

## James Randi, famed magician and skeptic, dies at 92

By **Scottie Andrew, CNN**

🕒 Updated 11:09 AM ET, Thu October 22, 2020



James "The Amazing" Randi has died at age 92, according to his educational foundation. He made a name for himself as an escape artist and later as a skeptic who challenged magicians who deceived the public.

**(CNN)** — James "The Amazing" Randi loved magic. He was a celebrated escape artist who broke records set by Houdini and performed everywhere from the White House to [Niagara Falls](#) (dangling upside down over the falls in a straightjacket, naturally). And with his long white beard, he certainly fit the part of a wizard.

But he had no time for quacks whose "magic" duped its believers and even defrauded them. When he wasn't performing magic himself, he worked tirelessly to debunk the deceivers.

Randi, one of the original challenges to media misinformation, died this week at age 92, the James Randi Educational Foundation [confirmed](#). He's survived by his husband, Jose, and fans whose pocketbooks and belief systems were saved by his skepticism.

## He beat Houdini's records as an escape artist

The Canadian-American Randi came by escape artistry honestly. As he told [The Big Think.com in 2011](#), after a magic show in Quebec, some police officers asked him if he could manage his way out of a pair of handcuffs.

Randi, of course, said he could.

The way he tells it, the officers opened a squad car door for him. He got in on one side and emerged from the other, hands out of the cuffs.

They were impressed, so they upped the ante: Could he escape from their jail?



In all, he broke out of at least 22 jails around the world -- "all legally," he said (he hadn't broken out after being imprisoned for a crime). He appeared regularly on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson, and his [earlier escape attempts](#) in the 1950s were broadcast on NBC's "Today."

At age 22, he broke Harry Houdini's record for time spent submerged in a coffin at 104 minutes -- 11 minutes longer than Houdini. Of course, Randi said, he had an advantage -- he was also about 30 years younger than Houdini was when he attempted the feat.

## He became a professional skeptic

Though Randi was himself a magician, he became a "professional skeptic" during the latter half of his career.

In the 1970s and '80s, he published works discrediting the "magic" of self-proclaimed psychic Uri Geller, who appeared in print and TV media throughout the 1970s touting his "powers," which he claimed derived from the paranormal, and magically bending spoons.

Randi balked at the unskeptical coverage Geller received -- and as a magician, he recognized Geller's tricks. He challenged him in his 1975 book "The Magic of Uri Geller."

"Magical thinking ... is a slippery slope," Randi [said](#) in a short film on his work. "Sometimes it's harmless enough, but other times it's quite dangerous. Personally, I'm opposed to that kind of fakery, so I have no kinds of reservations at all about exposing these ppl and their illusions for what they really are."

In 1976, Randi and fellow skeptics established the [Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal](#) to debunk claims of paranormal pseudoscience. The committee, whose fellows included astronomer Carl Sagan and zoologist and atheist Richard Dawkins, covered everything from debunking the existence of UFOs and the Loch Ness monster to preventing creationist views of science from entering classrooms.

suits were later thrown out).

## He inspired legions of magicians

After years spent guest lecturing at esteemed universities, Randi established the James Randi Educational Foundation to help the public recognize unverified claims. He famously offered a \$1 million reward to anyone who could prove they had paranormal powers he'd spent his career railing against.

As of his passing, no one had convinced him.

Randi came out as gay to the public at age 81, a few years before his retirement. He hadn't intentionally kept his private life a secret, he [said](#) -- he just "never got around to it." He married his companion of 25 years, Jose Alvarez, in 2013.

Randi's fame and reputation as a quick-witted charmer inspired magicians who achieved similar fame after him. Penn Jillette, one half of the famous magic duo Penn and Teller, [mourned](#) Randi's passing in a series of tweets, calling him his "inspiration" and mentor.

"We will never forget that without Randi, there would not be Penn & Teller," Jillette [wrote](#). "It's really that simple."

Simplicity was what made Randi's magic so special. At his retirement party in 2015, Randi [performed one last card trick](#), 7 minutes in all. With his long white beard, he certainly fit the part of a wizard. Ever humble, he performed the trick bent over a wooden chair in his home in front of a small crowd. He asked a spectator to help him divide the deck by color without looking at the cards' faces.

Then, he switched it up. Without rearranging the piles, he asked his volunteer to place all the cards he believed were red in the pile where he'd previously placed the black cards. Then, Randi picked up both decks.

"This, I think, might just surprise you," he said.

When he placed the deck back down on the chair, all the red cards were in one pile, all of the black cards in another.

The crowd was quietly awed by the simplicity of his trick -- and the ease with which he performed it.



US

World

Politics

Business

Opinion

Health



- Tech
- Style
- Travel
- Sports
- Videos
- Coupons
- More
- Weather



FOLLOW CNN



- Terms of Use
- Privacy Policy
- Do Not Sell My Personal Information
- AdChoices
- About Us
- CNN Store
- Newsletters
- Transcripts
- License Footage
- CNN Newsource
- Sitemap

© 2020 Cable News Network. A Warner Media Company. All Rights Reserved.  
 CNN Sans™ & © 2016 Cable News Network.