

Journal Information

Journal ID (publisher-id): jgi

ISSN: 1910-7595

Publisher: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Article Information

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Publication date: February 2001

Publisher Id: jgi.2001.3.12

DOI: 10.4309/jgi.2001.3.12

Reviews

Book Review: Betting the House: Winners, Losers and the Politics of Canada's Gambling Obsession

By Brian Hutchinson. (1999).

Toronto, ON: Viking Penguin, 264 pages. Hardcover

price \$32 Cdn. ISBN: 067-088-586X.

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The first and only time I was in a casino, I was 12 years old. I was on holiday with my parents travelling from Vancouver to California with a stopover in Reno. There isn't much to Reno — certainly there wasn't then — but I can say that the flashing lights, and the men with shiny, studded white shirts with matching Stetson hats and heavily mascara'd wives made a huge impression on me. So did the pair of elderly women clutching plastic margarine tubs half filled with quarters. They lunged in unison at my mother screaming “don't touch *that*, it's *ours!*” when she tentatively approached a vacant slot machine with \$2 worth of coins in her hand.

That memory came back to me as I read *Betting the House*, a recent Canadian book that explores the psychology of gambling, the business interests that propel it and the not-quite-innocent relationship between all levels of government and casino developers. Written by journalist and self-acknowledged naive gambler Brian Hutchinson, the book offers a brief history of the gaming industry, a cross-country round-up of gambling's rabid grip on governments and gamblers alike, and finally, some proposals to end what Hutchinson calls “a feverish experiment that's

gone wildly, madly, out of control.” It also takes a peek at the ephemeral highs of winning and the more common desperation of those, like the two who accosted my mother, who in their quest to score, lose not only a respect for others, but possibly their life savings.

If Hutchinson's research has value, the citizens of Canada, along with the vast majority of its governments are slowly going mad with wager fever. As evidence, he offers anecdotes about people like Mary, a happily married, gum-chewing government worker who has lost close to \$20,000 in the past two years playing the slots. When asked why she still keeps at it, Mary exclaims: “Because it's fun. It's exciting. When I walk out of here with nothing, I feel alive, like I've done something really, really naughty. My heart pounds every time. Maybe it's like a drug. After a while you kind of crave it.”

No less distressing are Hutchinson's findings that governments at almost every level, strapped for cash as costs rise and revenues fall, take advantage of Mary and others like her, seeing the introduction of massive 24-hour casinos as a genie's proffered wish come true. No matter that crime rates rise when a casino is introduced to a community, or that problem gambling behaviours balloon in people who are ill-equipped to pay rent once their bets are placed and typically lost. In the mad dash to pad their coffers, Hutchinson's compelling evidence that politicians of every political hue look with greedy reverence to the gaming industry to pull them out of cash-flow wreckages of their own making is cause for alarm.

I'd be bluffing if I said the book was a great read. The truth is, it's rather depressing and mildly tedious. On the one hand, Hutchinson is adept at sorting fact from fiction, much in the way a croupier neatly sorts and divvies up poker chips. But — to this reader at least — the thoroughness of his research comes at the expense of an engaging narrative. In some chapters there are so many statistics stacked one upon the other that it's hard to stay with the story. And my hope to learn more about why so many Canadians gamble was dashed by simplistic explanations that only led me to more unanswered questions.

However, when Hutchinson shares a more personal glimpse into the world of lotteries and blackjack, either by divulging his own forays into games of chance or moves from the purely informational into tale-telling about the lengths people will go in search of a jackpot, the book takes on the slight edgy feel of a page-turning thriller. To enjoy the author's gift for rousing my interest in some chapters only lose it in others was a disappointment.

Overall, I did like much of what the book offered simply because Hutchinson writes well. With a practised ease, he can shift from quoting Freud, who claimed gambling was a “secular religion for the obsessional neurotic,” to recounting how he became “a croupier's dream” by virtue of his substantial losses at the gaming tables. I

enjoyed his recounting of events in the life of Don Idiens, for instance, which began in the sleepy town of BC's Campbell River and ended in Vegas, when the small-time Canadian gambler was discovered dead, with part of his naked, battered corpse wrapped in plastic. In this sequence, Hutchinson demonstrates his talent at braiding together skeins of drama and detail into a tidy tale.

