



Cowboys Full: The Story of Poker

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From James McManus, author of the bestselling *Positively Fifth Street*, comes the definitive story of the game that, more than any other, reflects who we are and how we operate.

Cowboys Full is the story of poker, from its roots in China, the Middle East, and Europe to its ascent as a global—but especially an American—phenomenon. It describes how early Americans took a French parlor game and, with a few extra cards and an entrepreneurial spirit, turned it into a national craze by the time of the Civil War. From the kitchen-table games of ordinary citizens to its influence on generals and diplomats, poker has gone hand in hand with our national experience. Presidents from Abraham Lincoln to Barack Obama have deployed poker and its strategies to explain policy, to relax with friends, to negotiate treaties and crises, and as a political networking tool. The ways we all do battle and business are echoed by poker tactics: cheating and thwarting cheaters, leveraging uncertainty, bluffing and sussing out bluffers, managing risk and reward.

Cowboys Full shows how what was once accurately called the cheater's game has become almostly honest contest of cunning, mathematical precision, and luck. It explains how poker, formerly dominated by cardsharps, is now the most popular card game in Europe, East Asia, Australia, South America, and cyberspace, as well as on television. It combines colorful history with firsthand experience from today's professional tour. And it examines poker's remarkable hold on American culture, from paintings by Frederic Remington to countless poker novels, movies, and plays. Braiding the thrill of individual hands with new ways of seeing poker's relevance to our military, diplomatic, business, and personal affairs, *Cowboys Full* is sure to become the classic account of America's favorite pastime.

Cowboys Full: The Story of Poker Details

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From Reader Review Cowboys Full: The Story of Poker for online ebook

Eohlson says

This is an excellent and well-researched history of poker. When I started I wanted to get to the more current material that is applicable to the poker I know, but then I did get sucked in to the origins of the game. This is an excellent book start to finish.

Ty says

this book was very disappointing, especially since i very much enjoyed McManus' other poker book, "Positively 5th Street". perhaps the author was just trying too hard...starting from a very review of games of chance since Neandarthal man, we work through the origins of poker in Persia through France to the American South during the Conferederacy....and then i just ran out of patience for rambling anecdotes that were, at best, tangential to the game of poker. perhaps one day i will go back, skip a couple of hundred pages and read the last quarter of the book or so, to see what the author has to say about the modern legends of the game. definitely not recommended, unless you have a taste for meaningless trivia.

Chris says

Was really interested in this but it was very boring

Joe Kapraszewski says

Good book overall for anyone who's interested in the game of poker. The history lessons and how the game is truly America's game that has been exported to many other countries now. The older history was fascinating and well written. However, I felt very bogged down by the end where (at least it seemed this way) every single WSOP in the last decade had the results and analysis. The "I can't wait to read this" fell off when I saw individual results and more of a newspaper feel and not a book feel. Maybe biographical sketches of some of the bigger stars and their backgrounds would have been more appropriate for the modern game. There are plenty of interesting characters that could have been sketched with their some of their personas.

Tyler Jones says

In *Positively Fifth Street*, James McManus did a three-part juggling act in relating his first-hand adventure at the World Series of Poker's main event with the trial of the accused killers of Ted Binion, while also injecting a healthy dose of poker history. Of the three themes, the poker history came off as dry in comparison to the more immediate drama found in the other threads. It comes as a very pleasant surprise then that *Cowboys Full*, an ambitiously large study of poker, should be such a fascinating book.

As a history, *Cowboys Full* is impressive. McManus goes back beyond the game -back beyond the invention of cards itself- and methodically brings us up to the game we recognize today. But as interesting as the history is, the book is most fascinating when it shows how the skills various historical figures developed at the poker table influenced their success in the business and political world. The chapters covering the Civil War are brilliant.

Unfortunately *Cowboys Full* weakens somewhat in its later chapters where McManus repeats much of what he wrote in *Fifth Street* and regurgitates what appears in other books. Two full chapters are devoted to Texas banker Andy Beal's attempts to better the best of the Vegas pros, and while interesting, this story has already been covered in great detail in Michael Craig's *The Professor, the Banker, and the Suicide King*.

Yet, overall, it is the most complete book on poker I have yet read. Those who do not understand poker's appeal, or view it merely as a form of gambling, would do well to read it.

