

Five Forty Seven
a companion volume to

SESSION

The Magic of Joel Givens



By Joshua Jay

**The following
is an excerpt from
the book**

Five Forty Seven

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SESSION

The Magic of
Joel Givens

By Joshua Jay

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Introduction

Dave Eggers, author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, is one of my favorite authors. His book was a Pulitzer Prize finalist, and the paperback edition I have comes with an addendum. He calls it "Mistakes We Knew We Were Making," and it explained which characters were based on which family members and what *really* happened on his date with his little brother's teacher. It also explained what, exactly, he was trying to convey and how effectively he felt he did it. It was as fascinating as the book it was attached to, and it made subsequent reads much clearer. The first part of this booklet is my humble attempt to do the same.

The second part is a section of magic not included in the book. These tricks weren't left out on the basis of quality—I think each item has merit. These items were omitted because they didn't fit the theme of the book. For example, Joel devised two excellent forces, but since only one trick in the book requires a card to be forced, it seemed out of place to describe the sleights in *Session*. I'm glad these "orphaned" pieces have a home, here.

Joshua Jay
April 2005
Canton, Ohio

A Prologue to *Session*

Session isn't the first book to fuse story and magic. I believe *The Expositor*² is. Among magic books that will fit inside your back pocket, I consider it the best. Written by William Frederick Pinchbeck in 1805, its historical importance is twofold. It is the first American book on conjuring and it describes the astonishing "Pig of Knowledge" effect in detail. What I don't understand is why so little has been said about the book's narrative.

The Expositor is a dialogue between a master magician and a curious pupil. The story is told in a series of letters between the author, W.F.P., and someone we must assume is a fictional character, A.B.

The book is gripping from cover to cover. By dodging the "recipe" approach we are accustomed to (effect, setup, method, for trick after trick after trick), Pinchbeck develops a cohesive through line—a Socratic rapport is developed between the two gentlemen. The tricks are explained like an onion being peeled. First Pinchbeck offers a brief explanation in response to A.B.'s query. Then A.B. writes back, asking for clarification on certain points. Pinchbeck writes again, going into more detail on problematic issues or presentational tips. This simulates learning a trick in a private lesson. First your teacher explains the method. When you run through the handling, invariably you'll have trouble with some part of the method. So you ask your teacher for help and he explains in greater detail those areas that require additional attention. In a way, Pinchbeck's unique style perfectly models a session.

There is also a charm to Pinchbeck's stylistic choice. He starts several letters with formalities and small talk, which add a degree of realism to the story and lend credence to the friendship between the two. The book starts in this manner (with the long S, an antiquated character, replaced):

In my last I informed you of my indisposition; but, thank Providence, I am now perfectly recovered: The journey and change of air has no doubt facilitated that recovery. Wherever I stop on my tour, I am sure to hear of the fame of your celebrated Pig...³

And now they're off, discussing the Learned Pig. But have you ever been so gripped by the beginning of a magic book? Who is A.B.? Where was he? How does he know W.F.P.? And what about this "celebrated pig"? Perhaps I'm

Pinchbeck's ideal reader, but I believe there are other magicians who would appreciate what he was after.

So while I had an idea about giving a magic book context, Pinchbeck had this idea two hundred years ago. His book provided the impetus for me to try it⁴.



I read another book that proved equally influential on this project: *Kort*⁵. Mr. Milt Kort, the subject, passed away in 2003. I met him several times—all of them long after his dexterity had left him. But what he lacked in technical agility he compensated for with story. Mr. Kort had fabulous anecdotes about all the greats, embarrassing performing stories, and "eureka" moments of creativity. All of his stories were fun at surface level but contained a sage message if you were willing to look hard enough.

Kort fit its subject like a latex glove. Between tricks were short, attractive memoirs—all from Milt himself—about magic, life, and what happens when the two mix. "My Sensational Poison Swallowing Act" and "My Short Career as Master of the Locks" are examples of enticing titles with equally titillating stories. Anyone who reads *Kort* is not only treated to a book of great magic—but also has a chance to sit next to ol' Milt.

In *Session*, you'll sit down with Joel Givens. You won't just read about his magic. Through the dialogue, he'll give you background on each effect, the theory behind his techniques, and other insights that simply wouldn't come up unless you were sitting with him at dinner, discussing magic.



