

# Derren Brown

This article is about the English illusionist and mentalist. For the baseball coach, see **Daren Brown**. For other people with a similar name, see **Darren Brown (disambiguation)**.

**Derren Victor Brown**<sup>[2]</sup> (born 27 February 1971)<sup>[3]</sup> is an English **mentalist** and illusionist. Since his television debut with *Derren Brown: Mind Control* in 2000, he has produced several other shows both for the stage, and for television in both series and specials. He has also written books for magicians as well as the general public.

Brown does not claim to possess any super-natural powers, indeed his acts are often designed to expose the methods of those who do, such as **faith healers** and **mediums**. He makes clear in his performances that all of his apparent abilities, which manifest on stage/screen as feats of memory, intuition, **mind-reading** and control of other objects/people, are achieved through a variety of psychological means, such as hypnosis, suggestion, cold reading, misdirection, and showmanship, and in many cases he will often give detailed explanations of his specific methods during or after the performance. In some performances he also uses his techniques to explore issues of personality such as fears and motivation.

## 1 Early life

Brown was born in **Croydon, London**<sup>[4]</sup> to Chris and Bob<sup>[5]</sup> and has a brother nine years his junior.<sup>[6]</sup> Brown was privately educated at **Whitgift School** in South Croydon (where his father coached swimming),<sup>[6]</sup> and studied Law and German<sup>[7]</sup> at the **University of Bristol**.<sup>[8]</sup> While there, he attended a hypnotist show by Martin S Taylor, which inspired him to turn to illusion and **hypnosis** as a career.<sup>[9]</sup> Whilst an undergraduate, he started working as a conjuror, performing the traditional skills of **close-up magic** in bars and restaurants. In 1992, he started performing stage shows at the University of Bristol under the stage name Darren V. Brown.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 2 Career

Brown cites magician and comedian **Jerry Sadowitz**, whom he met at the International Magic shop in **Clerkenwell**, London, as being instrumental in his rise to stardom. Sadowitz put him in touch with H&R

publishers and **Objective Productions**, a production company founded by the television magician **Andrew O'Connor**.<sup>[10][11][12]</sup> This gave him his breakthrough show, *Mind Control*, in 2000, and Brown went on to become their first award-winning product.<sup>[13]</sup> After several further shows with Objective, Brown set up his own company **Vaudeville Productions** with former Objective executives Michael Vine, Andrew O'Connor and Paul Sandler, in order to produce his own shows as well as other projects with other performers, both new and established.<sup>[14]</sup> Its first show was Brown's TV special, *Pushed to the Edge*.<sup>[15]</sup>

## 3 Works

### 3.1 Shows

Main article: **List of Derren Brown shows**

#### 3.1.1 Television series

#### 3.1.2 Television specials

#### 3.1.3 Stage shows

#### Broadcast on television

- 29 December 2006 - *Something Wicked This Way Comes*
- 13 January 2009 - *Mind Reader – An Evening of Wonders* (performed 4 June 2008)
- 6 January 2011 - *Enigma*
- 18 September 2012 - *Svengali*
- 22 September 2014 - *Infamous*
- 10 October 2016 - *Miracle*<sup>[17]</sup>

### 3.2 Books

Brown has written four books on magic: *Absolute Magic*, *Pure Effect*, *Tricks of the Mind*, and *Confessions of a Conjuror*. The first two books he penned are intended solely for practitioners of **magic** and **mentalism**, whilst his books *Tricks of the Mind* and *Confessions of a Conjuror* are aimed at the general public.

*Absolute Magic*, subtitled *A Model for Powerful Close-Up Performance*, is not so much about magical methodology as about how magicians can make their performances magical; it is written in a variety of styles: sometimes humorous, sometimes serious. He warns against an act that conveys the feeling of “Here are some tricks I’ve bought” and urges magicians to make their performances experiential and memorable by involving the audience. In some respects a lot of what he says is evocative of the content of **Darwin Ortiz**’s *Strong Magic* but his book expresses it in the context of his experiences, performance style and theories of how performance should be. (*Out of print*)

*Pure Effect* is a more traditional book of trickery and technique and offers an insight into some of the methods that Brown employs, and offers a starting point for development for the reader’s own use. (*Out of print*)

*Tricks of the Mind* is Brown’s first book intended for the general public. It is a wide-ranging book in which Brown reveals some of the techniques he uses in his performances, delves into the structure and psychology of magic and discusses hypnosis. He also applies his insight to the paranormal industry, looking at the structure of beliefs and how psychology can explain why people become ‘true believers’. He also offers autobiographical stories about his own experiences as a former **Christian**, and discusses his **scepticism** about religion, allegedly ‘psychic’ phenomena and other supernatural belief systems.

