The Best and the Brightest

By A. Alvarez

One of a Kind: The Rise and Fall of Stuey "The Kid" Ungar, the World's Greatest Poker Player
by Nolan Dalla and Peter Alson, with a foreword by Mike Sexton
Atria, 316 pp., $25.00

The Professor, the Banker, and the Suicide King: Inside the Richest Poker Game of All Time
by Michael Craig
Warner, 282 pp., $24.95

1.

According to Alexis de Tocqueville, belief in luck was one of the fundamental characteristics that separated the closed hierarchical societies of Europe from the wide-open democracy of the New World, where class distinctions were fluid and the possibility of going from log cabin to White House wasn't a foolish dream: "Those who live in the midst of democratic fluctuations," he wrote, "have always before their eyes the image of chance, and they end by liking all undertakings in which chance plays a part."

Tocqueville was writing when poker was still a crude riverboat gambling game, but as it spread north up the Mississippi, then west with the gold rush and cowboys—stud poker got its name from horses—it gradually developed into a pastime that seemed to embody the frontier spirit. Like pioneering, poker thrived on great expectations and self-reliance, on risk-taking and opportunism as well as the willingness to fold a losing hand and move on. By the turn of the century it had become the national game, as intrinsic to the American psyche as chess is to the Russian, cricket to the English, and motor-racing to the Italian. "The game," said Walter Matthe, "exemplifies the worst aspects of capitalism that have made our country so great." Poker, he meant, is social Darwinism in its purest, most brutal form: the weak go under and the fittest sur-vive through calculation, insight, self-control, deception, plus an unwavering determination never to give a sucker an even break.

In 1960, John Scarne, one of the great authorities on gambling, reckoned that poker was played regularly by at least 47 million Americans. Yet despite its popularity, there was always something shady about the game, as though it had never quite freed itself from its crooked origins. Old poker, as it was first played early in the nineteenth century in the casinos of New Orleans and on the Mississippi steamboats, was a game for four people, played with a twenty-card deck; each player was dealt five cards, bet or folded them according to their value, then showed down his hand. Because there was no further draw from the pack to upset the distribution of the cards, it was an ideal game for cardsharps who knew how to fix the deck or mark the cards. By mid-century the game had been adapted to a fifty-two-card deck, but the cheaters didn't go away; they simply adjusted
their skills to the challenge and their continuing presence in illegal backroom games—or the threat of it—darkened the reputation of the game. Even in the legal poker rooms of Las Vegas, there was no guarantee that all games were straight until the mob lost control of the casinos and the new corporate owners realized there was more profit in honesty than in cheating.

"Is poker a game of chance?" someone asks W.C. Fields in *My Little Chickadee*. "Not the way I play it," he replies. Fields is an old-style cardsharp and he dresses the part—top hat, white gloves, dingy frock coat. These days professional poker players prefer bomber jackets and baseball caps, but on the question of chance they and Fields would agree: all of them work on the principle that poker, like chess, is a game of skill and the better player will always win in the long run. (What they don't mention is that even for the best players, the short run can sometimes last longer than they could ever imagine.) Like artists, the professionals see themselves as free spirits, loners who work outside the system, without bosses to answer to or timetables that they haven't chosen for themselves, and they thrive, some of them spectacularly, simply by virtue of their natural talents. Most have photographic memories and all of them—even old-timers like Puggy Pearson and the late Johnny Moss, whose schooling ended at third grade—are blessed with two gifts: a flair for mathematics that enables them to calculate the odds precisely at each turn of the cards, and an instinct for "reading" other players—for sniffing out the vanities and fears that make them vulnerable, and for figuring out the cards they are holding. It is a formidable combination that would probably bring them success in the straight world, yet, until very recently, when poker became an international craze, even the finest players seemed uneasy about the social status of their chosen profession.

2.

The most conspicuous exception was Stuey Ungar, who is generally reckoned to have been the most gifted card player of all time. In *One of a Kind*, his biographers, Nolan Dalla and Peter Alson, make it clear that Ungar was never bothered by the opinion of the straight world for the simple reason that he had very little contact with it. His father was a bookie and loan-shark who owned a Lower East Side bar called Fox's Corner on Second Avenue and 7th Street. The place was popular with gangsters, so Stuey, who went there with his older sister, Judith, every day after school from first grade on, spent what passed for his childhood hanging around "wiseguys." As he told Nolan Dalla,

I always tried to make excuses to hustle up to the bar where all the guys were talking. I wanted to see what was going on. The first thing I can remember, the first conscious memory that I have, was learning how to work the soda gun. I musta drunk ten Cokes a day trying to weasel my way up to the bar to hear their conversations. I just wanted to be part of it.