Given the depth of Hutchinson's study and his carefully articulated evidence that government is brashly promoting gambling yet is silent on the rising tide of despair left in gambling's wake, one would expect a militant call to action. Instead, readers are left with a handful of ideas, spelled out in less than two pages at the book's close. A moratorium on further casino development, elimination of gambling advertisements, funding of problem gaming programs and outlawing video lottery terminals are his recommended efforts to slow down expansion of Canada's gaming industry.

In the end, families, futures and finances will continue to fall victim to gambling's greedy appetite for winning at all costs, regardless of what measures are taken. It matters not, to my mind, if another casino never sees the light of day or if all the one-armed bandits are rounded up and buried in a big, deep hole. Because on the horizon is a growing swell of Internet gambling that will likely prove difficult to suppress. And this likely means, if Hutchinson's warnings are to be believed, that governments who have walked down gambling's plush red carpets and found them dusted with gold, will find it easier to figure out how to get a piece of that action than to U-turn back to smarter, less hazardous routes for paying their bills.

This book review was not peer-reviewed.

Received: September 7, 2000

Book Review: Diary of a Powerful Addiction

By Alexandra King. (1999).

Winnipeg, MB: Crown Publishing, 256 pages.

Approximately \$22.95 Cdn and \$15.95 US. ISBN: 0-9685470-0-1

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Alexandra King grew up in a farming community in Manitoba, where poverty, hard work and a belief that women do not need an education were the norm. She left school at 17, worked as a waitress, then took a secretarial course and found employment at Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. During these early years, King married. Her husband was a gambler and over time his gambling worsened. King worked, raised two children with little help, and put herself through university on a part-time basis. Ultimately she found the courage to leave her husband of 14 years, convinced that gambling was “evil” and vowed never again to marry a gambler. King married again six years later. She had completed her BA and been promoted to a position in Human Resources. Life was good and full of promise.

King's world began to crumble when she was laid off after 22 years on the job. Forty-eight years old, angry, discouraged, disappointed in job search efforts and frightened about her future, King found her self-esteem and optimism plummeting. It was then that she discovered video lottery terminals (VLTs) at a local bar. She played and won. Despite everything she had been through while living with her husband, she began to gamble. She writes, “It was like a powerful drug that altered my mood instantly...the VLTs became my escape from my present reality.”

Diary of a Powerful Addiction is King's account of the next six years as an obsession with gambling creates chaos in her life. She details the financial drains, the escalating tensions and deterioration of her relationship, her aborted attempts to regain control through Gamblers Anonymous and a brief stint with the Addiction Service of Manitoba. King walks us through her lapses, painting a landscape of emotional turmoil – depression, self-hatred, fear, anger and thoughts of suicide. Her feelings are compounded as her husband, in the face of his ineffective efforts to make her stop gambling, also begins to gamble.

King eventually stops gambling. The last section of the book contains her reflections on the gambling experience and healing process, offering advice and support to others who may encounter problems with gambling. Liberally dispersed throughout the writing is King's critical commentary on the role of the government in creating and profiting from gambling addiction.

Diary of a Powerful Addiction is well worth reading. As a candid autobiographical account of a female slot player, it is a unique and welcome addition to the gambling literature. The socio-economic pressures bearing down on King, the emotional vulnerability she experiences, the social pressure to gamble, and the rapid progression into problems are but a few of the ways in which she represents many female “escape” gamblers.

King offers some simple and poignant descriptions of intrapsychic duality,

describing the conflict between the “monster” within and the logical part of herself. She notes the emotional hijacking of her reason. She describes her developing immunity to losses and her strategies to support her denial and keep her gambling a secret. She exposes the violation of her own value system to enable her gambling. She cites psychology literature to elucidate the addictive process created by intermittent reinforcement. She offers an insider report on the process that traps the gambler into the repetitive cycle of gambling, remorse and temptations. King also describes with graphic accuracy, the mental mechanics that perpetuate the problem.