*Confessions of a Conjuror* was published by Channel 4 Books in October 2010. (ISBN 978-1-905-02657-9)

### 3.3 Other productions and publications

Brown co-presented two web-based series for Channel 4; *The Science of Scams* and *The Science of Attraction*. In *The Science of Scams*, a number of videos were placed on **YouTube** purporting to show various kinds of paranormal phenomena such as ghosts, telekinesis and a tarot card reading. In a second series of videos, Brown and his co-presenter Kat Akingbade explained what was actually happening, exposing each as a specially created scam. *The Science of Attraction* was co-presented by Brown, Akingbade and **Charlie McDonnell**, the shows examined the physical and psychological factors that can influence our feelings of attraction to other people, especially those of the opposite sex. The series featured a number of experiments designed to show how these factors can be influenced.

Brown has recorded some audio extracts from *Tricks of the Mind*. In them he expounds on the three subjects essential to his performance—Magic, Memory, and Hypnosis. The extracts last around 40 minutes each, disclosing tips and techniques Brown uses in his acts (as well as day-to-day) and narrating the highlights of his book.

*The Devil’s Picturebook* is a near 3-hour home-made video. The first half explains in detail some classic card

routines from his earlier career as a conjurer, all of which rely on **sleight of hand**, misdirection and audience management. The second looks at psychological card routines and shows a distinct move towards **mentalism**, for which he is now known. It is an instructional video for aspiring magicians and not an entertainment piece. For this reason, it was available only to practitioners through a password-protected “magicians only” area of his website. The clue to the password tells you that the word itself begins with T and is a type of palming trick.<sup>[18]</sup>

*International Magic Presents: The Derren Brown Lecture* is an 80-minute lecture DVD of close-up mentalism and subsequent discussion of various aspects of Brown’s performance. Again, this product is not intended for general consumption but is directed at magicians and mentalists only.

In 2007, Brown performed in the short film *Medium Rare*.<sup>[19]</sup>

In 2008, Brown made a guest acting appearance in **BBC Four**’s *Crooked House* as Sir Roger Widdowson.<sup>[20]</sup>

In 2008, Brown provided caricatures for “The QI ‘F’ annual”.

In 2009, a book, *Portraits*, was released containing a selection of Brown’s paintings and bizarre **caricatures** of celebrities.

In 2010, Brown appeared in a special Comedy Gala for Channel four and Great Ormond Street Hospital. He appeared with **Kevin Bishop**, who played his jealous annoying twin ‘Darren’.

### 3.4 Thorpe Park ride

Brown created a new dark ride at the **Thorpe Park** amusement park, which opened on 8 July 2016. “**Derren Brown’s Ghost Train**” is set aboard an old train carriage in an abandoned warehouse. It is expected that the experience will last around 13 minutes and is Thorpe Park’s most expensive ride experience.<sup>[21]</sup>

### 3.5 Controversy

Many of Brown’s shows have generated controversy.<sup>[22]</sup> In 2007, **BBC News** listed two of Brown’s shows (*Russian Roulette* and *Seance*) in a list of examples of Channel 4’s “legacy of controversy”.<sup>[23]</sup> In 2013, Brown said “Controversy has never interested me for its own sake. It’s always been about doing stuff that feels dramatic.”<sup>[24]</sup>

Public complaints that *Russian Roulette* was distasteful, made light of suicide and promoted gun culture were ultimately rejected by the regulator the **Broadcast Standards Commission**, on the basis that the context (a post-watershed magic show) and warnings given were sufficient, plus the use of a 15-minute delay would have ensured no viewer would have seen the result of any

mistake.<sup>[25]</sup> The police had also warned that the show might inspire copycat acts.<sup>[23]</sup>

*Seance* received 487 complaints to Channel 4 and 208 to OFCOM, making it the third most complained about show in history. Most were from church groups and came before transmission, i.e. before it was revealed that the attempt to contact the dead was a hoax.<sup>[26]</sup> The show was ultimately cleared of any wrongdoing.<sup>[23]</sup>

The GMB union criticised *Heist* on behalf of security workers, arguing it was “irresponsible and insensitive” in light of increased attacks on staff. Channel 4 responded by arguing that it was made “very clear that attempting any form of robbery was criminal behaviour.”<sup>[27]</sup>

