

BOOK CLUB KIT

THE CONFIDENCE MEN

HOW TWO PRISONERS OF WAR
ENGINEERED THE MOST REMARKABLE
ESCAPE IN HISTORY

MARGALIT FOX

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the differences between Harry Jones and Cedric Hill in terms of their background, temperament, and abilities? How did these differences contribute to the roles each of them played in the escape plot?
2. If you could spend a day with either Jones or Hill in their postwar prime, whom would you choose and why?
3. As Margalit Fox writes, Jones and Hill's escape plan "seemed born of a fever dream . . . yet in the end they won their freedom." What was it about life in the World War I era that allowed this outlandish plan to succeed?
4. Could Jones and Hill's plot—escape via Ouija board—work in a comparable situation today? Why, or why not? How do you think it would have to be adapted in order to have a chance of success in the 21st century?
5. For their con to succeed, Jones and Hill needed above all to persuade their captors to believe in the Spook. Yet they chose to reinforce that belief among their fellow prisoners first. Why was this step essential to their plan?
6. Fox writes about Jones and Hill's con game as a superlative example of "coercive persuasion." Has *The Confidence Men* made you more aware of the use of coercive persuasion in contemporary life? What are some instances that you've personally experienced or witnessed?
7. Jones and Hill's scheme is one of the only known instances of a confidence game being played for a good cause. Do you know anyone who has fallen victim to a modern-day con game? What were the circumstances? How did it fit the pattern of a "long con" or a "short con," as described in the book?
8. How does the tone of *The Confidence Men* shift between Book Two, "Ghosts," and Book Three, "Demons"?
9. How does this story of lockdown, isolation, and longing resonate with the events of 2020–21? Did your experience of this period have things in common with that of the Yozgad prisoners as they courted "barbed-wire disease"?
10. Fox writes that Jones's 1919 memoir "was intended as a cautionary tale about how easy it is to become a spiritualist charlatan." Do you think Fox intends *The Confidence Men* to be a cautionary tale of its own? If so, in what way?

FASCINATING FACTS

- Margalit Fox first encountered the story of Jones and Hill's con game while paging through a dusty, long-out-of-print anthology looking for something else. What caught her eye, though, was an essay by Jones with an irresistible title: **"The Invisible Accomplice."**
- The British gambit to end the siege of Kut by bribing the Ottoman government was led by a reluctant T.E. Lawrence—the **future Lawrence of Arabia**. Drafted by the British Army to spearhead the effort, he knew the principal players well enough to believe that any attempt at bribery would be futile. He was right.
- Some Yozgad prisoners **kept local stray dogs as pets; each house adopted several**. One, Judy, was described by the inmates as an "Anapom"—a breed name they coined from "Anatolian Pomeranian." During their time in camp, Major Edward Sandes wrote, Judy "gave birth to four little Anapoms . . . [which] were given away to various officers and orderlies."
- While the prisoners' orchestra at Yozgad—three violins, flute, and guitar—provided welcome diversion, it paled in comparison to that of the prison camp at Kastamuni. There, Sandes wrote, **"expert carpenters among the officers made violoncellos, double basses, drums, and other instruments**. Some of the violoncellos were so wonderfully finished that they would have passed for the genuine article."
- "Bugeilio'r Gwenith Gwyn" ("Watching the White Wheat"), the 18th-century Welsh love song that Jones sings on the first clue hunt, tells of the doomed affair between the daughter of a patrician family and the poor farm laborer she loves. Forced by her family to marry a wealthy young man instead, she dies of a broken heart. [Listen to the song here.](#)
- Jones and Hill's con game was sometimes **helped along by pure happy coincidence**. After Clue 1 was unearthed, the Cook, a native of Yozgad town, confirmed that the land on which they found it—the place Hill happened to have chosen as the burial site—had belonged to a wealthy Armenian believed by locals to have buried his riches for safekeeping.
- On the trek to search for Clue 2, Jones, faint from starvation, needed to rest. Not wanting to betray any weakness to his captors, **he solved the problem in the usual manner—with a ghost**. As they approached a stream, the Spook intoned through him: "Sit down and wait. I cannot cross running water." (The belief that water is the bane of spiritual beings, Jones knew, occurs in folk traditions around the world.) Once he had rested, the ghost YYY told the group that they could now cross in safety.
- Before leaving Yozgad on the next leg of the escape, Jones was determined to secure additional living space for his still-crowded countrymen. He managed to persuade Kiazim to move a group of captives into two nearby houses—even though that plan **forced Kiazim to evict his favorite witch**, who had been occupying one of them.
- The distinguished American poet James Merrill experimented with occult practice over many years and **spoke of having composed a number of poems by means of a Ouija board**. The most famous of them is the 560-page verse epic *The Changing Light at Sandover*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry in 1982.

PRINT YOUR OWN SPIRIT BOARD

D.I.Y. spirit boards work just as well as the real thing—after all, Jones and Hill's was homemade! Print your own using the **template** on the following four pages, which can be taped together. After that, you'll just need a planchette that can glide easily across the board, such as a clear plastic cup. For smoother gliding, attach pieces of felt to the bottom of your planchette.

HAPPY SPOOKING!



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HOW TWO PRISONERS
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@margalitfox
#FoxConfidenceMen

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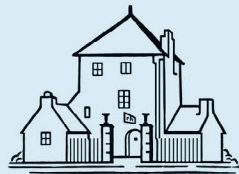
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RANDOM
HOUSE

