Introduction

I discovered poker when I was in the hospital in 2004. Bored out of my mind, I turned on the television and watched an amateur win millions playing Texas Hold 'Em at the World Series of Poker.®

In most Hold 'Em games, there is an ante, but two players are required to bet 'the blinds,' which escalate at regular intervals. The 'small blind' is half the 'big blind,' which is the minimum that any player needs to continue in the hand. The dealer deals only two 'hole cards' to each player. After that, the dealer deals five more cards: three cards, known as the 'flop,' followed by a single 'turn' and a single 'river.' After each of these, the remaining players bet or fold. The fact of the matter is that most hands don't get to the end, as players lose their nerve in the environment which changes with the changing cards.

At first I must admit that I was baffled by the appeal of such a simple game. But as the tournament progressed, I started to see what millions of viewers already knew: that poker is a subtle game where tactical bluffs and strategic indirection play as much a role as the actual cards do in determining the outcome of any given hand. From the moment that realization struck me, I was hooked.

Being a lifelong reader, I wanted to read *fiction* written about my newly discovered game. I knew that there had been a vogue for poker in the 19th century, and that in the 20th century poker had assumed a prominent place in the genre of Western film. I assumed that the 19th century literary tradition would have been continued into the 20th cen-

tury, as well.

Golf and baseball had given us hoards of books in the 20th century on lessons which connect us as individuals back to the larger world through their respective games. Steven Pressfield's *Legend of Bagger Vance* offers his readers a spiritual connection to the larger world through Bagger Vance, who comes to Savannah and raises the consciousness of the war veteran Rannulph Junah to a higher Hermetic plane through the means of a not-so-simple golf game. Bernard Malamud's novel *The Natural* links the protagonist to the wider world through the not-so-simple game of baseball by offering the reader an archetypal hero who acts out archetypal myths and is named after the archetypal hero Perceval.

But when it came to poker, I found little in the way of 20th century fiction. Most of what I did find was confined to genre mysteries, and most of those books took the same approach that I found in golf and baseball books. The author links his readers to the larger world by substituting a bold hero who dares play a game which could jar more timid readers with its erratic ups and downs.

That vicarious model has its place, particularly in the world of baseball and golf, where most men have not got the natural talent to succeed as adults and must find substitutes to appreciate the deepest spiritual merits of the game. But poker is a game that anyone can play, and, because there's luck involved, even an amateur can win. And unlike golf and unlike baseball, playing poker has less to do with what's on the table than any other game in the world. Therefore, people play poker long after their childhood dreams of playing baseball or golf professionally have passed.

I find it odd that when poker is portrayed in *fiction* that it should travel so close to *nature*. I asked myself why should the bluffing and indirection that is so central to the game of poker have eluded so many poker writers?

The answer was not difficult to find. Las Vegas, in the serious intellectual's mind, is the symbol of everything that has gone wrong in the world. Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves To Death* tells us that "Las Vegas, Nevada [is] a metaphor of our national character and aspiration, its symbol a thirty-foot-high cardboard picture of a slot machine and

a chorus girl." The result of this, Postman says, is that "we are people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death" (He says it like it's a bad thing).

The intellectual's perspective on Las Vegas, then, is to scratch the surface kitsch, as Rothman and Davis do in their work *The Grit Beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas*, to find out just how much degradation the city hides from us. That portrait of Las Vegas reminds me of Engel's cheerless book on the city of Manchester in the 19th century, which hides the degradation of the slums behind high walls in order to front stores that appeal to the bourgeoisie on its broad avenue.

It's a fair point, and one which I feel no need to refute. But my book was not written for humorless critics who feel the need to point out what the city is by pointing out what the city is not. This book was written for those who come to Las Vegas for a weekend getaway in a desert paradise and who want to read about that experience *as they experience it*.

To that end, I drew on models of books that I had enjoyed growing up. I transformed them into my take on the importance, not of the facts of *nature*, but of *fiction* in the poker world.

The two most important of these were P. G. Wodehouse's *Golf Without Tears*, from which I got my reliance on humor, as well as the practice of using abstract names for my characters. I also relied on Hermann Melville's *The Confidence Man*, where I got the picture of the innocent who learns to confront the fact that there are deceivers in the world. Out of these works (and many others) I have managed to build my own picture of the city of Las Vegas.

In telling my comic tales of riverboat gamblers and chess masters, actors and directors, mobsters and Texas cheats, and a tale in which a lone individual plays the Devil himself, I hope to appeal to the gambler who loves Las Vegas for what it is and who wants to read about what he or she enjoys there without the serious counter-invention of the critic, who wishes to spoil the fun that so many of the rest of us truly enjoy.

William Heise
March 2010