An episode of *Trick or Treat* caused charity *Cats Protection* to complain and news reports to label Brown a “cat killer”, after he appeared to convince someone to press a button even though they thought it would electrocute a kitten inside a metal box. Brown responded by arguing they had misunderstood the trick (the box wasn't wired up), and he “wasn't glorifying cruelty to cats. People would have been hard-pressed to recreate the electrocution device at home even if they wanted to.”<sup>[28]</sup> Another episode which saw someone hypnotised into thinking they had been killed in a car crash after not wearing a seatbelt was criticised by a road safety charity, who alleged it trivialised the issue.<sup>[29]</sup>

OFCOM received 11 complaints and began an investigation relating to the safety of a scene in *Hero at 30,000 Feet*, in which the subject was shown chained to a railway line in order to escape from an oncoming train.<sup>[30]</sup>

Psychic *Joe Power*, the subject of episode 1 of *Derren Brown Investigates* (“The Man Who Contacts the Dead”), complained to OFCOM about being misled and treated unfairly, and that the programme “presented, disregarded or omitted material facts”.<sup>[31]</sup> He also alleged he had received threats from sceptics and had to move home because of it.<sup>[32]</sup> OFCOM rejected his complaint on the basis that Powers had been fully apprised of the sceptical nature of the programme, and his actions had been presented fairly.<sup>[31]</sup>

Several viewers complained that the subject of *Apocalypse* was an actor, with reports pointing to evidence that he had a link to a professional actors' website on his Twitter page and that he looked like another actor in a noodle advert, which Brown initially dismissed as conspiracy theories and then attempted to debunk by identifying the actor in question.<sup>[33]</sup>

## 4 Other appearances

Derren Brown made a brief cameo in *Crooked House*.<sup>[34]</sup>

Brown appeared as himself in the *Sherlock* episode “The Empty Hearse”, as part of a theory regarding how the title character faked his own death.<sup>[35]</sup>

Brown appeared in a *skit* at the beginning of the *8 Out of 10 Cats Does Deal or No Deal* special (a cross between *8 Out of 10 Cats* and *Deal or No Deal*).<sup>[36]</sup>

He was also mentioned briefly in the 50th anniversary special of the British television show *Doctor Who*.<sup>[37]</sup>

An interview with Brown<sup>[38]</sup> was featured in Richard Dawkins' two-part documentary series *The Enemies of Reason*. Brown explained various psychological techniques used by purported psychics and spiritual mediums to manipulate their audiences. The most notable was *cold reading*, a technique about which Brown talked extensively in his book *Tricks of the Mind*. Some video footage was also used from Brown's TV special *Messiah*.

As part of Channel 4's 3D season, Brown presented *Derren Brown's 3D Magic Spectacular*.<sup>[39][40]</sup> The show was not a new special from Brown, rather he was the presenter for a number of other magicians and clips that were shown. However, he did include one clip in which he found an object that had been hidden in the streets of Venice by a volunteer.

In January 2011, to celebrate ten years since his first television appearance, Channel 4 held a special *Derren Brown Night*. As well as re-showing *The Heist* (which won a recent poll of favourite specials) and one of his *Enigma Live* shows the channel screened a special documentary; *Derren Brown: Behind The Mischief*, a personal and candid film about Brown. The documentary included the story of how he met his co-writer (who was featured in *Seance*), his mother's feelings about his involvement in *Russian Roulette*, and an emotional visit back to his old school, university and the Bristol bars where he first began his close-up magic. Celebrities contributors included *Matt Lucas*, *Jo Whaley*, *Stephen Merchant*, and *Simon Pegg*.

In January 2013, Brown was featured in a Channel 4 *Deal or No Deal* special, where he appeared to have predicted all the correct boxes, to win the big jackpot of £250,000. This was filmed as part of the Channel 4 Mashup.

## 5 Suggested methods

Brown uses a variety of methods to achieve his illusions including traditional magic/conjuring techniques, memory techniques, *hypnosis*, body language reading, *cognitive psychology*, *cold reading* and psychological, *subliminal* (specifically the use of PWA – “perception without awareness”) and *ideomotor suggestion*.