While worth reading, *Diary of a Powerful Addiction* is not easy to read. The retrospective diary format of much of the book is artificial, unconvincing and lacking in passion. The most emotionally powerful piece in the book is the poem written by her daughter Nadine. The entries do not elicit empathy for King's emotional turmoil, but create a sense of disbelief at her boringly repetitive and mindless visits to the machines despite the consequences. Perhaps this underscores the horror of the addiction as we witness how unconscious and automatic gambling becomes, but the writing fails to convey a sense of struggle. Nor does King provide a clear account of the dynamics of what seems to be her almost instantaneous cessation of gambling. She mentions two critical factors – the unconditional, non-judgmental support of a feminist counsellor and the therapeutic benefits of refocusing her energy, in her case, on writing this book. While these are key and critical elements of change for many women, it would have been helpful to have more detail about the process.

The reader needs to work too hard to know what was helpful and to get around the sense that King did it on her own. Perhaps this would not be problematic if King did not assume a role of mentor, critic and adviser to others having gambling problems. She shifts from sharing personal stories in the diary to what comes across as finger-wagging – authoritatively using “you” in the last section of the book. This serves to alienate rather than invite self-awareness and change. She does not take responsibility for her gambling behaviours, but presents as critical and blaming of the government and current treatment programs for her addiction. Finally, she presents as her own models of addiction and recovery what one suspects have been seeded and influenced by her exposure to treatment and newspaper articles (her primary form of research). If she is attempting to be academic, it behooves her to acknowledge the work of others rather than present them as her thoughts.

Professionals and students who would like to walk through the experience of a woman's addiction to slots will find *Diary of a Powerful Addiction* enlightening. It is an account of a resourceful, determined woman who fought to overcome obstacles and improve her life, only to be blindsided by an addiction to gambling. The book

dramatically illustrates many of the stressors that distinguish women's experience of gambling problems from men's; issues around autonomy, guilt and shame connected to children, relationship problems, the empty nest, aging and powerlessness. It speaks to the male bias inherent in current treatment programs and the special treatment needs of many women. It would serve well in a study curriculum. Whether it would effectively inspire and guide other female problem gamblers out of the woods is questionable.

This book review was not peer-reviewed.

Received: August 31, 2000

Movie review: The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas (2000)

By Nigel Turner, PhD, Scientist

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Length: 91 minutes

Subject: An action version of the TV cartoon series. Comedy.

Ratings: Canada: in Ontario F for Family, and in Quebec G for General

US: PG for language and innuendo

Studio: Universal Pictures

URLs:

-production information:

<http://movieweb.com/movie/flintstones/flintsto.htm>

-promotional material: <http://www.vivarockvegas.com>

When I first saw ads for the movie *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas*, I was rather puzzled. Las Vegas is an adult playground for sex and gambling; not a child oriented city. Is this movie a *Joe Camel*, trying to get pre-teens hooked on gambling, or could it be an attempt to prevent gambling? I was intrigued.

For my review I took along my three older children; Naomi is 11 3/4 years, Justin, 7 1/2, and Ian is nearly 4. My children do have a somewhat heightened awareness of

gambling, but otherwise appear to be fairly typical for their age and gender.

The movie, released by Universal and directed by Brian Levant, is set before Fred (Mark Addy) and Wilma (Kristen Johnston) are married. As the movie begins Gazoo (Alan Cumming), a short, flying alien, is sent to earth to investigate mating rituals. Fred and Barney (Stephen Baldwin) are discussing their new jobs at the rock quarry and their future plans when Gazoo crash lands nearby and starts to follow them around. Meanwhile Wilma is dissatisfied with her life at home and runs off to Bedrock where she meets Betty (Jane Krakowski) and finds a job at the Bronto King restaurant. Fred and Barney meet Betty and Wilma and they go to a carnival where Wilma and Fred fall in love. Fred is surprised to find out that Wilma's family is rich. However, Chip Rockefeller (Thomas Gibson), Wilma's former boyfriend, wants Wilma back. Wilma's mother (Joan Collins) prefers Chip. Chip invites Fred, Wilma, Barney and Betty down to his Rock Vegas casino.