(Hey, you like poker? Why not check out my poker blog: <http://jacksfullofnines.blogspot.com/>)

Aaron George says

Had to give this one up about half way through. I play poker every day and totally relate to the poker-as-a-mirror-for-everyday-life premise. Poker has taught me a lot about my own character. I did not realize until trying to read this book that I just don't care about the history of the game, its prominence in influential circles, or the seemingly endless anecdotes and stories that the author theorizes are the bedrock of American culture, politics and society. This overestimation of the game's importance was just too much for me. As far as writing style, it is clear to me that the author is head over heels into poker lore, however insignificant, and stretches every little factoid into half a chapter. Good reading material before a nice sound sleep.

Bap says

NYT notable book 2009. This book won't tell you how to win at poker but it will explain the rise of poker from it's antecedents in Europe such as pogue to its birth in North America in New Orleans and via the Mississippi River throughout the US. It became america's game of now is a world wide phenom. Poker continues to evolve. The five card draw games of my youth, jacks or better, are now as common as the rotary phone. Seven card stud hi-lo resulted in bugger pots and more action and finally Texas Hold-em with community cards , more players and more action arose in the 70's and 80's and has become the staple of poker by virtue of the World Series of Poker and later the internet.

McManus has gathered the rich history of the game, of cheats, and beat downs, and introduces a colorful cast of characters that have frequented the game. It is an entertaining read.

Sandy says

This was a book I won through the GR giveaway, and which I am WAY late in reviewing. The problem is that I found it almost unreadable - tried once or twice, kept putting it aside, hoping that it would be better if I were in a different mood. I finally decided that I had to give it my best shot, and either read it or mark it abandoned.

I got through about 80 pages, and just couldn't find anything to enjoy. It seemed like one big data dump, with the author just spitting out everything he had ever learned about card games and gambling, and not in a particularly interesting or amusing way. If it were a shorter book, I might have kept on - but the thought of reading another 500+ pages was unbearable.

In fairness, I know some of the reviews said that after the first few chapters the book was better, but there's only so much time and effort I'm going to give a book that is just work to read.

On the other hand, my husband said he thought it sounded interesting, so I've passed it along to him.

Sheehan says

Hands down the best book I read in 2009...

If you like poker, McManus' straightforward approach to the history of poker ties in everything from politics, to race in the United States. The book describes so many intriguing anecdotes about how so much of American English has incorporated poker terms and theory.

Even if you don't like poker this book does a great job of presenting a sweeping thesis of how Poker is truly the "American Pastime"; and deny though you might, has in fact played a role in so many historical moments of import (e.g. Cuban Missile Crisis, Cold War, the Reconstruction, etc.)

Great read!

Rob Rausch says

Not to much the history of poker as the history of the world seen through poker analogies - in extruciating detail. This book was easily 100 pages too long. The few bright spots were the few stories actually about poker.

Tim says

My review (which appeared in the poker magazine Card Player):

Poker & The American Experience

A Review of *Cowboys Full: The Story of Poker* by James McManus

Tim Peters

For some players, poker is just a game. But for many players, it's tempting to see the game as a microcosm of life itself, as having a significance that transcends the cardroom. James McManus, the author of the justly celebrated *Positively Fifth Street* (his 2003 account of his run to the final table of the 2000 WSOP Main Event), is one of those people, and his new book, *Cowboys Full: The Story of Poker*, explains why "sometimes...the game is much more than just a game."

Much of the book has been published in *Card Player* over the past few years under the heading "History of Poker." Now that it's in book form, *Cowboys Full* will surely be viewed as the most exhaustive and definite account of the history of poker yet published.

And it is a very much a history, chronicling the ancient roots of poker to its birth and flowering in New Orleans to the global phenomenon of today. But what makes *Cowboys Full* so interesting is how McManus articulates the role of poker in society (primarily American society). He writes about how the game spread across the country, how it evolved, and the lessons that people have drawn from it. As the subtitle "The Story of Poker" suggests, McManus rightly understands that poker is part of a larger narrative. "My goal," he writes, "is to show how the story of poker helps to explain who we are. The game has gone hand in hand with pivotal aspects of our national experience for a couple of centuries now."

