Amanda Botfeld, *A Girl’s Guide to Poker* (D &B Publishing, 2020)

Reviewed by Jeremy Larance, West Liberty University

“Seeing a woman at poker tables is like flopping a set or making a flush—it

happens, but don’t count on it.”

 ---Amanda Botfeld

Given the sheer number of how-to-play-poker books published every year, one might reasonably ask if there is a compelling reason to read Amanda Botfeld’s *A Girl’s Guide to Poker* (2019), especially—one might also reasonably ask—if one is not a girl. A lot probably depends on what one thinks “A Girl’s Guide to…” means. Search for that phrase and you’ll easily find dozens of titles like

* *A Girl’s Guide to Hunting and Fishing*
* *A Modern Girl’s Guide to Personal Finance*
* *A Woman's Guide to Cannabis: Using Marijuana to Feel Better, Look Better, Sleep Better-and Get High Like a Lady*
* *A Woman's Guide to Spiritual Warfare: How to Protect Your Home, Family and Friends from Spiritual Darkness*
* *A Woman's Guide to the Wild: Your Complete Outdoor Handbook*
* *The Woman's Guide to Running for Office and Changing the World*

Most of these books are obviously published under the assumption that women want guides that will help then navigate topics stereotypically reserved for, or typically only enjoyed by, men. And, not surprisingly, *A Girl’s Guide to Poker* is not the first guide for women who are interested in participating in the male-dominated culture of poker.

In 2002, Laura A. Van Vleet and G. L. Norris published *Playing with the Big Boys: A Woman’s Guide to Poker* in which they write, “We have taken these games, demystified them, and redefined them in an easy-to-follow manner, all with a decidedly feminine twist.” Over three quarters of the book, however, is little more than a collection of rules for various forms of poker, mostly wild-card games that the “Big Boys” would probably not even consider authentic poker. There is very little strategy and not much of a “feminine twist” beyond referring to the players as “Goddesses” and expounding on trivial aspects of poker like good luck charms and pre-game rituals. “These are the mysterious and magical, the winsome and slightly absurd elements of Poker,” they write, “They are felt and seen with the inner eye, and though not tangible as other facets of the game, they should never be fully discounted.” In other words, the authors openly reason that “A Woman’s Guide to Poker” does not mean actually playing “*with* the big boys” as much as it means to embrace trifling aspects of the game.

This is where Botfeld’s *A Girl’s Guide to Poker* differs. Her guide *is* written for women, but it could just as easily be a valuable guide to any gender. “I never set out to write a ‘women’s’ poker book,” she writes, “I simply wrote it in my own voice.”

 When I first spoke to a female poker pro about writing *A Girl’s Guide to Poker,* she liked the idea but wanted to make sure it wasn’t…well…stupid. (I believe her word was “diminutive.”)

 “Like pink razors?” I replied.

 “Exactly”, she said.

 Feminine, but also sharp.

Her “Girl’s Guide to...” does not hinge on the idea that one needs to trivialize a subject to give it a “feminine twist.” She is, instead, attempting to help women find their voices at the poker table, rejecting decades of chauvinism and exclusion while, at the same time, embracing more feminine characteristics like intuition and receptiveness. Women, she suggests, are simply more confident in their ability to use their “social and/or emotional intelligence” than men, making it easier for them to “learn people” before they “learn poker.” She stresses the point that although poker “is very math-oriented and utilizes skills that are traditionally ‘guyish,’ creative, connected, right-brain thinking is a major asset.” The best way to utilize that asset, she argues, is to turn the game into a story: “Whenever you’re playing poker, ask yourself what story you’re telling.”

Section titles throughout *A Girl’s Guide to Poker* emphasize story-telling aspects of the game: “Tell Me a Story,” “Continue the Story,” “A Tale of Two Stories,” “A Story…,” “Plot Twist,” “Alternate Ending,” “The Sequel,” “What makes a good poker story?,” and--in a nod to her profession as a journalist--“Author’s Choice.” Botfeld is certainly not the first poker author to make this connection to learning how to play poker and learning how to read (people, cards, etc.), but her emphasis on a woman’s perspective to storytelling

is unique and convincing.

Unfortunately, it is worth noting that the visuals in *A Girl’s Guide to Poker* do, at times, detract from her premise. While this might seem nitpicky, there are literally photos on every other page, making it clear that someone, either the publisher or Botfeld herself, felt this was necessary. This would not be so problematic if it weren’t for the fact that the grand majority of these images are clearly cheap stock photos that often have little to nothing to do with the text. In a section about checking, for example, the accompanying photo is of a woman (clearly a model) working on a laptop and drinking coffee in her pristine office. To be fair, she *might* be checking while playing online poker, but the next image of a stoic woman (also clearly a model) sitting in a dark alleyway with a pistol in her hand is even more disconcerting. Again, if not for the overwhelming number of these stock photos, it would be easy to dismiss such things as trivial, but they do make the book look more amateurish than the quality of the writing deserves.

But the question remains, why read *A Girl’s Guide to Poker* when so many guides are already available? Is it as comprehensive as Doyle Brunson’s magnum opus, *Super/System*? Certainly not. But as a poker primer, you could do a lot worse, especially in relation to the fundamentals of Texas Hold’em. Little is said about other forms of poker, but, as Botfeld notes, Texas Hold’em is what most people think of today when they think of poker, and, thanks to the popularity of televised Texas Hold’em tournaments, most casual fans will likely cut their poker teeth playing in a low-stakes tournament.

In the end, reading Botfeld’s guide purely for strategy would be a mistake. What truly sets this guide apart, and what makes it an interesting read, is the style and the quality of the writing itself: “Told with a female flair and girlish glam” while “teaching the ins and outs of the game with style, sophistication, and moxie.” Like many of the best poker writers (James McManus, Maria Konnikova, et al.), Botfield is a journalist whose skills as a writer make her an exceptionally effective professor of poker, regardless of her student’s gender. Her emphasis on style is what makes Botfeld’s manual an unique and entertaining read, even for someone not all that interested in learning how to play poker. “The key to good poker,” she reminds us, “is storytelling.”