*Poker & Pop Culture: Telling the Story of America’s Favorite Cards Game* by Martin Harris

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“Poker? Sure, we know poker. But how well do we know poker, really?”

--Martin Harris, *Poker & Popular Culture* (2019)

Like baseball, jazz, and comic-book superheroes, poker is an American-born institution of popular culture. Like baseball, the popularity of poker spread across the country when soldiers returning from the Civil War carried with them the rules of a new game of uncertain origins. Like jazz, the game was fine-tuned in the late-nineteenth century along the shores of the Mississippi River, in and around the ports of New Orleans. And, like comic-book superheroes, by the mid-twentieth century, poker players (both real and imagined) were quickly becoming icons of American masculinity.

In his new book, *Poker & Pop Culture*, Martin Harris laments that even though poker “is so deeply embedded in American culture, its profound significance and even influence on the country’s history has...been taken for granted” (15).There have been countless surveys and studies written about popular symbols of American culture, but until now there has never been a comprehensive examination of poker from a pop-culture perspective. James McManus’s *Cowboys Full: The Story of Poke*r (2009) is easily the most exhaustive history of poker, but in his blurb for *Poker & Pop Culture*, McManus himself acknowledges the importance of Harris’s contribution to the field, calling the book “a lively, well researched, highly readable account of the game’s hold on the popular imagination...with 1,001 telling details. A+ Americana, and then some.”

Harris is a journalist and a college English instructor, so it should come as no surprise that *Poker & Pop Culture* is both readable and scholarly. Casual readers and academics alike will find *Poker & Pop Culture* to be an engaging survey of poker in what Harris describes as a “host of contexts as an incredibly complex and versatile emblem for all sorts of ideas and messages, all of which might be said in one way or another to reflect the diversity and richness of the Amerixcan experience” (371).

One need only view the book’s table of contents to recognize its breadth:

Poker on the Mississippi

Poker in the Old West

Poker in the Civil War

Poker in Clubs

Poker on the Bookshelf

Poker in the Home

Poker in the White House

Poker During Wartime

Poker in the Board Room

Poker in Folklore

Poker in Casinos

Poker on the Newstand

Poker in the Movies

Poker in Literature

Poker on the Radio

Poker in Music

Poker on Television

Poker on the Computer

Poker Under Siege

Poker in the Future

Although references to other chapters are sometimes used to avoid redundancies, each chapter is essentially a stand-alone, thematic essay. Readers could easily jump from one chapter to another with relative ease, but the chapters work best when taken as a whole. Together, they tell the story of poker in a series of vignettes, in which poker is like a dynamic character constantly evolving in response to changing cultures and contexts. Early chapters focus on tales and theories about poker’s roots, and general readers not familiar with poker’s complicated history will find these chapters informative and accessible, but even the most passionate poker aficionados will likely benefit from Harris’s exceptional research and insight, supplementing the work of poker historians and theorists before him.

Not surprisingly, the most interesting and distinctive chapters focus on poker in popular mediums like folklore, movies, radio dramas, short fiction, songs, television shows, and video games. In a wonderful display of kisch criticism, for example, Harris dissects of the history and influence of Cassius Marcellus Coolridge’s infamous “Dogs Playing Poker” paintings:

Everyone knows them, those absurd gatherings of different breeds of dogs smoking cigars, drinking whisky and beer, and playing poker as though they were human. You don’t even have to play poker to be familiar with the card-playing canines, regarded by some as the epitome of kitsch of lowbrow culture, by others as an effective, insightful commentary on the middle and upper classes. The images may well rank among the most iconic depictions of poker ever produced by mainstream popular culture. (136-37)

Though *perhaps* not as “highbrow” as Georges de La Tour’s *Cheat with the Ace of Clubs* (ca. 1626-29) or *Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds* (1635), the eighteen “Dogs Playing Poker” paintings (1894-1910), according to Harris, reflect and comment upon the male-dominated culture of turn-of-the-century America, a theme he returns to many times throughout *Poker & Pop Culture*. In his analysis of the 1951 film-adaptation of Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, for example, Harris writes, “The story conspicuously uses poker to emphasize the stark, conflict-causing differences that can sometimes exist between men and women” (258). Contrast that dramatic use of poker to how the game is used as a central staging device in Neil Simon’s play and film, *The Odd Couple* (1965 and 1968 respectively), and one can begin to see how versatile and significant “iconic depictions” of poker can be.

Readers interested in poker will be hard pressed to find any resource as comprehensive as *Poker & Pop Culture*. If anything, Harris’s obvious desire to make his book an “easy” read means that he does not venture too far into the realm of pop-culture theory. Still, Harris’s fourteen-page bibliography and twenty-three pages of endnotes should satisfy any scholar looking for more information and resources about poker in popular culture.

Commenting on the surge of poker-related books published in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Harris notes that, “Taken together, the books provide ready evidence of the game’s growing popularity as well as its constant evolution and adaptability” (111). The same can certainly be said about *Poker & Pop Culture*, a much-welcomed and much-needed survey of “America’s favorite card game.”

Harris, Martin. *Poker & Pop Culture: Telling the Story of America’s Favorite Cards Game*. D & B Publishing, 2019.