

DEALER'S CHOICE

ROBERT SINGER

The Only Way To Play It

By Peter Alson

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THERE HAVE BEEN SEVERAL NOTEWORTHY NOVELS ABOUT GAMBLING, from poker to roulette, such as Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler*, Nelson Algren's *The Man With the Golden Arm*, Mario Puzo's *Fools Die*, and other works of fiction that seemingly traverse the line between the life of the author and his protagonist. These novels are frequently situated in well-known locations, such as Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and Monte Carlo. Now, to rival these seminal works of gambling prose, *The Only Way To Play It*, a new work of fiction by the contemporary novelist, Peter Alson, features a complex yet oddly attractive character, Nate Fischer, living the life of the subterranean gambler in New York City.

Nate's life of shuffling cards and subway rides is not restricted to the illegal gambling dens in undetected sites across the city; he also has a family and an assortment of friends who seemingly fell out of a Damon Runyon novel, if Runyon were still alive and practicing the art of New York City "typage." The assorted characters one encounters throughout the novel are people one might pass by in the streets of mid-town, on the subway, or in a grocery store; but then, the added fixation of the game enters the picture and all bets are on that Alson's novel take Nate into a world we imagine *when* we imagine what it must be like to place that one bet that cleans out the

house, presumably, if one lives to exit the house. Alson's novel depicts the daily life—diapers and dinners—and gambling routine of a man determined to continually get into the game. Despite Nate's legion of personal flaws, and occasional scenes of real violence associated with bad gambling and loads of loose cash, we oddly root for Nate—after all, he is a family man.

Alson's novel is rich with descriptive energy, with an extraordinary ear for regional dialogue and observational details. For example, when he writes: "We got off the B train at Brighton Beach. The afternoon air was salty and lush, even under the shadow of the El tracks. . . . We walked a few blocks down the bustling avenue, past a motley assortment of shops with signs mostly in Russian. A group of men walked ahead in three-wide formation, forcing aside old ladies toting packages. Two of them wore thin leather gangster jackets and jeans, and the third, who was older, wore a snap-brim cap and a tight-fitting patterned sweater."¹ Alson is describing the scents and sights of a common, ominous presence, familiar to those who witness the routines of the locals. It is a rough city.

Alson writes about gambling, contemporary families, obsessive behavior (both comedic and serious) and a city that he knows and celebrates, especially Brooklyn, the borough of churches and covert burial sites; one theorizes what it would be like to enter into the game with Alson as a coach. At least we have this exceptional work of fiction to supplement his presence in the big game. Poker has a novel, new champion at the table.