McManus asserts July 4, 1803, can be seen as the "symbolic birth date" for the game: the date of the Louisiana Purchase, which helped open the American West. He writes that poker was the perfect game for this era in American history, a game "whose rules favored a frontiersman's initiative and cunning, an entrepreneur's creative sense of risk, and a democratic openness to every class of player." Poker really is the quintessential American game.

Poker's infancy was marked by scandal, particularly during the heyday of the Mississippi River steamboats ("the Internet card rooms of 1814"). "By the 1830s, at least six hundred sharps were working the riverboats, with one estimate putting their number as high as fifteen hundred," he writes. Poker was known as "the cheating game" with good reason, and McManus devotes a whole chapter to the "styles and technologies of cheating" back in the day.

Despite the rampant cheating, at least in big-money games, poker spread far and wide in the young country. The steamboats introduced poker to players in the North and the West; the Civil War introduced the game to players in battlefields across the South. McManus has thoroughly scoured the existing literature of poker to recount all kinds of stories, familiar and less so, of the game, including stalwarts like the shooting of Wild Bill Hickok in Deadwood, South Dakota, holding Aces and Eights. But because McManus is a cultural historian, he searches for the meaning behind the event: "It was Wild Bill Hickok who forged the strong links in the popular imagination between gunfighting, poker, and manliness—all this despite being known as a losing player who was shot from behind by a cowardly punk at the table."

That's a good example of his strategy in the book: recount the facts, at least to the extent they are known, then search for the meaning and significance behind the facts.

With the origins and spread of poker behind him, McManus turns to a less linear style for the rest of the

book, with chapters on important people in the history of the game (such as Herbert O. Yardley, American cryptologist and the author of *The Education of a Poker Player*) and events where poker played a role (such as the terrific account of poker and its relation to the Cold War).

And there are chapters on key aspects of poker history. The birth of Texas Hold'em, for example, the rise of the WSOP, and the detonation of the contemporary poker boom, which McManus dates to March 30, 2003, when the Travel Channel broadcast the Five Diamond World Poker Classic from the Bellagio. The book is particularly good on the ensuing boom (poker as a global phenomenon) and the current legal mess of the UIGEA.

McManus is an excellent stylist and storyteller, so the book is unfailingly entertaining. Structurally, he struggles a bit with chapters that belong in the book but don't have a neat slot to fit into (like the chapter on Gardena, California, and its important place in poker history). But some of these difficult-to-pigeonhole bits are excellent, like the chapter "Fooled by Randomness."

Most of the books reviewed in *Card Player* are designed to help you improve your play. But some are intended to help you appreciate the game you're playing—its history, its traditions, and its cultural impact. We are living in what must surely be the golden age of poker, with games spread around the globe in unprecedented numbers, with a year-long tournament circuit with staggering prize pools, and, for a few people, the chance to turn poker playing into a career. Read *Cowboys Full* to understand how this golden age came about—and to grasp that poker does have a meaning beyond the felt.

David Miklethun says

Sadly, the library needed this book back before I was able to finish. I enjoyed the first half a great deal. I've even developed a warmer place in my heart for President Nixon after learning that he financed his early congressional campaign by fleecing his fellow WWII sailors. (Poker played an important role in the early political career of our current president as well...)

Dennis Willingham says

Billed as the story of poker, but that doesn't quite sum it up - it gives an analysis of US history and leaders thru poker-colored glasses, a history of the game's development and a more detailed look at contemporary play and developments such as tournament and online play.

Bookmarks Magazine says

McManus's *Cowboys Full* makes room for everyone at the table. Lightweights will learn something about the basics of the game and why it appeals to so many people, while those already convinced of poker's importance will find much to enjoy here as well. Reviewers indicated that even those who do not normally

enjoy history will appreciate the book's insights into how the game's past informs today's political strategies. A few critics considered some of McManus's arguments somewhat overreaching and some of his anecdotes, well, anecdotal—but what would a book about poker be without a couple of good bluffs? This is an excerpt of a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

David Long says

The definitive history of Poker. Jimbo himself describes it as more "the story of poker" as he recounts the history of America's Game in stories, folk tales, reportage, and anecdotes. McManus is an accomplished poet, teacher of writing, and previously published "Positively Fifth Street..." the groundbreaking poker memoir.
