CARDS ON THE TABLE

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Game Ball and Other Essays
by Peter Alson
Arbitrary Press, 2021
227 pp.
Hardcover USD 23.95
Paperback USD 9.99
Ebook USD 7.99

PETER ALSON'S *GAME BALL AND OTHER ESSAYS* IS AN ANTHOLOGY of memoirs, journalism, and fiction, published over the forty years of his writing career. The thirty-one selections cover childhood memories, recollections of the interesting and odd folks he's met along the way, and, mostly, tales of the gambling life (Alson was a bookie and has played tournament poker). There is also some fiction.

The collection overall reads like a scrapbook. The subjects lead to interesting stories, some of which are very compelling reads, some of which fly by as the reader moves on to the next one, which is not necessarily a bad thing in a collection that ranges over this many topics and genres. Alson has many gems in this collection. Other selections make one wonder why they were included.

The non-fiction gems all seem to involve different aspects of the world of pro poker playing and the gambling life. It's an area that Alson knows well and here he writes with confidence, energy, and insight.

Poker makes for a fascinating metaphor for survival in this world. Excellence in poker depends less on skill with cards as it does on skills with people. You need to observe closely and silently, and act quickly and decisively. "I can tell what each player has in his hand without ever looking at my cards,"

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 15, NO. 1, FALL 2021. Copyright © 2021. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

poker guru Doyle Brunson once said. It requires brains, nerve, and conviction. If one is lacking in any one of these areas, it will be sniffed out immediately. It is as if the law of the jungle was being played out by humans of underrated intelligence instead of big cats of immense cunning. And in the end, the one who sniffs out what's real from what's smoke will end up on top. Such journeys and the discoveries made along the way are endlessly dramatic, whether the subject is Hamlet or Johnny Chan.

"Love and Death In The Desert," about the turbulent life and hard death of casino owner Ted Binion, reads like both a true crime drama and the search for something real in Las Vegas where, it seems, everything is a lie except for sex, violence, and money. When Binion, scion of Las Vegas royalty, meets Sandy Murphy, a topless dancer almost thirty years younger than he, he's smitten. And when she refuses to accept his generous tip, he's lost in love. It must be love, what's stronger than money? He's found what he's been looking for his whole life, something honest and true that he can anchor his life to. Trouble was, it wasn't the first time. Ted threw off his current blond, much younger wife to be with Sandy. He'd also been having a long-running affair with heroin. This, plus the usual connections to gangsters and hangers-on, eventually costs him his casino, the legendary Binion's Horseshoe. When he needs to extract his silver coins and bullion from one of the Horseshoe's underground vaults, he enlists the help of his new friend Rick Tabish, an ex-con from Montana looking to start a new life in the desert. Binion probably had the money and resources to just hire someone legit to extract what was his from the vault but, as Alson says, he liked living on the edge. When he turns up dead shortly after, surrounded by heroin wrappers and Xanax bottles, it seems like just another sad Vegas story. The next night, Tabish is arrested trying to extract the silver (valued at $7 million and weighing about 48,000 pounds) from the hiding spot he and Ted had devised. Soon Tabish and Murphy are charged with Ted's murder once *their* affair is exposed. Was it all a lie, a con? Or was it just how life spins in the City of Sin, where one impulsive move leads to another and where nothing, as Tabish described his relationship with Murphy, is what people think it is.

In "The Education of Phil Hellmuth" about the champion poker player and less-than-stable personality, Alson quotes the poker veteran Pug Pearson: "The first thing a gambler has to do is make friends with himself. A lot of people go through this world thinking they're someone else . . . in poker that can be fatal." Hellmuth ends up getting exposed at the poker table and,

in a bizarre twist that just confirms how weird life can be sometimes, decides to cure his gambling problem by devoting himself to tournament poker. He embraces his mother's self-help maxims and ends up winning the World Series of Poker, only to find that it's not enough, he's the kind of guy who will always go for the big score as opposed to playing it safe. It's just his nature. Alson's writing captures both the excitement and knowing disappointment of living this way. You're cheering for Hellmuth even as Pearson's words ring in your ears and you know where the story is heading. Is it comedy or tragedy? In Alson's telling, it's actually both.

"Chan is Bluffing," which Alson wrote for *Esquire*, is something of a companion piece to the Hellmuth story. Johnny Chan, who in the late eighties and early nineties was acknowledged as the best poker player in the world, is facing off against Hellmuth when the story opens. Chan is all cool, calm confidence as opposed to Hellmuth's bluster, like Edward G. Robinson facing off against Steve McQueen in *The Cincinnati Kid.* Chan sees that Hellmuth's act will also be his downfall, but can't deny the kid's talent, and knows he must play at the top of his game to beat him. Hellmuth is good enough to beat the other players at the table, but one gets the sense that this was Chan's plan all along, which is confirmed when Chan walks away with the game. Alson spends a few days walking around with Chan at both the tables and life. Chan is something of a poker savant, having excelled at tournament poker from the first game he tried. His expertise isn't necessarily bluffing but being able to read someone else's bluff. "You have to convince yourself of what you're doing. If you don't believe it, it shows." Even gamblers have a limit to the fake-it-until-you-make-it approach, it seems, and as Alson says about Chan, game recognizes game.