The story in *Session* is less about plot and more about flow. That is, I wanted to depict a session that progresses like a real meeting between two magicians (Joel and me). One trick reminds him of another trick, this Assembly leads into that Assembly ("I know a trick like that but the one I know doesn't use a gaff—let me show you..."). Sessions are like stories; each event segues into the next. There is an order and a build. *Session* has these elements, too. There are protagonists, antagonists, and surprises. All of these elements serve Joel's material. For example, Joel has a trick he reserves for late nights in bars, when someone is giving him a hard time during a set. He calls it "Heckler Stopper," and it's certainly a trick with a niche. The heckler in our story, Jamie, gives Joel a chance to *show us* the occasions where he would use the trick, and how this peculiar effect is supposed to play for an audience. Without context, in any other magic book, I'm quite sure the trick would be unclear.

Through the dialogue, each trick flows into the next. The discussions are candid—in the story I'm quick to point out flaws and what doesn't fool me,

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illustrations are better than photos. I think it depends on the circumstance. We took considerable time and effort on the photos of *Session* and I'm pleased with the outcome. Additionally, these photos are thematic—they are shot in locations that match the scene they depict. That is, there are dirty plates in the background for all the tricks Joel performed for me after dinner. A mahogany bar is the background for the set he did for the barflies. I saw the photos as just another way to carry out the themes of the book.

As far as eliminating unnecessary detail, I'm not sure this is an advantage either. When I learn a sleight, *no* detail is unimportant. I want to know what every finger is doing—how every fold in my flesh bends around the deck.



I assume a higher level of knowledge for readers of this book than I do for readers of my other books or my column in *MAGIC*. Those who would, in real life, sit down at a session with Joel or me, understand a bottom deal or palm, or what the difference between a cull and reverse cull is. The concept of *Session* is inviting the reader to sit down at a real session to watch and discuss magic. There's no time to discuss how to do a strike double lift or what an out-faro is. I'm sure this will frustrate eager first-timers but I hope that more advanced readers will enjoy the rare chance to read this book line for line without having to skip rudimentary explanations of basic sleights they already know. There are plenty of books that assume nothing about the reader's skill level. This just isn't one of them.



All the people kind enough to read earlier drafts of *Session* asked many of the following questions. Here are some answers.

Is the story true?

Yes and no. I met Joel Givens at a Fechter's close-up convention in the late nineties. We spent almost every second of every day there together, on the floor, doing magic. As in the story, I would show him a trick and he would show me fifteen versions—all original, all good. Since then we have talked daily, via cell phones, about all things magical. The conversations sound pretty much like the dialogue in the story. He rags on me, I rag on him, etc. We see each other often and when we do, we stay up late doing tricks. At one time or another (and in various degrees of completion), he showed me every item in *Session*. The specific dialogue is fictional and obviously he didn't show me these tricks in one night.

His cousin, Ashley, is the only other character in the book who is real. And, the anecdote about Ashley giving four hundred-dollar bills to strippers is absolutely true. I was there.

Why haven't I heard of Joel Givens?

Joel Givens has made no effort to be known in the magic community. He's happy on the fringe, attending a convention or two every couple years, getting the magic magazines, and reading all the latest books. But he's also a fairly private person who doesn't open up to just anyone (magician or layperson). Joel isn't at ease in front of groups of magicians. He doesn't like the convention environment as much as he does a crowd of laypeople.

If you have heard of Joel Givens, you're almost certainly a *Trapdoor* magazine reader. Steve Beam was Joel's sole outlet for effects and Joel published often in Steve's journal and his *Semi-Automatic Card Tricks* series.

How long did it take you to write Session?

What a long and uninteresting story! Joel and I kicked around the idea for years. I taped most of this material in early 2002. Since then he has revamped a couple pieces and sent me some forgotten items. But before I described a single trick, I outlined the story from start to finish. *That* took over a year. I wrote a large part of the book in Florida over a couple summers, and completed the first draft in Columbus, Ohio. It was a difficult project that I abandoned more than once, but it is a *different* magic book and I'm pleased about that.

Were the photos difficult to take?

It's difficult to make instructive photos attractive. For *Session*, Joel and I selected Stephen Heinzelmann, a capable Raleigh-area photographer. I insisted he use a macro lens and that the material be shot on location. Joel scouted potential venues and settled on the Sawmill Tap Room, a restaurant that perfectly embodies what I describe in *Session*.

Joel and Stephen spent over a month planning, shooting, and editing the series, and it shows. The time on Joel's watch is always in sync with the story's timing. Pictorially, you see the sandwiches and drinks diminish throughout the evening. In the bar scenes, even the beer glasses have the Sawmill restaurant's logo. This project was a collaborative effort that required the photographer to play an unusually large role, which Mr. Heinzelmann did with grace.

Hasn't this title been used already?

Pretty much. Simon Aronson and Dave Solomon released a book called *Sessions*⁶ (note the plural). The book is hard to find, but so are titles.

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