

Bringing Down the House: The Inside Story of Six MIT Students Who Took Vegas for Millions Study Guide

Bringing Down the House: The Inside Story of Six MIT Students Who Took Vegas for Millions by Ben Mezrich

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Plot Summary

From c. June 1994 to c. June 1998 Kevin Lewis, an MIT graduate student, joins forces with other MIT students to operate an organized card-counting team. The team makes weekend trips to Las Vegas and other casinos and uses a variety of strategies to beat the casinos at their own game. Lewis and the other team members split the winnings and make a fortune, until they are identified by casino security and invited to leave the premises for good.

The book is essentially a biographical portrayal of about four years in the life of Kevin Lewis; the book also contains many elements of fiction. For example, Kevin Lewis is a fictionalized and renamed representation of a real person while all of the other characters are composites of more than one real person. Lewis is a graduate student at MIT and is recruited by some of his roommates to participate in a group of organized card counters. The group travels to Las Vegas or some other gambling destination on most weekends and uses a variety of techniques to win at blackjack. Lewis is introduced to the techniques and then trained in their use. He then begins working with the group and eventually becomes one of their best players. Over time, the group's membership changes as older members are excluded and new members are recruited. After about one year, Lewis is the head of his own team within the organization.

Most of the members of the group devote themselves entirely to counting cards and gambling at blackjack, but Lewis pursues a professional career outside of gambling. Some of his team members also hold down normal jobs. As time goes on, a natural rift develops between the full-time gamblers and the weekend gamblers, and eventually Kevin is excluded from the group. He takes a few team members with him and they continue operating on their own. Occasional conflict occurs when members of the various teams encounter each other in casinos.

Eventually the casino security teams wise up to the teams' unnatural luck and begin to investigate individual team members. The strategy of playing in teams proves successful, however, and it takes quite some time for most casinos to realize who the various team members are. Because card counting is, technically, not cheating those detected are not arrested—but they are excluded from the casino, permanently. After several years Lewis has been excluded from numerous casinos and his face is well-known. Meanwhile his professional career is burgeoning and he finally and reluctantly decides to give up card counting. At that time he contacts Ben Mezrich, the author, and the two collaborate to create the current book.



Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4

Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 Summary and Analysis

From c. June 1994 to c. June 1998 Kevin Lewis, an MIT graduate student, joins forces with other MIT students to operate an organized card-counting team. The team makes weekend trips to Las Vegas and other casinos and uses a variety of strategies to beat the casinos at their own game. Lewis and the other team members split the winnings and make a fortune, until they are identified by casino security and invited to leave the premises for good.

The book incorporates numerous elements commonly found in fiction but atypical for non-fiction biographical writing. For example, Chapter 1 of the book opens in medias res, with Kevin Lewis gambling in a Las Vegas casino and taking betting cues from Jill, a card-counter and spotter. The opening chapter consists of fictionalized dramatic action meant to capture the experience of counting cards while playing blackjack, winning huge sums of money, and beating the house. Following the introductory chapter the book presents two interleaved narrative threads with individual chapters being devoted to the 'past' or the 'present'; in the narrative, the 'present' indicates c. 2000 when the author, Ben Mezrich, began writing the book. Six of the thirty-two chapters in the book are devoted to the 'present,' and these chapters often contain autobiographical elements. The remaining twenty-six chapters consider events which transpired from c. June 1994 to c. June 1998, and focus on the biography and experiences of Lewis and some of his acquaintances. Each chapter is clearly introduced with a location and time period, except for the first chapter. Note the introductory matter states "[t]he names of many of the characters and locations in this book have been changed, as have certain physical characteristics and other descriptive details. Some of the events and characters are also composites of several individual events or persons." For example, later editions of the book add supplementary end materials that identify Kevin Lewis as Jeff Ma; in fact, Lewis is the only person in the book based almost wholly on a single individual. While this technique unquestionably delivers an exciting and enjoyable book, the work has been widely criticized as being essentially a work of fiction.

Chapter 2 begins the main narrative thread set in the 'present' with Mezrich and Lewis performing in-person research into the lifestyle of the professional card counter. In the chapter, Lewis tails Mezrich as the author proceeds through airport security wearing \$100,000 in cash strapped to various portions of his body. Mezrich is highly nervous and fears being caught, though it is unclear whether he is doing anything illegal. After proceeding through security without incident he is joined by Lewis who then recounts a few similar stories of smuggling money or casino chips through security on a nearly weekly basis for about four years. Lewis portrays life as a professional card-counter as glamorous, exciting, lucrative, and dangerous; Mezrich's book certainly supports this tone. Mezrich recounts how he first met Lewis c. 1998 when Lewis' career as a professional card counter was more-or-less concluded; Lewis suggested that Mezrich, a



budding author, could produce a biographical account of his life—the book itself is the result of that meeting.

Chapter 3 is set in Boston during June 1994. Lewis is introduced as a brilliant pre-med student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Lewis is physically fit, highly intelligent, gifted in mathematics, and of Asian extraction; his family is socially conservative. Lewis is losing interest in becoming a doctor and yearns for something more exciting in life. He spends much of his free time competitively swimming. Lewis' birthday is c. May 1974, making his twenty years old at this point of the book. Lewis rooms with two other young men, Jason Fisher and Andre Martinez. Fisher is large, works out a lot, and is of Asian extraction. Martinez is 5'6" tall, with nearly black eyes and of mixed Asian and Hispanic extraction. Fisher is outspoken while Martinez is flashy. Both men have dropped out of school and begun to pursue an unorthodox lifestyle of very late hours and frequent extended weekend trips. Lewis likes and trusts them both, but begins to feel they are involved in something shady. When they repeatedly come home with sushi in the early morning and huge piles of cash, Lewis begins to question them on their activities. Fisher and Martinez suggest that Lewis accompany them on the next weekend and he hesitantly agrees, lured by the promise of ringside seats at a professional boxing match.

Chapter 4 is set in Atlantic City during June 1994. Lewis and Martinez fly to Atlantic City where they are met by a casino host and taken to the hotel in a limousine. Lewis is impressed but troubled by the fact that they are traveling under false names. Martinez takes Lewis to the blackjack tables and freely advises his play. Lewis wins money but Martinez wins huge sums. After a few hours of play they wander the casino and locate Fisher, whom they pretend not to know. As they watch, Fisher wins huge sums of money. Martinez explains that Fisher can count cards, track packets of known-good cards through shuffles, and cut the deck to any depth desired. Along with several other skills, Fisher uses these skills to win heavily. Lewis at first suggests this is cheating but Martinez assures him it is not; they do not use any device, and they do not influence the outcome of the game—and hence they are not cheating by the legal definition. Instead, they are using their skills and intelligence to weigh the game in their own favor—heavily in their own favor. Lewis finally understands his friends' nocturnal lifestyle and constant trips to gambling destinations.



Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8

Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5 is set in Boston during September of 1994. Lewis swims with passion and contemplates card counting. He does basic research on card counting and concludes that it can provide, at best, a 2% rate of return which is insufficient to be attractive. He also thinks about his girlfriend Felicia. She is described as 5'6" with a swimmer's body, and is an MIT engineering student. Lewis and Felicia are close and he anticipates introducing her to his family. His reverie is interrupted by Fisher and Martinez who take him across campus and introduce him to a man named Micky Rosa. Rosa matriculated to MIT at the age of sixteen and is one of MIT's youngest-ever graduates. He wears glasses, has disheveled hair and bad teeth. Rosa is known to Lewis as a pioneer in blackjack card counting and, indeed, Rosa welcomes Lewis into a classroom where he says he is teaching 'Blackjack 101.' The room has seven other people: Kianna Lam, a petite and pretty Asian woman from Taiwan studying electrical engineering; Michael Sloan, a blonde tennis jock; Brian Hale, thin, smart, and a local boy; and four men Lewis does not know—Chet, Doug, Allan, and Jon. After a brief talk, Rosa invites Lewis to join the organization known informally as the MIT blackjack team. Lewis states card counting is a shady business, but Kianna counters that they are freedom fighters while Martinez and Fisher argue they are just like Robin Hood, stealing from the rich. Rosa explains that unlike all other forms of gambling, blackjack is a game with a memory inasmuch as once a card is played it does not recur for numerous hands. Card counting in Las Vegas is not technically cheating, and is not illegal. Rosa explains that the team is composed of investors—who front the betting money—and players who actually play the game. Martinez and Fisher have earned about \$100,000 each over the past six months. Lewis is intrigued and agrees to join the team; this is a major turning point in the narrative, as Lewis' decision informs the remainder of the book.