The search for the real also comes in, through a side door, in "Mad Dogs and Glory" about the World Championship Wrestling tryout camp in Atlanta. For $250 and paying your own travel expenses, fifteen men get to be physically and verbally abused by WCW trainers as they work to get into pro wrestling-level shape. Alson admits in his introduction to the story that he wasn't sure there was a story here because pro wrestling "is all fake." What he discovers is it may be all entertainment, but it's far from fake. The pain and abuse these fifteen wannabes endure is all too real, so much so that the training camp becomes something of a war of attrition, a game of Last Man Standing. Five of the fifteen are gone by lunchtime of the first day. Reading how this crowd of tough guys—bar bouncers, contractors, ex-football play-

ers—get whittled down to an eventual *four* is fascinating, if only for the descriptions of the masochism these men are willing to undertake (one ex-footballer says "two-a-days have nothing on this"). The ones who show up out of curiosity or because it "would be a cool thing to do" are gone quickly. Others just flat out refuse to give up, no matter how much abuse is thrown at them. One exercise is called Running The Gauntlet, where the trainees have to leap into a ring, bounce off the ropes, flip onto their backs, get up, roll out of the ring and then into two more rings to do the whole thing over again *twice*. The pushups and squats that follow feel like relief. The trainees are all caught between never having quit anything in their lives and this unabashed, almost comical run of torture. As former wrestler and camp instructor Lash LeRoux says, "You find out a lot about yourself when you go through something like this."

In these and the other non-fiction stories, these questions—what am I good at? What means anything to me? How can I be better than what I am, and why do I keep getting dragged back to what I really am?—are really about people struggling to live this thing called life, with its empty successes and heavy failures, and searching for the common thread. It shows in the observation and insight Alson brings to each of his subjects. He has a genuine curiosity and obvious respect and love for these flawed humans using what they've got to make their way in a difficult world.

This curiosity and gift for insight unfortunately fades when Alson turns the subject to himself. The autobiographical entries are among the weakest. "A Fish Story," which like many of the stories in this group was originally published in *Sports Illustrated,* has great details and lots of excitement, but it kind of fades in the end. "Game Ball" is also great with details and I was waiting for them to add up, to no avail. "King Pong," like these others, has a great situation, great details, and no wrap-up. It's difficult to write about human nature when you are exploring your own—one usually holds things back or leaves things half-explored which leaves the reader feeling empty, as if something is missing. One of my overarching observations about G*ame Ball and Other Essays* is that because he is such a good observer, because he's learned to use those observations about people to predict what they will do, his best writing comes when he puts himself in the background and goes all in on his other subjects or characters.

This is what makes the one notable exception to the memoir stories—"The Goat Man's Way" which Alson wrote with punk rock icon Legs

O'Neill—stand out. O'Neill, author of *Please Kill Me*, goes with Alson to report on a rattlesnake roundup in Claxton, Georgia, for the *Village Voice*. The story is told in sections titles "Legs" or "Peter" depending on who's doing the writing. The overall effect is fascinating. O'Neill confesses to loving snakes (his childhood nickname was Swamp Rat), Alson hates them. O'Neill says Alson's interest in snakes starts and ends with "buxom women in rattlesnake skin bikinis." Alson talks about Legs' annoying habit of digressing from discussing snakes to traveling back in time to hunt dinosaurs. It is a bit of a buddy comedy that suits each of their voices well. They encounter the "boys" of the rattlesnake roundup, a local event that grew from civic necessity (a young man nearly dying from a rattlesnake bite prompts the town elders to offer bounties on the rattlers) to civic celebration to tourist magnet. When Legs, who has his own snake stick and method for catching the crawlers, is shown up by the locals, who refuse to actually touch the rattler with their own hands, he lashes out at how they can brag about never being bitten when they won't handle the snakes. Alson observes that the town has as much use for real snakes as they have for "a scuzzy runt named Legs O'Neill." The whole thing turns out to be an excuse for a cut-rate parade and some hijinks by Shriners. Alson and O'Neill are overcome by the sheer phoniness of it all. It makes Peter want to go back to New York, but Legs is determined to catch a snake and vindicate himself. They are tipped to an old-timer's farm where there are dozens of snake holes. The old-timer, Jebbie-Gee, the Goat Man, finally tells them after much searching that years ago a bunch of men came onto the land and took all the snakes away. But seeing Jebbie-Gee on his land, speaking a native dialect that maybe only he spoke, Alson realizes that the "last living reptile in these parts was human." For two New Yorkers going south looking for some authentic, Hemingway-esque experience, the Goat Man was their redemption.