Once at the casino, Fred has a remarkable winning streak at craps. Barney tries to get him to cash out, but he continues to play, dreaming about impressing Wilma. Meanwhile, we learn that Chip needs to marry Wilma for her money to payoff the mob. Chip invites Fred to the high rollers table and offers him a casino line of credit. In the middle of Fred's winning streak Chip switches a lever and Fred starts to lose. After all his clams are gone, Fred asks Chip for more credit. Chip tells Fred that he will erase his one million clam debt if Fred leaves without Wilma. Fred refuses so Chip has Fred framed for stealing Wilma's pearl necklace. Gazoo shows up and reveals Chip's plot to Fred and Barney who then escape and save the day. Although the plot is never actually resolved, in the end they live happily ever after.

The movie utilises the stereotype of the mob involvement in gambling. Obviously, Rock Vegas is modelled after the old Vegas of Bugsy Siegel, not the new corporate Vegas.

The movie glamorises Las Vegas and gambling. But it also suggests that casinos cheat players. The movie shows Fred lose it all, not because of random chance and a house edge, but because of cheating. Will kids come away believing it is possible to win if you can figure out the casino's scheme and quit before the 'Lose' switch is pulled?

During the movie Naomi watched attentively. Her expressions ranged from smiling to laughing. Justin, however, sat still looking somewhat bored, and Ian had trouble sitting still. At one point Ian said, "I hate this movie."

Naomi liked the movie. She liked the fact that it showed what really happens when you gamble. First you win, then you lose. She apparently believes that the portrayal of how casinos cheat was accurate. She liked the bright lights and

thought that Rock Vegas looked cool. She liked the fact that everything turned out good in the end. She liked Dino and liked seeing dinosaurs being used as tools such as vacuum cleaners. She thought it was funny in parts, but there was too much mushy gushy stuff. Naomi rated it as a 6.5 out of 10. She isn't interested in going again, but would go if given a ticket. She would like to gamble in Rock Vegas.

Justin, liked the very beginning, but otherwise found it pretty boring. His favourite character was Dino. He felt there were too many gambling and love scenes. He liked the animated animal characters such as an octopus that gives backrubs, a roller coaster made up of long-neck-dinosaurs, and a pterodactyl aeroplane. Wouldn't want to see it again. On a scale of 1 to 10 he gave it a '1.7.' (Do seven year olds understand decimals?) The movie did not make him want to gamble.

Finally, Ian didn't have much to say, but when I asked if he'd like to see it again, he said 'yes.'

I'm still puzzled over exactly who the movie was aimed at. It is rated as F for family. It has little violence and no sex, so parents might find it acceptable for young children. However, it has too little action or kid-relevant humour to hold their interest. The emphasis on the love story of Fred and Wilma would perhaps suggest a pre-teen and teenage girls' audience, but such youths would consider this "Flintstones" too juvenile.

The movie was at times funny, and the animation and puppets were integrated well into the movie. Personally, I found the movie a bit boring, but by no means the worst kids film I've had to endure. I'd give it a 6 on a scale from 1 to 10.

In general, the movie does not appear to be a Joe Camel, but it's hardly an anti-gambling message either. The gambling serves mainly as plot vehicle that allows Chip to gain control over Fred. Perhaps it is simply a sign of the times that the producers would think nothing of adding gambling as a key plot element in a children's movie. On the plus side, it portrays how wins, financial need, and the desire for respect can lead to problem gambling. It shows how gambling can lead to losing. On the other hand, the wins and the losses portrayed in the movie were the result of non-random cheating that were specific to one person and one situation; this will not help a young audience to understand gambling.

This movie review was not peer-reviewed.

Received: June 1, 2000

Article Categories:

- Review