Chapter 6 is set in Boston during October of 1994. Martinez explains the team strategy to Lewis. The team is composed of people in one of three roles—spotters play marathon sessions, place minimum bets, and count the cards. When the deck becomes favorable, spotters call in gorillas. Gorillas place huge bets, act drunk or naive, and then leave the table when the spotter determines the deck is no longer favorable. The third type of person, a Big Player—often noted as a BP during the book—does everything and operates more autonomously. Lewis spends many weeks practicing the methods of card counting which are explained in pieces throughout the book. He learns to calculate the odds of winning, calculate the running count, estimate how many cards are left in the blackjack shoe, and to calculate the true count. The chapter presents some technical information on blackjack odds and how the true count and running count can be used to win at blackjack. Lewis also learns several body-language signals and many code-words used by the spotters to communicate the running count. After months Lewis is subjected to a series of tests and passes easily. He is ready for the final test before being accepted as a team member.



Chapter 7 is also set in Boston during October of 1994. Lewis is given an address in Chinatown and proceeds there with a bankroll. The place is a secret, or underground, Chinese casino. Lewis enters, plays blackjack, places bets, and begins to win. Then Fisher grabs Lewis and hauls him into a backroom, demanding to know the count. A flustered Lewis tells the count and passes the test. Fisher explains the casino knows what's going on and that the whole process was a controlled test. Lewis has passed the final test and is now a member of the team. Much of Chapter 7 is devoted to creating the texture of a casino and the tone of excitement Lewis feels when betting—and in particular winning—at blackjack. Lewis' subsequent successful integration into the team dominates the middle segment of the book; his winning even during the practice casino run foreshadows his subsequent huge successes at real gambling.

Chapter 8 is set in Las Vegas in the 'present' day. In the chapter, the author interviews Damon Zimonowski at an indoor shooting range. Zimonowski is a long-time Las Vegas resident, having risen from security guard to blackjack dealer to pit boss to shift manager at several major casinos. Zimonowski briefly recounts the history of Las Vegas and then contemplates cheating in general and card counting specifically. He agrees it is not illegal but also states that the casinos are not entirely victims—card counters convince regular gamblers that they can win at blackjack, even though they can't. Zimonowski concludes that in any event, Las Vegas always wins over the gamblers no matter how skilled they are. Zimonowski does not recur in the book and the chapter has little connection with the remainder of the narrative: in essence, it provides an alternative point of view to card counting.



Chapters 9, 10, 11, and 12

Chapters 9, 10, 11, and 12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9 is set in an airplane traveling from Boston to Las Vegas during November of 1994. Martinez and Lewis sit together. Martinez is relaxed but Lewis is nervous on his first trip to count cards in Las Vegas. Lewis has a huge amount of cash strapped to various parts of his body. He feels like he is living like James Bond even though he has lied to Felicia about his destination. Martinez tells Lewis that during their entire time inside any casino they will be watched on surveillance cameras and must therefore never drop out of character. He also discusses the Plymouth Associates, an anti-cheating organization that is hired by several casinos. The Plymouth Associates publish the Plymouth Facebook that has photographs, descriptions, and write-ups of known cheaters—Rosa is in the Plymouth Facebook, making it impossible for him to personally gamble. Lewis later realizes that Rosa's multiple bans have forced Rosa to organize the blackjack team to continue his own lifestyle. Martinez suggests that if Lewis is caught counting cards, he will most-likely simply be asked to leave the casino and never return. He may, however, be taken to a back room and closely questioned. Martinez jokingly suggests that Lewis never take a ride into the desert with a man named Vinnie; in reality, the casinos are businesses that do not want adverse publicity and thus their most likely course of action is to simply bar card counters from future play.

Chapter 10 is set in Las Vegas immediately after the airplane lands. Lewis deplanes and meets the other team members. Rosa hands out fake identification and credit cards and instructs the team members that they cannot appear to know each other at any time. He then organizes them into units and assigns shifts and casinos. Lewis removes the cash in the restroom and it is divided up among the players. Lewis and Martinez then travel to the MGM Grand where he sees other team members playing. Lewis acts as a spotter and plays blackjack for several hours, placing minimum bets and waiting for his card shoe's count to become favorable. When it does he calls in Martinez with a secret sign. Martinez wins big and that night the eight players divide the evening's take of \$20,000. The next day they return to the MGM Grand and Lewis plays as a Gorilla—he waits until called to a table, then places big bets on every hand until the spotter signals him to leave. He wins a lot of money, meets a few celebrities, and then goes to a boxing match. Lewis finds the lifestyle exciting and enjoyable. While gambling he notices Sanjay Das, a fellow MIT student, at another blackjack table. This heavily foreshadows later developments in the book.

Chapter 11 is set in Weston, Massachusetts, on Thanksgiving Day, 1994. Lewis and Felicia spend the holiday at Lewis' parents' house. The family is introduced; they are a proper, upper middle class family in an established neighborhood. Lewis' father Peter is respectable and formal, of mixed Asian descent, and financially successful. Peter is anti-gambling and thinks that card counting is cheating. Lewis' mother is successful as a homemaker and cook. Felicia impresses the family and in turn finds them appealing. Lewis realizes that he is living a double life and the strain begins to tell on him as he



weaves webs of lies to keep his family and Felicia in the dark about his gambling weekends. Chapter 12 spans six months through May of 1995, and continues to develop the theme of living a double life. By Christmas 1994 Lewis is a Big Player, bringing in huge sums of money for the team. He is used to using fake identification, fake identities, and fake credit cards. He lives the life of a high roller in Las Vegas and has become a professional gambler, winning \$35,000 on one hand on one occasion—on another occasion he loses \$100,000 in two hands. Lewis meets Teri Pollack, a Ram's cheerleader, and they begin a sexual affair that spans many months but consists only of meeting for weekends in Las Vegas. Then, on New Year's Eve, 1994, he is formally ejected from Bally's and asked to not return. He finds the banning a curious mix of excitement, resentment, and fear.



Chapters 13, 14, 15, and 16

Chapters 13, 14, 15, and 16 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13 is set in Chicago during May of 1995. Before leaving Boston for a Chicago gambling trip Lewis breaks up with Felicia. The break-up comes as a surprise to her and Lewis can't explain his rationale because his entire life with her has become a web of lies. After dumping her he flies to Chicago and goes to the Grand Victoria Casino, a paddle-boat casino and the biggest in Illinois. There he plays blackjack and makes huge winnings along with the rest of the team. During the trip it becomes evident there is tension between Rosa and Fisher—Fisher thinking Rosa is too controlling and takes too much money as an investor. Chapter 14 is set in Boston during June, 1995. The team holds a meeting and Fisher demands that the team expand. Rosa is cautious but agrees to add a few new spotters. The team discusses who they should add and a lengthy discussion about race ensues. Lewis agrees that most gamblers are Asians or Hispanics, and that the new recruits should reflect that. Lewis suggests Andrew Tay, who is half Slavic and half Asian. Tay is 6'5" with a narrow face and usually spiky hair. He is a swimmer, an MIT student, and a loyal friend to Lewis. Lewis and Martinez easily recruit Tay who already enjoys gambling. Then they recruit two more common friends.

