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21: Bringing Down The House: The Inside Story Of Six M.I.T. Students Who Took Vegas For Millions



Synopsis

In the midst of the Go-Go '90s, the culture of greed infused the MIT campus. A small blackjack club sprang up, dedicated to counting cards and beating the house at major casinos around the country. The Club grew slowly at first, but by the late 1990s, the right people had come up with the right system to take some of the world's most sophisticated casinos for all they were worth. In less than two years, this ring of card savants earned more than \$3 million from corporate Vegas. This is the true story of how they did it. Bringing Down the House is everyman's dream, certainly every gambler's dream, and gambling is a growth industry on the East and West Coasts. A cross between Liar's Poker, Ocean's Eleven, and The Cuckoo's Egg, this fast-paced caper features the most unlikely of heroes, a bunch of super-smart MIT geeks. Before the dot.coms kidnapped the mathematical geniuses of MIT, here's what higher education produced from the dark underbelly of the Ivy League, where kids with brains, money, and bright futures were just as likely to be found gambling in a Paradise Island casino as putting in time in the library.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

...namely, how much of this tale to believe? But first, the basics: "Kevin" joins a team of Blackjack players based out of MIT, and extracts some ungodly number of dollars from the casinos over the course of a five-year romp. Then the casinos wise up to the game, and start putting the squeeze on Kevin and his buddies: expulsions, IRS audits, intimidation, and a little rough stuff in back rooms. Ben Mezrich is a thriller-writer by day, and the prose is a bit too ripely

melodramatic--cliff-hanger chapter endings that go nowhere, visual metaphors culled from Raymond Chandler's wastebasket: "the muscles beneath his MIT T-shirt rippled like a plastic trash can left out in a heat wave." (And just when did everyone at MIT get so darned ripped? Almost everyone's a stud or a babe, except for the shadowy Asian ringleader with the horrible teeth and bad vision. Must be a different part of campus than I usually see.) But he manages to keep the writing at a good poolside or plane-time level, and you can skim the bits that are obviously padded out to stretch a 150-page story into a 250-page book. The Blackjack itself seems mostly reasonable. The kids practice the classic "Hi-Lo" count, but with a clever twist. Hi-Lo calls for the player to bet the minimum a lot of the time, then dramatically raise the betting level when the distribution of cards turns favorable. One thing this isn't, is inconspicuous--the casinos are good at spotting this stuff. So the MIT gang fielded two types of players--some always bet low, but kept track of the "count." When it became favorable, these players would give the high-sign to a "Gorilla" or "Big Player," who always bet high, and sat at a hot table until the count went bad again.

Author Ben Mezrich is on the streak of a lifetime, with his top-selling, wildly flawed, heavily fictionalized "history" of a well-known blackjack team getting made into a movie by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Pretty impressive. MGM, after all, as Mezrich notes in a recent interview, is "the same company that owns most of the large casinos in Vegas." (See the February, 2004 Kuro5hin interview at [...]) The only problem with this observation, like many of the major and minor details in Mezrich's book, is that it isn't true. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the movie company, and MGM Mirage, the casino company, are totally separate corporations, just as Mezrich's Las Vegas and the real Nevada town are totally different. Mezrich may be the only gambling writer in America who doesn't know these elementary facts. For four years I've supported myself and my family by counting cards in American casinos and winning at blackjack. It is a tense, weird, exhilarating life, and I would love for more of my friends to understand it. This book doesn't help. Not only is the grade-school prose tedious. Not only are the technical blackjack details, on those few occasions when Mezrich summons the pluck to try tackling them, incorrect or misleading. The dramatic structure gropes and falls flat. The journalism is scandalously lazy and erroneous. Above all, the spirit, the eclat that card counters muster to wage our little war against casinoland is missing. Mezrich doesn't get it and can't report it. He hasn't been there and he doesn't know, his scanty experimental plays with MIT alums notwithstanding. If you want to know what gamblers are like and how we live, skip this drivel. Look instead at legendary hustler Amarillo Slim's new memoir, *Amarillo Slim in a World Full of Fat People*.

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