In an interview in *New Scientist* in 2005, when asked how he “acquired his psychological skills”, Brown says that he learnt skills as a hypnotist, which he was not sure how to apply until he started performing *close-up magic*. When asked whether he is able to *detect lies*, Brown claimed to be able to read subtle cues such as a micro-muscle movements that indicate to him if someone is lying. Concern-

ing his apparent success at hypnotizing people, he stated that he can normally spot a suggestible type of person and chooses that person to be his participant. He believes that the presence of a television camera also increases suggestibility.<sup>[41]</sup>

Several authors have claimed that Brown uses **neuro-linguistic programming** (NLP) in his act which “consists of a range of magical ‘tricks’, misdirection and, most intriguing, setting up audiences to provide the response that he wishes them to provide by using subtle subliminal cues in his conversation with them.”<sup>[42]</sup> In response to the accusation that he unfairly claims to be using NLP whenever he performs, Brown writes “The truth is I have never mentioned it outside of my book”. Brown does have an off-stage curiosity about the system, and discusses it in the larger context of hypnotism and suggestion.<sup>[43][44]</sup> In his book *Tricks of the Mind*, Brown mentions that he attended an NLP course with **Richard Bandler**, co-creator of NLP and mentor of **Paul McKenna**. He also describes the NLP concept of **eye accessing cues** as a technique of “limited use” in his book *Pure Effect*.<sup>[45]</sup> The language patterns which he uses to suggest behaviours are very similar in style to those used by Richard Bandler and by the hypnotist from whom Bandler learnt his skill, **Milton H. Erickson**. Brown also mentions in *Tricks of the Mind* that NLP students were given a certificate after a four-day course, certifying them to practice NLP as a therapist. A year after Brown attended the class, he received a number of letters saying that he would receive another certificate, not for passing a test (as he discontinued practising NLP following the course), but for keeping in touch. After ignoring their request, he later received the new certificate for NLP in his mailbox, unsolicited.<sup>[46]</sup>

Brown relies heavily on misdirection for his tricks, helped by the audience viewing him as having deep psychological insights. He relies on a wide array of techniques to prevent audiences from deducing the techniques he has used.<sup>[47]</sup>

In a *Daily Telegraph* article published in 2003 **Simon Singh** criticised Brown’s early TV appearances, arguing that he presented standard magic and mentalism effects—such as the classic ten-card poker deal trick—as genuine **psychological manipulation**.<sup>[48]</sup> On Brown’s television and live shows he often appears to show the audience how a particular effect was created—claiming to use techniques such as subliminal suggestion, hypnosis, and body language reading. Singh’s suggestion is that these explanations are dishonest. Furthermore, Singh took exception to the programme’s website being categorised under Channel 4’s “Science” section. The mini-site was moved to “Entertainment” for later series.

In an October 2010 interview, Brown conceded that Singh may have had a point, explaining that at the start of his television career “I was overstating the case, overstating my skills. I thought there’ll only be one show, there’ll never be a repeat, so I might as well go for it.”<sup>[49]</sup> In his

book *Tricks of the Mind*, Brown writes,

I am often dishonest in my techniques, but always honest about my dishonesty. As I say in each show, ‘I mix magic, suggestion, psychology, misdirection and showmanship’. I happily admit cheating, as it’s all part of the game. I hope some of the fun for the viewer comes from not knowing what’s real and what isn’t. I am an entertainer first and foremost, and I am careful not to cross any moral line that would take me into manipulating people’s real-life decisions or belief systems.

Brown claims to never use actors or “stooges” in his work without informing the viewers. In *Tricks of the Mind*, Brown writes that to use such a ploy is “artistically repugnant and simply unnecessary”; furthermore, he “would not want any participant to watch the TV show when it airs and see a different or radically re-edited version of what he understood to have happened”.<sup>[43]</sup>

## 6 Personal life

Brown came out as gay in 2007, and is in a long term relationship with a designer.<sup>[22][50][51]</sup> He came out late in life—his parents were not practising Christians, but they sent him to Bible classes from age 5, believing it was the right thing to do. In an effort to deal with issues of self-esteem and sexuality, Brown became a committed **Evangelical Christian** in his teens in order to present a confident, asexual, character. After he came to the conclusion that his belief in Christianity had no basis, by his twenties he had become a committed **atheist**, and he instead turned to the character of the eccentric, caped magician to fulfill the role.<sup>[52][53]</sup>

Since 2004, Brown has been the patron of the registered charity the Parrot Zoo Trust in Friskney, Lincolnshire.<sup>[54]</sup> In an interview with *LeftLion* magazine, he said, “I’m a big fan of parrots – I think they’re fascinating creatures. Many of them live for longer than us humans and it’s interesting to me the way they learn to mimic human voices even though they don’t really comprehend what they’re saying.”<sup>[55]</sup>

## 7 Awards and nominations

## 8 DVD releases

## 9 References

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## 10 External links

- Official website

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