Chapter 15 is set in Foxwood Casino, Connecticut, during the 'present' day. The author meets and then interviews Jill Taylor, one of the other individuals Lewis and Martinez recruited. Jill was then married to Dylan Taylor, the third recruit. Jill is described fully in physical terms—petite, weighing about ninety pounds, blue eyes, red hair, sex appeal, with a Nordic face and sharp jaw. Dylan is twenty-six—the oldest one on the team except Rosa—with an advertising career. After the events described in the book Jill and Dylan divorced. The author watches Jill play blackjack and sees her effortlessly win money without arousing suspicion. He then interviews her. She discusses the technical and legal difficulties of earning huge amounts of cash, noting that she and Dylan always reported their cash income to the IRS to remain fully legal. She also comments that merging the life of gambling while attending Harvard Business School was challenging. However, she found the Las Vegas lifestyle appealing and fun.

Chapter 16 spans from July to October, 1995. The three new recruits—Tay, Jill, and Dylan—become Kevin's spotters. They work together well and make lots of money. Lewis moves from Boston to Chicago and takes a job in banking for a few months. He finds the two lifestyles don't merge well and makes more money gambling, so he gives up his job and moves back to Boston. Lewis becomes an investor and continues his sexual no-strings relationship with Pollack. He immerses himself in Las Vegas with Fisher and Martinez, and they enjoy partying with strippers. On one occasion Lewis again sees Sanjay Das and mentions it to Fisher. Fisher complains that Rosa is running at least two blackjack teams—their team and the other team, of which Das is a member. Fisher refers to the other team as the amphibians; the amphibians calls Fisher's and Lewis' team the reptiles. Fisher then complains that Rosa is not being fair, open, or

entirely honest with all of them. Lewis realizes that the rift between Fisher and Rosa is becoming significant.



Chapters 17, 18, 19, and 20

Chapters 17, 18, 19, and 20 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 17 is set in Boston on Halloween, 1995. The team of gamblers assembles at Micky Rosa's apartment to discuss the future. Lewis gawks at scantily-clad Halloween revelers on the way to the meeting. When the team members are assembled Fisher confronts Rosa and informs him that the students are splitting off from Rosa's organization—they will be pursuing card counting on their own. The decision appears unanimous and Rosa receives the news with a surprising amount of amicable advice. He does warn, however, that the lucrative period of success will not last forever. Indeed, Rosa's warning proves prescient as will be discussed beginning in Chapter 20.

Chapter 18 is set in Boston during November, 1995. Lewis decides to file all of his winnings as income with the IRS; other team members, notably Jill and Dylan, do the same. Lewis invests \$250,000 with the new team which is composed of twelve members divided into three squads of four players. Each squad has three spotters and one Big Player. Fisher is the leader of the organization. During one trip to the MGM Grand in Las Vegas the new team encounters the amphibians—Rosa's original team—and Lewis runs them out of the MGM Grand. Later, the team gambles at the Mohegan Sun in Connecticut.

Jill and a few others are worried about card counting at a casino located in an Indian Reservation, as the laws may be different—Fisher overrules the concern. During the action at Mohegan Sun Lewis wins \$40,000 on a single hand and the team brings in \$330,000 in a single weekend. Over the next weeks the team continues to win massive amounts of money and Lewis and Pollack pursue their sexual relationship. Lewis starts up a small company in Boston. The team then travels to Las Vegas and gets tickets to the Tyson-Holyfield fight. As the fight breaks down the entire casino erupts in a riot and many chips are stolen. The casino announces they will invalidate their old chips in a few days—the team has about \$200,000 in the chips. Knowing that cashing in that many chips by themselves will draw unwanted attention, the team enlists seven local strippers to cash in stacks of chips. Note that the segment of the book involving strippers cashing in chips has been criticized as being entirely fictional.

Chapter 19 is set in Las Vegas in the 'present' and portrays an interview between the author and a stripper named April. The interview is conducted in a strip club while a nude April performs a lap dance on the author—lurid details are provided. April somewhat corroborates the author's story about the chips and then states that nobody ever really wins in Las Vegas. Chapter 19 adds little to the book beyond a salacious portrayal of stripping. Note how the narrative focuses closely on April's body, objectifying her to a degree not found with authorial interviews with male individuals. This focus on female anatomy pervades the narrative; in general, males are described as capable and fast-thinking while females are described as sexual objects.



Chapter 20 is set in Las Vegas during the fall of 1997. Lewis, now twenty-five years old, works at his startup company job and splits his time gambling. The team gambles at New York, New York in Las Vegas and Lewis is ejected from the casino for card counting and barred from re-entry. Nearly simultaneously, Martinez is awakened from sleep in his hotel room, detained by anonymous security guards while his room is searched. Martinez is then ejected from the hotel with not-so-vague threats of bodily harm should he continue to count cards. Note that Martinez is in bed with a woman who is physically described even though she is entirely insignificant in the narrative. The team meets and surprisingly concludes that the two actions were coincidental. They proceed to the Rio casino where Lewis is nearly immediately ejected and barred from re-entry. Obviously, many casinos in Las Vegas have identified at least Lewis and Martinez. Chapter 20 marks a major turning point in the narrative; from this point forward the team will be increasingly unsuccessful because of security at various casinos.



Chapters 21, 22, 23, and 24

Chapters 21, 22, 23, and 24 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 21 is set in Boston during the fall of 1997. The team meets and openly discusses the recent multiple barring events. Lewis and some of the others realize that something fundamental has occurred but Fisher argues it's all just bad luck. During this period Jill and Dylan start to experience marital difficulties. The team travels to Chicago to gamble, in order to avoid Las Vegas for awhile. Even in Chicago, however, they are identified and ejected. Lewis and some others theorize the team has been identified by the Plymouth Associates. The Plymouth Associates are a company that identifies card counters and cheaters and then sells photographs and compiled information about those individuals to casinos. The compiled information is referred to as the Plymouth Facebook. The team theorizes that only Martinez and Lewis have been placed in the Facebook, but a few weeks later at the MGM Grand they realize that all of the spotters are also known card counters. The whole team has been compromised.

Chapter 22 is set in Las Vegas in the 'present' day. The author meets with Jake Eldridge, a fat surveillance expert. Eldridge demonstrates some advanced surveillance equipment used by casinos to detect cheaters and card counters and then notes that much more advanced devices exist or shortly will exist. Eldridge concludes that there is no way successfully to cheat or win over the medium-to-long term without being detected and caught. Chapter 23 is set in Boston on Valentine's Day, 1998. The team members meet and argue about the future. Most are convinced that their productive time as card counters is over. Then Martinez and Fisher appear dressed in costume and wearing many prosthetics to substantively alter their appearance. They convince the rest of the team that disguises and so forth can keep them productive gamblers. Chapter 24 is set in Las Vegas on President's Day, 1998. The team plays in disguises and prosthetics. However, Martinez is nevertheless detected and two anonymous security guards follow him back to his hotel room, break into the room, slightly rough him up, intimidate him, threaten him, and then leave. Martinez downplays the encounter and the team continues gambling throughout a weekend that ends up being quite lucrative. This section of the narrative details the team's somewhat successful efforts in avoiding detection. Even though they appear in the Plymouth Facebook they are not helpless—not every casino uses Plymouth Associates, and even those that do are sometimes unsuccessful in identifying the players through disguises and prosthetics. The chapters in this segment of the book are relatively short.



