his grief—primarily grief for the death of his mother, but also grief for his own lost enthusiasm and idealism. Floored by his mother's death and overwhelmed by his guilt over missing it, Harry sets up the psychic trial and offers \$10,000—a huge amount of money in the 1920s—to any psychic who can tell him his mother's dying words. Although the

public thinks that this is a mere act of telling him what he already knows himself, he actually wants to learn something he does not yet know. During the psychic trial, as Benji supposedly channels his mother's voice from the beyond, Harry expresses a great deal of emotion, visibly weeping and speaking effusively of his love for his mother. He begs her to forgive him. Meanwhile, he expresses nostalgia throughout the film for the way he used to feel about his life and his work as a magician. He has become jaded. His relationship with Mary and Benji helps him recover some of the joy he once had.

Illustrative moment: During the psychic trial, when Benji collapses to the floor and starts speaking in German and German-accented English, Harry's whole demeanor changes. He moves toward Benji, bends over her, and tries desperately to get his mother to forgive him. He speaks to her in German as well as English. He is crying the whole time.

Ambition Both Harry Houdini and Mary McGarvie demonstrate strong feelings of ambition. Harry explains to Mary how hard he used to work as a child and youth in order to hone his skills as a magician and escape artist. He says that he used to spend hours studying lockpicking and working on his physical fitness in order to be able to endure challenges that would look dramatic enough to generate interest. Now, having succeeded, Harry withstands a punishing schedule of global travel and performance in order to keep his fame going. In addition, he continues to work hard behind the scenes: several times, we see him do physical workouts and practice getting out of locked containers. Meanwhile, Mary has her own ways of working hard to succeed. At first, we do not necessarily know that she is ambitious; she is trying to keep body and soul together and support her child. The instant she hears of Houdini's \$10,000 challenge, however, Mary starts working to meet it. This includes breaking into his hotel room, sending Benji to break into his dressing room, speaking modestly and appealingly at the audition, and then continuing to try to break into his trunk.

Illustrative moment: The limits of ambition become clear near the end of the film. Mary has worked hard and set everything in place to succeed at the psychic trial; she has gained private information from Mr. Sugarman and convinced Harry that she is the real deal. At the last minute, her ambition is foiled not by lack of effort but by an unwillingness to fool a man she has come to care about. Wearing his mother's wedding dress and with all the devices in place for the psychic trial, Mary simply gets up and starts to walk away.

Quest Harry Houdini is on a quest throughout the film—two quests, in fact. At first, only one is revealed: a quest to find out if any psychic is genuine. As far as the public knows, Houdini heard his mother's dying words for himself, so his call for a psychic to repeat them to him is about confirming knowledge he already has. Therefore, the purpose of the quest is to find out whether psychic powers can be scientifically verified. While he is indeed interested in the verifiability of psychic powers, we find out later in the film that Harry is also undertaking a second, secret quest: a quest to find out what his mother's dying words were, and to get her forgiveness for his absence from her death bed. While the public quest is important to him, the private one is far more powerful. At the psychic trial, Harry becomes very emotional as soon as Benji starts seemingly channeling his mother's spirit. He desperately apologizes for missing her death and begs for her forgiveness. Harry seems convinced that this really is his mother's spirit. Still, when he himself is dying and Mr. Sugarman confesses to having told the McGarvies that he missed his mother's death, he says "I know"; therefore, it is not entirely clear exactly what Harry believes he learned from the psychic trial.

Illustrative moment: Early in the film, having announced the psychic trial, Harry must contend with large numbers of people who want the chance to participate. He wades through many letters and eventually auditions several people claiming to have psychic powers. This is the major logistical challenge of his quest, though certainly not the part that most challenges him emotionally.

Deception Deception is a major theme in *Death Defying Acts*. Both Houdini and the McGarvies make their living through deceiving audiences. Show business in general is presented as a sort of benign deception. The McGarvies' psychic act at McTavish's palace does have a dark side, though: Mary and Benji commit acts of theft in order to secretly get information about their audience members ahead of time, and they sometimes fool grieving people into believing that they are actually communicating with

their loved ones from beyond the grave. Meanwhile, Houdini and the McGarvies continually engage in other deceptions. Houdini is deceiving the entire world by claiming to have heard his mother's last words. The McGarvies deceive him by putting on an innocent front while repeatedly breaking into his rooms to get information about him. Ultimately even Mr. Sugarman engages in deception: he secretly gives information about Harry and his mother to the McGarvies. This is a film in which people deceive each other constantly. While show business is not overtly castigated, personal deception is presented as a problem to be overcome when Mary refuses to fake a psychic performance.

Illustrative moment: Near the end of the film, Mary and Benji look on as Harry drives away with Mr. Sugarman. Benji repeats some of the words she spoke at the psychic trial and says that she simply told Harry what he wanted to hear. "That's my girl," Mary replies, applauding Benji's hard-nosed attitude. But Benji tears up as Mary walks away, and Mary tears up even as she speaks. Each is claiming to be free of the emotion she is actually experiencing.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did you find the love story between Mary McGarvie and Harry Houdini convincing and/or appealing? Why or why not?
2. Whereas Houdini has made a living out of breaking *out* of various locked containers, Mary and Benji try to make their fortune by breaking *in* to Harry's rooms. Discuss.
3. The mother-daughter relationship between Mary and Benji is unusual. How did it strike you? As odd, or refreshing, or something else?
4. Discuss the film's portrayal of wealth and social class.
5. This is a film by an Australian director, featuring three lead actors from Australia, Wales, and Ireland (all playing characters of different nationalities from themselves), and taking place in Scotland. Discuss the treatment of national identity and international encounters in the film.