Alson's fiction stories are all quite good. Once again, his observations of behavior and how those behaviors presage what people will do and what happens to them are spot on.

In "Jimmy Ahern's Last Hand," Alson draws to an inside straight and nails it. It could have turned out saccharine and phony, or it could have dug too deep in the crud of it's environment, but instead he pens a lovely story with perfect balance. The contrast between the family life and professional stakes of Jimmy, who runs the club and lives with his wife and two teen

children, is beautifully drawn. Jimmy makes lots of money at the club but it's not about the money, at least until two wise guys show up wanting to shake him down. Jimmy's response is to threaten to close the club, but no one, not his partner, not the mob guys, not anyone who works for him, and certainly not his family, take him seriously. One half expects him to take all of them on, selfishly putting each one in danger from another, given the world Jimmy runs in and how he needs to be to survive, but there's a surprise, one which is earned and fully supported by the previous events. It's not a long story, but in the short arc of the tale Jimmy, and Alson, and us, go on the journey to find what's real and what's really real. It is a beautiful read.

Reading Alson at his best unfortunately can also make the less-than-best stories stand out. One wonders why so many of the *Sports Illustrated* stories were included, other than the fact that they were published in *Sports Illustrated*. Choosing the best of the lot might have been a better choice. Not leading off the anthology with all of them also might have served Alson well.

Some of the stories feel oddly dated, in a way that over-accentuates the fact that they may have been written the '80s or '90s. I'm less than ten years younger than Alson, and I remember many of the phrases and attitudes in a lot of these stories that hit wrong notes to a modern audience. "There's even women at the tables!" says Phil Hellmuth in one story, and that quotation, presented without modern context, immediately places it in the time it was written in a way that pushes the reader away, rather than draws the reader close. References to Mr. Magoo or Lexis-Nexis searches (Google them) also don't help. It forces me to face that this story was written thirty or more years ago in a very different world, and in stories that have the energy of the present tense it becomes a discordant note. When stories feel of the moment it is usually a good thing, unless the moment has passed.

I am still baffled by the inclusion of five blog posts at the end of the anthology, especially coming after the very moving "One Last Drink" (more on that below), which would have been a perfect note to go out on. This may reflect my own personal preference or limited experience, but in that experience I've seen very few blog posts that are worthy of inclusion in anyone's anthology, and these five are no exception. Like most blog posts, they're pretty much what George Carlin called "brain droppings." The reader

watches Alson's brain work, which at times can be entertaining, but the blog posts don't show him at his best. Tales meander, stories are incomplete, and in the end their inclusion feels a bit indulgent.

On the whole, the collection in G*ame Ball and Other* Essays is solid, at times transcendent, but probably too long. As individual stories many of them shine, as a collection it seems put together without much thought or outside help. Reading G*ame Ball and Other* Essays from cover to cover can feel like sitting next to someone on a long plane or train trip who starts spinning yarns which go down smooth, produce a few laughs, but just don't stop. But then, when you're ready to put on your headphones and tune the person out, he or she pulls out a corker that gets under your skin and stays with you. I'll not soon forget the ordeal of would-be wrestlers, the tension and racing minds of high-stakes poker players, and the wrong turns that led people he thought were fun acquaintances to end up dead in an alley. As a playwright, I could see using many of these as prompts for scripts (attention producers and agents).

One other tale I won't soon forget involves the shenanigans in Norman Mailer's hospital room on what turned out to be the last day of his life. "One Last Drink," which is perhaps the most moving story of the whole collection, comes late in the anthology. The story has Alson at the bedside of his uncle Norman Mailer, reflecting on the Bantu philosophy of muntu, or life energy, that Mailer discusses in his book, *The Fight.* Muntu holds that humans are not so much beings as they are forces. Mailer's son Michael decides to bring by the makings of Mailer's favorite drink at the moment, rum and orange juice. The gathered family members all agree that this is appropriate. Mailer, loaded down with tubes and terminally weak, gets impatient waiting for the drink, and when Michael finally arrives, all they have is a plastic hospital cup. That will never do. He tells the collected visitors to find a real glass. Somehow, they do. Mailer, barely able to speak, still takes it upon himself to school Michael on the exact proportions of the drink and, of course, rejects using a straw. Breathing tube be damned, Mailer pulls the medical apparatus aside and takes a proper pull. He then smiles and passes the drink around for everyone to share, "drinking in the Mailer muntu and the sweet taste of rum." Character is action, as playwrights say. It's a perfect tribute to the man.

No human can flash that level of muntu every day of our lives, and similarly, none of us can write with the muntu of "Chan is Bluffing" or "The

Goat Man's Way" or "Jimmy Ahern's Last Hand" every time out. That fact shouldn't take from the accomplishment that the best of the stories in G*ame Ball and Other Essays* reflect, but it does make others suffer when forced to compare. That said, like in poker, don't let a lousy hand force you out of the game. Trust me, there's better ones coming.