Chapters 25, 26, 27, and 28

Chapters 25, 26, 27, and 28 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 25 is set in Shreveport, Louisiana, during 1998. The team decides to try out new casinos in various places and travels to Shreveport, Louisiana. They play in one casino and place large bets and begin to win. Later, they play in a second casino and begin to win. Then Lewis sees a fax being circulated and believes that the fax has photographs of himself, Martinez, Fisher, and others. The team fears they have been discovered but they have a huge stash of chips. Lewis determines to cash in the chips; when he does, he is escorted from the casino by security guards who invite him to never return. He gets into the car with Lewis and Martinez and the car is then stopped and spotlighted by local police. Successfully intimidated, the team departs Louisiana fearing for their physical safety. The chapter portrays the team as increasingly paranoid—probably rightly so—and increasingly fragmented by fear and concern.

Chapters 26, 27, and 28 are all set in Boston during the Spring of 1998—indeed, Chapters 26 and 27 occur on the same evening. In Chapter 26, Lewis is audited by the IRS. Then Martinez calls and tells him to shortly meet at Micky Rosa's apartment—an odd request given their history. In Chapter 27 the team meets with Rosa who informs them they were sold out by an unknown person. Rosa tells them that someone sold information to the Plymouth Associates for a mere \$25,000—the information includes a full dossier of photographs and personal information on all team members as well as all team members of the amphibians. Rosa identifies the chief investigator of Plymouth Associates as Vincent Cole, a man Lewis has seen before. Cole has silver hair and a thin, weathered face. Rosa tells a legend about Cole forcing one card counter to swallow a chip. The team realizes they can never again gamble at any casino that uses the Plymouth Associates' services.

In Chapter 28 Lewis deals with his IRS audit. During this period he reevaluates his life and realizes he is growing weary of the double life and world weary of the Las Vegas lifestyle. He decides to gamble less frequently. Meanwhile Martinez and Fisher take the opposite approach and determine to pursue their card counting with renewed vigor. To this end they travel to the Golden Sun Casino in New Providence Island, Bahamas. Jill warns them that they will be gambling under foreign laws but they don't care. At the casino the pair begins to win huge sums but then Martinez notices Fisher has gone missing. He finally locates him in a restroom where Fisher is being physically assaulted by two huge anonymous security guards. Martinez intervenes by claiming to have summoned the police and the men leave. Fisher has been badly beaten and the two men speculate that Vincent Cole somehow learned they were at the Bahamas casino. Note that the trip to the Bahamas has been criticized as being entirely fictional. Many of the chapters in this section of the book continue to be very short in length. These four chapters serve as a transition between the team's declining fortunes and eventual realignment, occurring in Chapter 29.



Chapters 29, 30, 31, and 32

Chapters 29, 30, 31, and 32 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 29 is set in Boston during the Spring of 1998. Through a series of oddball telephone calls Lewis and Dylan learn that they have been ejected from Fisher's gambling team. Lewis calls Kianna and she confirms that Fisher is realigning the team. When Lewis finally speaks to Fisher, Fisher states that Lewis is no longer wanted on the team. Many heated telephone calls ensue but Fisher's decision is final. Lewis responds by recruiting Dylan, Jill, and Tay and the four individuals form a new team composed of a single squad. The other eight team members continue on as the original team. Later, Martinez calls Lewis and the two men share a fairly amicable but short conversation. Martinez explains that Fisher and Martinez are committed while they view Lewis as a part-time gambler with one foot in the real world. It is unclear when, or even if, Lewis learns of Fisher's beating in the Bahamas.

Chapter 30 is set in Las Vegas on Memorial Day, 1998. Lewis' squad had decided to play less often and less aggressively; they will use their card counting as supplementary income and not as a lifestyle. The team makes only \$42,000 in two months, and still gambles in disguises and wearing prosthetics. They base at the MGM Grand as a hotel, but never gamble there. During one weekend Lewis encounters Fisher's team gambling at the MGM Grand. Lewis attempts to run Fisher's team off on the grounds that the MGM Grand should be a safe haven, but Fisher refuses to leave. The encounter is strained and fairly antagonistic. Chapter 31 is set in Boston during June, 1998. It concludes the major narrative thread of the book. Jill and Dylan continue to have marital problems. Lewis and Dylan spend an enjoyable night drinking and then return to Dylan's apartment only to find that it has been torn apart and apparently robbed—except the only thing missing is a wall safe, hacked out of the wall, containing \$75,000. Jill arrives shortly thereafter and a tense few hours pass. Lewis finally returns home and finds his own apartment untouched, yet a single chip has been placed on his kitchen table. He takes it as an obvious warning. The burglary and intimidation is successful and the team decides to call it quits.

Chapter 32 concludes the secondary narrative thread of the book, and it is set at the Hard Rock casino in Las Vegas during the 'present.' The author and Lewis play blackjack together, Lewis acting as a spotter and the author acting as a Gorilla. Lewis' disguise allows the author to make some fairly big winnings very quickly but then Lewis is spotted and ejected. The two men meet outside and the narrative wraps up. Jill and Dylan got divorced in December, 1998. Lewis has not seen Fisher or Martinez for several years. Tay still enjoys poker games. Kianna and Rosa live together. Lewis has no special knowledge of organized card counting but believes it must still be widely practiced. Although he earned much money during a few years of gambling, Lewis now works a rather more mundane job at a company he owns.



Some editions of the book have additional end-matter included. Lewis provides a section entitled How to Count Cards and Beat Vegas. In this segment Lewis discusses the relatively simple method of hi-lo counting, where cards two through six count as +1 and a ten, face-card, or ace counts as -1 (seven, eight, and zero have no value). As cards are played each card contributes its value to a running count. The running count is divided by the number of card decks left in the shoe to get the true count. A high true count is favorable to the player while a low true count is favorable to the dealer. Lewis provides a few other unexceptional notes about blackjack and strategy. Some editions include an Epilogue, set in Las Vegas during June of 2007; the epilogue identifies Lewis as Jeff Ma and provides a brief question & answer section with Ma providing the answers to the author's questions. Some editions include a Reading Group Guide which includes a conversation with the author—similar to Ma's question and answer section with ten questions; and a Who Said That listing of six quotes from the book.



Characters

Kevin Lewis

Kevin Lewis is the main individual in the book which in some ways can be viewed as a biography of his activities during several years spent card counting and gambling. Lewis is born during May, 1974, and is about twenty years old when the book's primary narrative begins. By the concluding scenes of the book Lewis is in his mid-twenties. Lewis is of mixed Asian race and comes from an upper-middle-class family with conservative and socially proper roots. Lewis' father is fairly stern and a successful businessman; his mother appears to be a housekeeper and his sister is a successful student. Lewis is a matriculated student at MIT and excels in his studies, focusing on pre-med. He graduates but decides not to pursue medicine. During the book, Lewis works temporarily in some capacity at a bank, then starts his own company and is successful working for himself—the exact nature of his non-gambling employment is not considered. The book infers that Lewis is exceptionally intelligent and particularly gifted at mathematics; however, within the narrative Lewis' primary skills seem to be an easygoing nature, a capacity for acting, charisma, and the ability to observe and assimilate situations involving large amounts of activity—such as a blackjack game. Prior to taking up card counting, Lewis spends his spare time swimming, studying, and working.

Lewis is recruited by Martinez and Fisher, two MIT drop-outs and his roommates, onto a card counting blackjack team. Lewis proves unusually capable at counting cards and playing various roles as a gambler. He quickly rises within the ranks of the team to an equal stature with Martinez and Fisher. Lewis enjoys the Las Vegas lifestyle for several years but in the process breaks up with his girlfriend, becomes somewhat estranged from his family, pursues a meaningless sexual relationship with an NFL cheerleader, and makes a lot of money. By the end of the book Lewis has tired of the lifestyle, however, and as he is recognized as a card counter at many casinos he eventually gives up his life of card counting to focus on his career. Some editions of the book identify Kevin Lewis as a composite character predominantly based on Jeff Ma. Some editions have a brief section of questions and answers between the author and Jeff Ma.

