



# The Magician and the Cardsharp: The Search for America's Greatest Sleight-of-Hand Artist

By Karl Johnson

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**"Johnson details exciting anecdotes of scams, hoaxes, and instances of conjuring . . . His stories unfold like magic." ?David Blaine, *Entertainment Weekly***

In the 1920s, during an era when Americans were crazy for magic, Dai Vernon earned a reputation as a genius of the magical arts. When hard times descended after the crash of '29, the lights of New York faded, audiences dwindled, and Vernon headed west. Little did he realize that his life was about to change.

In Wichita, Kansas, while swapping secrets with a Mexican gambler, Vernon was told a story he didn't quite believe, the tale of a legendary cardsharp who could pull off the impossible?dealing perfectly from the center of the deck. Vernon set out to find the reclusive cardsharp, discovering a fascinating and dangerous kingdom of games and tricksters along the way. Did he finally get his man or did the greatest cardsharp who ever lived just vanish into thin air?

A story with the nostalgic quality of an old-fashioned fable, *The Magician and the Cardsharp* is a unique and endlessly entertaining piece of history.

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## **The Magician and the Cardsharp: The Search for America's Greatest Sleight-of-Hand Artist** By Karl Johnson **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This engrossing detective story traces the quest of Dai Vernon, né David Verner (1894–1992), to find the man who perfected the art of dealing from the center of the deck. An accomplished card cheat, sleight-of-hand magician and silhouette portraitist, Vernon was so expert at duplicitous card techniques that he once fooled Houdini with tricks he'd learned as a child from S.W. Erdnase's classic *The Expert at the Card Table*. Proficient at dealing from the top and bottom of the deck, he was astounded to learn that someone in the Midwest had the ability to win by dealing from the center. Johnson, a former editor at New York's *Daily News*, details Vernon's long search for Allen Kennedy (1865–1961), a cardsharp who plied his trade with loaded dice and deceitful deck handling. By recounting the shadowy careers of these two men, the author successfully evokes the picturesque world of illegal gambling during the 1920s, '30s and '40s. Johnson vividly conveys how obsessed Vernon was with magic and card tricks, and how much time, energy and practice gamblers put into learning how to cheat at cards.

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From [Booklist](#)

How does a kid from Ottawa, Ontario, get to Pleasant Hill, Missouri? With a deck of playing cards and an obsession with magic, of course. Johnson's fantastical tale concerns card cheating in general and, in particular, the search by Canadian Dai Vernon (1894-1992) for a legendary card player who dealt perfectly from the center of the deck. Johnson conveys the mores of the gambling world, in which Vernon considered himself primarily an entertainer. Vernon gravitated to New York and knocked about its carnivals, but following the stock market crash in 1929, he ended up in Wichita, Kansas, where he made a living cutting silhouettes but lived for mastering sleight of hand. There in 1932 he heard the center deal had been mastered by somebody in Missouri. One county down the railroad line from Kansas City, Pleasant Hill reflected its name--if you liked vice. Johnson's well-crafted unveiling of the town's character and the identity of the cardsharp inveigles as it entertains, rewarding readers hunting for an unusual topic. *Gilbert Taylor*  
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Review

“Fascinating . . . This folk history of magic is irresistible.” ?*Details*

“A master storyteller . . . dip[s] us headlong into the vibrantly portrayed worlds . . . part biography, part portrait of an age, and part guest narrative.” ?*The Washington Post Book World*

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