

Positively Fifth Street: Murderers, Cheetahs, and Binion's World Series of Poker

By James McManus

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Rough sex, black magic, murder, and the science—and eros—of gambling meet in the ultimate book about Las Vegas

James McManus was sent to Las Vegas by *Harper's* to cover the World Series of Poker in 2000, especially the mushrooming progress of women in the \$23 million event, and the murder of Ted Binion, the tournament's prodigal host, purportedly done in by a stripper and her boyfriend with a technique so outré it took a Manhattan pathologist to identify it. Whether a jury would convict the attractive young couple was another story altogether.

McManus risks his entire *Harper's* advance in a long-shot attempt to play in the tournament himself. Only with actual table experience, he tells his skeptical wife, can he capture the hair-raising brand of poker that determines the world champion. The heart of the book is his deliciously suspenseful account of the tournament itself—the players, the hand-to-hand combat, and his own unlikely progress in it.

Written in the tradition of *The Gambler* and *The Biggest Game in Town*, *Positively Fifth Street* is a high-stakes adventure, a penetrating study of America's card game, and a terrifying but often hilarious account of one man's effort to understand what Edward O. Wilson has called "Pleistocene exigencies"—the eros and logistics of our primary competitive instincts.

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Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In 2000, novelist and poet James McManus was sent to Las Vegas, innocently enough, by *Harper's* magazine to write a story about the World Series of Poker held annually at Binion's Horseshoe. But then, as so often happens on trips to Sin City, something kind of ... happened. Rather than becoming an objective report, McManus's article evolved into a memoir as he put his entire advance on the line, got lucky with his cards and won a spot in the competition, and came much closer than anyone expected to winning the darn thing. The result, *Positively Fifth Street*, is just as dazzling, exciting, and disturbing as Vegas itself.

McManus details his battles not only against his opponents but also against "Bad Jim," the portion of his own personality that needs to get in on a poker game in spite of both common and fiscal sense. Besides telling his own story, he relates the considerably more unpleasant tale of Ted Binion, whose grisly death was blamed on Binion's former stripper-girlfriend and her ex-linebacker beau. In the hands of a lesser author, the pursuit of these separate through lines of poker and the seedy personal lives of wealthy casino heirs may have lead readers to wish the author had picked just one subject. But under McManus's careful watch, they're really pretty similar: steeped in adrenaline, mystery, deception, and skating on thrillingly thin ice. Each story underscores the other, a neat little "narrative as metaphor" device, while also painting a vivid picture of Vegas casino life. Poker, as anyone who has lost at it will tell you, is an intricate game and it's nice to see a top-notch author and player relate its finer points in an entertaining style that will appeal even to non-players. The author's hilariously self-aware and at times self-loathing style make *Positively Fifth Street* a fun read. But beyond that, his account of nearly winning the biggest poker tournament in the world and subsequently watching as the verdicts are announced for Binion's accused murderers makes for a great story. Even if it wasn't the one he was sent there to write. --John Moe

From Publishers Weekly

It's the fantasy of many a red-blooded American male, and increasingly, many a female: to stare down a grizzled "rounder" (or professional) in the final hand to win the million-dollar prize of the world's biggest poker tournament. Harper's magazine sent poet and novelist McManus (*Going to the Sun*, etc.) to cover the 2000 event in Las Vegas. Playing in his first tournament, he was more successful than anyone could have dared hope. For a writer, this is the equivalent of drawing a straight flush-no small part of the appeal here is watching McManus as he skillfully converts a chance into a sure thing. Moreover, coinciding with the tournament that year was the salacious trial of the murderer of Ted Binion, legendarily profligate scion to the family that created the event. He probes the trial at length, but the theme-scummy people are capable of scummy behavior-is hardly as interesting, and the book always perks up when McManus returns to the green felt, where "flop" and "river" can combine to end the author's streak at any moment. Of course, opponents and spectators alike were well aware of McManus's identity as erudite literatus and tourney neophyte-which at once made him prey and permitted him to play possum. While refusing to downplay his No Limit Hold'em chops (earned by practicing with a computer program), McManus modestly charts his delirium as he prevailed in one nervy confrontation after another. The drama of high-stakes poker is inherently compelling-here is a rare opportunity to read an account by someone who can really write. B&w illus.

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From Library Journal

To cover the 2000 World Series of Poker in Las Vegas for Harper's, McManus insisted on entering.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

William Fiscus:

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Marilyn Calhoun:

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