Andre Martinez

Andre Martinez is first introduced as an MIT-dropout and roommate of Kevin Lewis. Martinez is of mixed Asian and Hispanic extraction. Martinez stands 5'6," wiry and lightly built, and has black eyes. He usually dresses in a flashy but variable style and feels quite at home being the center of attention. Martinez is very attracted to women and in several scenes of the book he is found in the company of strippers, prostitutes, or women he has picked up here or there. Martinez takes wholeheartedly to card counting when he is recruited by Micky Rosa. Martinez quits his job, abandons most of his prior relationships, drops out of school, and devotes his entire life to professional gambling.



In the book he is portrayed as fairly one-dimensional in his pursuit of gambling winnings. Martinez and Lewis retain a good friendship throughout the book, though Martinez always remains much closer to Jason Fisher. When Fisher decides to cut Micky Rosa out of the team, Martinez supports the decision. Later, when Fisher decides to cut Lewis out of the team, Martinez somewhat disagrees with the decision but supports the action. Martinez uses several wildly different personas during his gambling career. It is likely that the idea to use disguises and prosthetics to avoid detection originates with Martinez rather than Fisher. Lewis patterns himself on Martinez more than on Fisher, and both Lewis and the author obviously find Martinez's flashy appearance and wild antics appealing. Martinez is a successful gambler but does call more attention to himself than any other gambler—he is ejected and barred from more casinos and has more close-calls than any other gambler discussed.

Jason Fisher

Jason Fisher is first introduced as an MIT-dropout and roommate of Kevin Lewis. Fisher is of mixed Asian extraction. Fisher's predominant characteristic is his size and power; he apparently lifts weights and is physically very fit. Fisher takes wholeheartedly to card counting when he is recruited by Micky Rosa. Fisher quits his job, abandons prior relationships, drops out of school, and devotes his entire life to professional gambling. In the book he is portrayed as one-dimensional, pursuing gambling winnings with devotion. While other individuals, such as Martinez, occasionally engage in sexual encounters or other non-gambling activities, Fisher does not. Indeed, the one time that Lewis meets Fisher in a strip club it is because Fisher is arranging to dispose of chips won through gambling. Fisher has a falling out with Micky Rosa, the team founder, over the division of gambling winnings. This eventually leads Fisher to eliminate Rosa from the team. Later, Fisher eliminates Lewis from the team because he deems him not wholly serious about card counting. During one scene in the Bahamas Fisher is beaten by anonymous security guards—the scene has been criticized as being entirely fictional. In the book, Fisher is somewhat likable but also one-dimensional; a qualified gambler, he is neither as versatile as Martinez nor as adaptable as Lewis. He does enjoy respect and trust from the other players.

Micky Rosa

Micky Rosa is the founder of at least three MIT blackjack gambling groups and establishes the methods of card counting used successfully during the book. Rosa matriculated to MIT at the age of sixteen and is one of MIT's youngest-ever graduates. For a time, Rosa taught at MIT. He was presumably born c. 1954. He wears glasses, has disheveled hair and really bad teeth. Like Kevin Lewis, Andre Martinez, and Jason Fisher, Rosa is of mixed Asian extraction. A math prodigy, Rosa began counting cards at a young age, made a fortune, and then became so well-recognized as a card counter that he can no longer enter any casino—for this reason Fisher refers to Rosa as a dinosaur. Rosa's original blackjack team has apparently disbanded. He recruits MIT students, trains them, and then supplies the investment capital to begin gambling



operations. During the book Rosa operates two teams—the older team is called the amphibians and the newer team, which includes Lewis, is called the reptiles. Rosa is eventually cut out of the reptiles team by Fisher who wants to keep more of the profit; surprisingly, Rosa is not particularly angry about the move. Later in the book Rosa even assists the reptiles by telling them their identities have been compromised. By the close of the book Rosa is living with Kianna, one of the spotters from the reptiles team. Rosa is a fairly minor but seminal individual in the narrative, and is very memorable.

Felicia

Felicia, no surname offered in the book, is Kevin Lewis' girlfriend during 1994. She is described as petite, pretty, athletic, slim, and intelligent. Felicia and Lewis share a serious romantic relationship that culminates in his introduction of her to his parents at their home. Felicia apparently believes she and Lewis are destined for a permanent relationship. Lewis, instead, favors a lifestyle of card counting and gambling. As Lewis knows such activities would be repugnant to Felicia he keeps her in the dark, offering various lies and excuses about his weekend trips to Las Vegas. By the time Felicia begins to seriously worry about the relationship Lewis has already met other women in Las Vegas and he breaks up with her without offering any excuse. The breakup appears to catch Felicia by surprise and is obviously very damaging to her. She does not recur in the book, and she is a minor character.

Vincent Cole

Vincent Cole occurs in numerous scenes before he is named—he is described as having blue eyes, silver hair, weathered cheeks, and a thin but strong build. He usually wears a suit and tie and usually appears with several younger stronger men to act as enforcers. Cole is an apparently very senior member of the Plymouth Associates, a group of security experts offering their services to casinos. Cole's expertise appears to lie in identifying and recognizing known cheaters and card counters. From c. 1996 Cole begins to identify the various members of Rosa's gambling teams—he is apparently behind at least one episode where Martinez is forcibly evicted from a hotel and another episode where Fisher is actually beat up at a casino. Cole's company publishes a brochure known as the Plymouth Facebook that features photographs, descriptions, and demographic data about known card counters and cheaters.

By 1997 Fisher, Martinez, Lewis, and the other team members of both of Rosa's teams appear in the Facebook—seriously curtailing their activities. When Lewis responds by continuing to gamble, Cole apparently moves on to rougher tactics, robbing the Taylor's house and placing a warning poker chip on Lewis' apartment table. That these activities are attributed to Cole are peculiar, however—the man makes his living off detecting card counters, not from dissuading them from attempting to gamble. Cole's image in the book is that of a tough-as-nail investigator from 'old' Las Vegas. Rosa tells a probably apocryphal tale of Cole forcing one card counter to physically gag down a poker chip.



As the focal point of security activities, Cole is portrayed in the book as the 'bad guy,' an ironic and curious twist.

Ben Mezrich

Ben Mezrich (born 1969) is an American author from Boston. He has published both fiction and non-fiction and is probably better known for the latter. He is the author of the book under consideration and curiously also appears within it as an individual interacting with some of the other persons considered. Mezrich offers no background of expertise establishing his as an authority for a book on blackjack; instead, he explains having known the person on whom Kevin Lewis is based and being, more or less, in the right place at the right time. Mezrich's book features two narrative threads—in one, considered in most chapters of the book, Lewis pursues card counting and gambling. In the second narrative thread, Mezrich appears as himself conducting a series of interviews with various subject-matter experts. His self-portrayal is performed with several elements of fiction common throughout the remainder of the book and his personal biases are fairly evident. Mezrich's personal appearance in the ostensibly non-fiction work is somewhat jarring and definitely atypical of biography.

Terri Pollack

Terri Pollack meets Kevin Lewis during a weekend at Las Vegas; they meet by happenstance at a blackjack table at Bally's. By coincidence, Lewis is soon after ejected and barred from the casino—his first-ever barring—but he counts the weekend a success because he meets Pollack. Pollack is a cheerleader for the Rams, an NFL team. She is described nearly exclusively in physical terms—she has large, round breasts; exotic, nearly oriental features, and favors very revealing clothing more akin to costumes. On several occasions Lewis finds her remarkably provocative and muses that she would be entirely out of place in any locale except a casino in Las Vegas. Pollack meets Lewis in Las Vegas for weekends full of gambling, entertainment, and sex—they apparently have no relationship outside of occasional weekends and when Lewis stops calling her, Pollack moves on. Pollack is a minor character and is presented as a more-or-less trophy of Lewis' gambling winnings. She contrasts sharply with Felicia; Pollack is obviously not someone Lewis would ever introduce to his parents. Aside from her sex appeal, she has little to offer throughout the narrative—even Rosa finds her presence troubling.

Andrew Tay

Andrew Tay is an MIT sophomore who meets Kevin Lewis when they are both members of the swim team. Tay is of mixed Asian extraction and is unusually tall at 6'5." His height makes him stick out of any crowd but his personal demeanor allows him to blend in at the blackjack tables. Tay is a spotter and does not have higher ambitions—he only invests small amounts of money in the teams and appears quite satisfied with his



smaller winnings. Tay enjoys playing poker and does so during the week and during his free time. Tay is the first team member recruited by Lewis, and demonstrates an unusual amount of personal loyalty to Lewis. Tay is very sensitive to potential danger and provides some comic relief throughout the narrative by his all-too-frequent signaling of danger. Ironically, when Tay finally is really identified and investigated he doesn't realize it because the security agent is a beautiful young woman. Tay is a minor but very memorable individual.

Jill and Dylan Taylor

Jill and Dylan Taylor are a married couple that are recruited to card counting by Kevin Lewis and Andre Martinez—the four are apparently long-term friends but their relationship is not described in the book. Jill was born in 1975 and Dylan was born in 1969, making him one of the oldest members of the card counting team. Jill is described as petite, weighing about ninety pounds, with blue eyes, red hair, and a huge dose of sex appeal. The author describes her as very attractive and possessed of an Aryan look. Dylan is described in much more muted terms, as merely observant, reliable, intelligent, and detail-oriented. Dylan's attention to detail quickly lands him the job as team secretary. As the book progresses, the Taylors' relationship disintegrates. Dylan is more interested in having fun and entertainment, while Jill desires excitement and intrigue. The Taylors' apartment is burglarized during the concluding scenes of the book and their wall safe, containing a huge amount of cash, is literally hacked out of the wall. At that point the Taylors discontinue gambling and within a year divorce. By c. 1999 Jill has resumed occasional small-time gambling by herself. Both of the Taylors are fairly minor but memorable individuals.

Objects/Places

MIT

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or MIT, is a private research university located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. MIT has several schools with multiple departments; its focus is on scientific and technological research. Most of the card counters in the book are students, alumni, or dropouts of MIT. Several of the book's early scenes occur on or near the MIT campus.

Atlantic City

Atlantic City is a major city in New Jersey. It is famous for its boardwalk and gambling. Atlantic City is often viewed as the Las Vegas of the East Coast, but the city's gambling district has never attracted the same level of hyperbole as Las Vegas. Several of the book's events occur in Atlantic City, including Lewis' first real-world experience at counting cards.

Las Vegas

Las Vegas is the largest city in the state of Nevada and is an internationally renowned resort city featuring gambling, shopping, and entertainment. Many of the book's events occur in Las Vegas, making it a major setting for the narrative. The book describes Las Vegas only in general terms and nearly exclusively treats it as the locale for casinos, hotels, and strip clubs. The book very briefly recounts some of the history of early casino gambling in Las Vegas.

MGM Grand

The MGM Grand is a major casino in Las Vegas and is the setting for many of the book's scenes. Throughout the book, various blackjack teams gamble at the MGM Grand and always find the casino a hospitable place to gamble. After Fisher ejects Lewis' team, Lewis' team uses the MGM Grand as a hotel only and does not gamble there—instead using it as a sort of safe haven. Fisher's team continues to gamble at the MGM Grand, a fact that angers Lewis.

The Taylor's Safe

Dylan and Jill Taylor have a hidden wall safe in their apartment where they keep huge amounts of cash derived from gambling winnings. Toward the end of the book their apartment is burglarized and the only thing missing is their wall safe, which has been



hacked out of the wall. The theft of the safe is a major turning point in the narrative, because after it vanishes Lewis' team quits gambling.

Beat the Dealer

Beat the Dealer is the title of a book, published in 1962 and authored by Edward Oakley Thorp. The book demonstrates the mathematical feasibility of beating blackjack by card counting—using the method changes blackjack from favoring the house by about 5% to favoring the player by about 1%. The book is cited in the narrative as the basis for Rosa's methods of card counting.

Spotters

A spotter is a team member who sits at a single blackjack table and plays through several shoes of cards, placing a minimum bet on every hand but counting cards as the games progress. When the deck becomes favorable the spotter secretly signals to a gorilla or a Big Player. The spotter does not attract attention because he does not vary his betting strategy—he bets the minimum on every hand.

Gorillas

A Gorilla is a team member who enters a game after being signaled by a spotter, places huge bets on every hand, and leaves a game after being signaled by a spotter. The gorilla thus takes all instructions from a spotter; the gorilla does not attract attention because he does not vary his betting strategy—he bets large on every hand.

Big Players

On the team, a Big Player is the major money winner and works by doing a little bit of everything—some card counting, some packet tracking, and some speculative betting. The role is reserved for the most flamboyant and trained individuals. Typically, a Big Player works with three spotters during a given shift and moves between tables only as the spotters signal a deck configuration favorable to the players. Lewis becomes a Big Player; the other Big Players are Fisher and Martinez.

The Amphibians

Micky Rosa trains and fields at least two teams of blackjack gamblers during the early portions of the book. The oldest team is referred to as the amphibians; the later team is referred to as the reptiles. Rosa never explicitly admits to fielding multiple teams simultaneously. The amphibians appear about as successful as Lewis' reptiles team. Within the book the amphibians are not well described but do appear in a few minor scenes.



Themes

Gaming the Game

The major theme of the book is a consideration of the processes used by the blackjack teams to beat the odds while gambling at major casinos. Most editions of the book feature an end-matter section entitled *How to Count Cards and Beat Vegas*, putatively written by Kevin Lewis. The book does offer many technical methods, but the dominant theme of gaming the game is captured not in a specific methodology but rather an attitude: Las Vegas blackjack gambling can be mastered through a combination of skill, acting, attitude, disguise, teamwork, and luck. Card counting itself is not successful enough to be enticing because it is easily detected; Rosa adapts by fielding teams that count cards and signal each other. Once the team members are identified, Fisher and Martinez adapt by wearing disguises and prosthetics. Once these prove ineffectual the team adapts by visiting additional casinos where they are not known. Lewis' team adapts by keeping a low profile and gambling only intermittently. Presumably, Rosa's amphibians team adapts by similar methodologies. In short, the technical process of counting cards is used only as the base—and the rest of the glitz and process surrounding it is what converts simple card counting into a very lucrative method of beating the casino at its own game. Gaming the game of blackjack is thus the major theme of the book.

Greed

The book presents a range of individuals who engage in card counting in order to win at blackjack. The appeal of blackjack, as described by Micky Rosa, is that the game has a 'memory.' In other words once cards are played they will not recur again in a series of games. This allows an observant and trained player to determine the chance that a high card will be dealt next, and knowing the shifting odds of this allows for an adaptive betting strategy. This analysis could be conducted as a complex statistical problem but within the book the analysis is performed solely in order to allow players to win. All of the gambling individuals presented in the book are egotistical, self-centered, and motivated by greed. The casinos respond with adaptive measures to eliminate or limit the impact of card counting because they don't want to pay out more than they take in. The security personnel in the book try to catch the card counters because that is the source of their income. Indeed, it is difficult to locate an individual described in the book that is not motivated by greed—Lewis' family members being perhaps the only individuals pursuing a non-greedy lifestyle. Greed leads Fisher to eject Rosa from the team—once Rosa has transmitted all of his knowledge. Greed later leads Fisher to eject Lewis from the team; and Greed leads Lewis to recruit his friends to a new team. The theme of greed and self-satisfaction runs throughout the book.



The Double Life

Kevin Lewis begins the book as an MIT graduate student with a promising career in medicine within his grasp. He comes from a respectable, established, upper-middle class family, enjoys close family ties, and enjoys his father's respect. He excels in sports, particularly swimming, and academics. He is seriously involved with a beautiful young woman whom he shortly introduces to his family. Lewis is quite obviously intelligent, adaptable, and well-liked. Through this period of his life, Lewis gradually becomes slightly bored and partially disillusioned with a conventional approach to living. At this point he is recruited by some friends into an organized card-counting ring of gamblers. Lewis finds the craft intriguing and excels at the gambling aspects. Within a few months he is earning large amounts of money and living a type of double life. During the week he remains a student, a swimmer, a loyal child, and a devoted boyfriend. However, on the weekends he flies to Las Vegas, participates in card counting and gambling, attends entertainment events, and pursues a sexual affair with a woman he only knows from Las Vegas weekends. Within a year Lewis has broken up with his girlfriend, abandoned his professional goals, become distanced from his family, and ponders pursuing his new lifestyle openly and full-time. Lewis sees Martinez and Fisher adapt to gambling wholesale without any apparent ill-effect but still keeps one foot in his old life while pursuing his new life. By the end of the book Lewis gives up his gambling lifestyle only because he is forced to; throughout the narrative Lewis lives a double life which he finds simultaneously appealing and stressful. Living the double life is a major theme of the book.

Style

Perspective

The book is related from the third-person point of view in the past tense, in a typical style for non-fiction biography. Most of the chapters in the book follow this point of view and are related in a roughly chronological fashion. Thus, Kevin Lewis observes his friends' lifestyle, is recruited by them into the process of counting cards, joins them, receives training, and then pursues several lucrative years at counting cards. This perspective is periodically intruded upon by a handful of chapters that are related from the first-person point of view. In these chapters, the author appears as an individual with the putative purpose of conducting interviews with various subject-matter experts to gain insight into specific aspects of the narrative. Thus, the author interviews an expert in security systems on one occasion, and interviews a stripper on another occasion. These chapters are perhaps the most non-fictional in texture but are also the most subjective. The author does not establish any particular rationale for writing the book other than explaining it to be an exciting subject and having a personal relationship, of sorts, with the main individual considered. The perspective utilized allows the narrative to be delivered in a fast-paced and exciting way; the book is easy to read, engaging, and entertaining. The perspective utilized is not particularly appropriate for non-fiction biography.

Tone

The book's tone is atypical of non-fiction. The author creates a tone of excitement and suspense and portrays a texture of the heady lifestyle of a Las Vegas gambling lifestyle. Much of the action is set in a sort of shadowy world where the gamblers are conducting technically legal but ethically questionable activities. The tone of the book is created through dramatization and other techniques commonly found in fiction. For example, individuals are characterized rather than described; events are portrayed in dramatic sequences rather than chronologically considered; and there is little analysis of motivation or rationale. For example, Kevin Lewis, the dominant individual in the action, is portrayed more as a protagonist than as a biographical subject; events in his life are tied together into a narrative plot; and his motivation for pursuing a gambling lifestyle is not established. Instead, he simply enjoys the money, the attention, and access to beautiful women. Most individuals in the book are described using superlatives—Lewis is brilliant; Martinez is exuberant; Pollack is gorgeous. In fact, all of the female characters in the book are gorgeous. Even minor characters receive similar treatment—Dylan is mathematically perfect and Rosa is in all ways the stereotypical nerd. Indeed, the book reads more like a plotting of a Hollywood movie than a non-fiction biography about card counting students from MIT. The tone matches the narrative pacing, making the book exciting to read, enjoyable, and accessible—but also straining credibility during several key events. The authorial intrusion during the "author-as-participant" chapters is

fairly jarring and disrupts the texture. Note that narrative use of profanity is frequent and blunt.

Structure

The book is divided into thirty-two chapters of uneven length. Chapters have a generally consistent internal chronology but the book is comprised of two major narrative threads—one from c. 1994 to 1998 and the other in the 'present'; presumably the time during which the book was being written. Various chapters are primarily devoted to one or the other timeline, but some chapters contain elements of both. The book is usually considered to be non-fiction and biographical but the introductory matter states "[t]he names of many characters and locations in this book have been changed, as have certain physical characteristics and other descriptive details. Some of the events and characters are also composites of several individual events or persons." (p. VIII); the book contains many elements of writing traditionally found in fiction but absent, or at least atypically found, in non-fiction. Much of the material is presented as dramatic action and much information is delivered through dialogue. The author appears as an individual in the book—one might even say as a character in the narrative. The book has been heavily criticized as being nearly entirely fictional. The protagonist, Kevin Lewis, is a portrayal of Jeff Ma, a real card-counter; other individuals in the book have not been identified or, as stated, are composite characters. While the book is accessible and exciting to read, its value as non-fiction is questionable.

Some editions of the book have additional end-matter included. Lewis provides a section entitled How to Count Cards and Beat Vegas. Note that the section claims to have been authored by Lewis, an individual known to be fictional. Some editions include an Epilogue, set in Las Vegas during June of 2007; the epilogue identifies Lewis as Jeff Ma and provides a brief question & answer section with Ma providing the answers to the author's questions. Some editions include a Reading Group Guide which includes a conversation with the author—similar to Ma's question and answer section with ten questions; and some editions include a Who Said That listing of six quotes from the book with page references.



Quotes

He reached for three five-hundred-dollar chips, then glanced around, pretending to look for the cocktail waitress. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his Spotter. Red-haired, pretty, wearing a low-cut blouse and too much makeup. Nobody would have guessed she was a former MIT mechanical-engineering major and an honors student at Harvard Business School. She was close enough to see the table but far enough away not to draw any suspicion. Kevin caught her gaze, then waited for her signal. A bent right arm would tell him to double his bet. Both arms folded and he'd push most of his chips into the betting circle. Arms flat at her sides and he'd drop down to the lowest possible bet. But she didn't do any of these things. Instead, she ran her right hand through her hair. Kevin stared at her, making sure he had read her right. Then he quickly started to gather his chips.

"That's it for me," he said to the table, slurring his words. "Should have skipped that last martini." (p. 2)

"So you guys cheat at cards?"

Martinez sat up, indignant. "Absolutely not. We don't alter any of the rules or fuck with the nature of the game. We use our brains to take advantage of arbitrage opportunities. Blackjack is beatable—so we beat it. We beat the hell out of it."

Kevin was fairly sure it wasn't as innocent as that. After all, Martinez had checked into the hotel under a fake name, and they were pretending that Fisher was a stranger they had met at the casino. But Martinez was right; what Kevin had witnessed wasn't exactly cheating—was it? (pp. 33-34)

"Kevin," Martinez said. "This is Micky Rosa. He used to teach here, back in prehistoric times."

Micky nodded as his audience laughed, his hair flopping over too much glistening forehead. Kevin watched him with a new respect; he'd seen the name before. Two of the card-counting books had mentioned the former math prodigy—one of the youngest MIT graduates in history, matriculating at the age of sixteen—as a master of the sport. But the man was at least fifteen years older than Martinez and Fisher. What was he doing in a room full of college kids?

"I still teach here," Micky said, leaning back against the blackboard. Bright blue chalk was getting all over his shirt, but nobody said anything. It was obvious in the way they looked at him that his audience revered him. "But now I teach for profit. For me, and for my students." (p. 39)

"So in their heyday, how much do you think card counters cost the casinos every year? How much can they really win?"

The kid in the overalls was on his way over. The writer in me imagined he still had the .357, but I knew I was just being dramatic.

"It's not what they win that makes the casinos nervous," Damon said. "It's the fact that



they can win. Over time, nobody beats the house—that's the cardinal rule of Vegas. You fuck with the cardinal rule, you fuck with Vegas."

He winked at the kids in the overalls. "And sooner or later, Vegas finds a way to fuck you back." (pp. 66-67)

The next afternoon, Kevin came awake staring at himself. It took him a full minute to realize he hadn't gone insane: There was a mirror on the ceiling. He was lying in a bed the size of his room back in Boston. To his right, a vast picture window overlooked the Strip. To his left, a marble hallway led to a marble bathroom with a marble Jacuzzi. Straight ahead, a set of double doors opened into a circular living room with curved leather couches, plush white carpeting, and a revolving wide-screen TV. (pp. 83-84)

He glanced at the woman, trying not to be too obvious. She was tall, with long auburn hair, smoke-colored eyes, and high cheekbones. She was wearing a silk halter top that barely contained her unnaturally round breasts, and a sliver of tan abdomen was showing above her tight leather pants. She was the epitome of the Vegas girl, the sort of woman you was on the arm of a celebrity in the high-stakes pits or whisking through a VIP line at a trendy nightclub. Women like her did not exist in Boston, and even if they did, they wouldn't have socialized with whiz kids from MIT.

Kevin felt his face growing warm as he made room for her at the table. He had just celebrated Felicia's birthday two days before—followed by a heated argument concerning his plans to "visit his high school buddies in San Diego" over New Year's. But as he looked at this woman, Felicia was the last thing on his mind.

One of the electronics salesmen whistled, harvesting a quick glance from those smoldering eyes. Then Michael cleared his throat. "Having a happy New Year?" he offered lamely.

The woman completely ignored him, putting a single twenty-five dollar chip in her betting circle. Kevin smiled to himself, feeling a bit more confident. This is going to be fun. (p. 103)

The team followed up its rout of the Mohegan with an incredible holiday season in Vegas. They earned a staggering 80 percent return on their investments by the end of February and continued pounding out profits right into the following summer. Micky Rosa's warning faded away as the team grew richer with each passing month. To be sure, there were more than a handful of losing weekends; sometimes the cards did not fall their way. And at one point, Dylan ran an analysis on Brian's play, after a long losing streak that was costing them close to five thousand dollars every night he spotted. But the losses fell within the expected variances, and Dylan didn't see any reason for them to worry. Brian would start winning again soon enough—and the wins would more than make up for the losses. (pp. 145-146)

Her face hadn't changed, but I could finally hear evidence of the harshness I had expected. Maybe it was the fact that at twenty-five, she was already considered old in



her line of work. Or maybe it was just me, an outsider asking questions that could only lead to clichéd answers.

"You could work at one of the casinos," I said. "From what I hear, they're always hiring." She refilled her champagne, her naked breasts jostling as she maneuvered the bottle. "This place is no different than the casinos. We're all a bunch of liars, just like them." I tried to shift beneath her weight. My legs were starting to cramp. "What do you mean?" She waved her arms toward the smoked-glass wall that separated the Emperor's Room from the rest of the club. "All the girls are so friendly and smiling and happy to see you. They dance and dazzle and tell jokes while they take your money. Inside, they hate your guts. Each and every one of them. They think you're a sucker and a mark." The vitriol was out of place on her girlish face. (p. 159)

The CM rubbed a hand against his thick lips. "We have the right to hold individuals suspected of cheating or committing other crimes at our casino." "Are you accusing me of cheating?" Martinez countered. He felt his face getting flushed. His fear was turning into anger. He didn't like the way this middle-aged fuck was pushing him around. And he certainly didn't like the way Sideburns was glaring at him, taunting him with the Polaroid like it was some sort of weapon. Fuck, they must already have hundreds of pictures of him from the Eye in the Sky. "No," the CM admitted. "But I do have a report that maybe you pushed one of our security guards. Isn't that right, Jimmy?" Jimmy the Sideburns nodded, grinning. Martinez couldn't believe this shit. It was like something out of a bad movie. "Fuck this! You want to call the police, call them. Otherwise you let me out of here or I'm calling my lawyer." (pp. 167-168)

Emotions ran high in the darkened classroom as the team waited for Martinez and Fisher to show up. It was after eleven, and Fisher had called the meeting from Logan Airport via a pay phone. The pair had been gone all week, and not even Kevin knew where they had been or why they had gathered the team in the all-too-familiar classroom at MIT. Since Super Bowl weekend, the twelve conspirators had pretty much avoided one another. The team was in disarray, their future as a profitable venture utterly uncertain.

In Kevin's mind, there was little to discuss. Somehow the team had been compromised. They could still gamble at a number of casinos—the MGM Grand, the Stardust, Caesars, among others—but the enemy was closing in fast. When Kevin shut his eyes, he could see the man with the weathered cheeks and narrow blue eyes. The image had followed him all the way back to Boston, all the way to the safe haven of his apartment in the South End. In his head, the man had become a specter, a symbol of the unknown enemy tracking them, spreading their pictures all over the gambling world. (p. 189)

Three days later, Kevin got the first letter in the mail: a sealed manila envelope with a return address in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was sitting on the floor in his living room, eating cereal and watching Monday Night



Football while talking on the phone with his sister in Houston. Melissa was giving him advice about the stock market when he absentmindedly picked the envelope off of a tall stack of unopened mail on the floor next to him. He tore the seal, half listening as Melissa briefed him on the future of fiber optics and the financial health of the tech industry.

Inside the envelope, he found a few pages of typed, legal-looking documents. The top page was a letter addressed to him—from the Internal Revenue Service. It was a notice of an audit. At the bottom was a phone number he was supposed to call to schedule the first meeting with an IRS investigator. (p. 209)

A few minutes later, he had calmed himself down to a reasonable anger level. There was some kernel of truth to what Fisher had said. But it still hurt to be kicked off the team. And the way he saw it, he had two choices. Accept Fisher's decision and give up the lifestyle altogether. Or do a little repositioning of his own.

The first call he made was to Dylan.

"That was more than ten minutes," Dylan said.

Kevin made his decision while he spoke, "Dylan, Fisher's breaking away and taking most of the team with him. We have a choice—we can either give up blackjack, or form our own team. I know you and Jill have been going through some problems, and I know some of it is related to our lifestyle. But I'd still like to give it a shot. I guess I'm asking—are you with me?"

Dylan didn't wait to answer. "I never liked Fisher that much, anyway. He's a controlling meathead. I can't speak for Jill, but I think she'll pitch in. She likes the life too much to give it up altogether. What about the others?" (pp. 231-232)

Topics for Discussion

After reading the book, would you consider card-counting to be cheating? Or is it just a way to play a game and get a legal advantage? The book states that card counting is not illegal—do you think it should be? Why or why not?

Do you think the gamblers in the book like Kevin Lewis are basically dishonest people trying to earn a quick buck without an honest day's work? Do you see them more as entrepreneurs working within a system to beat the system? Or do you have some other view of them?

If you had the skills and know-how to count cards at blackjack and make huge winnings, would you do it? Why or why not?

The book presents itself as a nonfiction biography but it contains many elements of writing traditionally found only in fiction. The book has been strongly criticized as being nearly entirely fiction. Do you think it is appropriate to write about a nonfiction situation in such a manner? Why or why not?

Most of the men in the book are considered successful because of their intelligence and adaptability. Most of the women in the book are considered successful because of their beauty and sex appeal. Is this simply a reflection of the truth of life in Las Vegas? Or is the book fundamentally sexist in its portrayal of individuals?

The book presents a series of discussions about race in which most of the individuals argue that being of Asian or Hispanic appearance is beneficial in the world of gambling. Many of the security guards are Caucasian—and they are typically portrayed as stereotypically stupid and aggressive. Is this simply a reflection of the truth of the gaming industry, or is it a stereotype in itself?

Micky Rosa informs the team that they have been identified to the Plymouth Associates in exchange for money. Of all the individuals in the book, whom do you consider the most-likely accomplice of the Plymouth Associates?