Stuey was hyperactive and extremely smart, a fiercely competitive kid who loved taking
risks, but he was also undersized, skinny, and fragile; he got his kicks from indoor games, starting with checkers and Monopoly with his sister, then graduating swiftly to cards—always for money, since gambling was what everyone did at Fox's Corner. School bored him but he had a talent for numbers and by sixth grade he was keeping the books for his illiterate father. Like most bookies, Ungar Senior didn't gamble, but his wife had a passion for cards, which she played very badly, while her small son looked on and tried to tell her what to do. "From the time I was seven," Stuey told Dalla,

I was watching my mother play poker and gin; I was helping my father out, balancing his books. I mean, before I could tie my fucking shoelaces, I could handicap a horse race.

If his father had lived he might have kept the boy in school, but he died in flagrante with one of his many mistresses when Stuey was fourteen, leaving him to his feeckless mother. Her son may have taught her cards, but she apparently taught him nothing in return; it was another twenty-five years before he learned even elementary table manners from the exasperated wife of a friend. He dropped out of school, got hired as a dealer in an illegal card club, and began to make serious money playing gin rummy.

The previous year, when the family celebrated his bar mitzvah at the Americana Hotel, there were, he told Dalla, "so many wiseguys there, the feds wanted to subpoena my bar mitzvah album." After the death of his father, the wiseguys became his family. Dalla and Alson are understandably reticent about Ungar's connections to the mob, but the implication is that they were steady and deep. He was virtually adopted by a foot soldier in the Genovese crime family, an ex-con called Victor Romano, who ran a group of card clubs in midtown Manhattan. Romano may have felt sorry for the boy, but he also saw him as a source of income. Stuey, at fourteen, played gin rummy so well that he was already beating all the best players on the East Coast; by the time he was sixteen, he was so good that no one would take him on, so he was forced to concentrate on poker. But he was also an addicted gambler who had no use for money except for gambling; he earned fortunes playing gin, then immediately blew them at the race track. From Romano's point of view, that made him a precious asset, to be saved from harm:

Stuey was invited to a sit-down with the boss of bosses, the Mafia captain Gus Frasca. Victor [Romano] thought it was important to make his relationship with Stuey official, so that everyone would understand the Kid belonged to him. The meeting with Frasca... lasted no more than five minutes, but when Frasca shook Stuey's hand it was as if the king's sword had been touched to the shoulders of a young knight.

"I'm a made man," Stuey bragged to everyone after the meeting. He loved his association with organized crime. Being connected carried enormous stature in the gambling underworld, and it was a virtual guarantee of personal protection.

For Stuey, "being connected" was like a grant from some grand foundation. For the gangsters, it was simply a no-lose proposition: they staked him to play cards, took a percentage of his winnings, and then took another hefty cut from the bookies to whom he promptly lost the rest. That, presumably, is what his biographers mean when they call him "a stake horse for the mob."

Ungar's nickname among the mobsters was "Meyer," as in Meyer Lansky; in poker circles, in deference to his fearlessness, he was known as "the Kamikaze Kid." But his gifts as a card-player were so uncanny that he has also been called "the Mozart of poker." The poker-playing novelist James McManus wrote about Ungar in Positively Fifth Street, his fascinating account of how he became the only literary man ever to make it to the final table of the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas—he finished in sixth place, walking away with a quarter of a million dollars. "Brutally precise in assaulting big pots," McManus writes admiringly, "Ungar's near-suicidal black magic with chips mesmerized countless opponents into folding superior hands to him." McManus is fascinated by the headlong nature of Ungar's genius and how similar it was to the "impossible, even deranged leaps of insight that seem to be a common denominator dividing ordinary artists from the biggest of the big boys and girls." He makes a persuasive case that in his reckless and defiant use of his remarkable skills, Ungar can be compared to Sylvia Plath.
Dalla and Alson's biography is full of examples of Ungar's uncanny gift for reading his opponents' cards. In one cash game, for instance, he called a bet of $32,000 with a mere 10 and 9 of different suits in his hand because he somehow knew—correctly—that his opponent was holding nothing better than a 4 and a 5 or a 5 and 6. As the hand evolved card by card and bet by bet, there was a weird logic to Ungar's call, but we see this only with hindsight, because we know the concealed cards of each player. In the heat of the action, with $32,000 at stake, analysis of that order has less to do with logic than with creative imagination—that is, with the intuitive certainty with which artists know what they know. If he had got it wrong, the call would have seemed suicidal, but he made it his business not to get things like that wrong. Even so, the sheer arrogance and daring of his call are astonishing. I'm sure Sylvia Plath would have approved.

Despite his ability to read his opponents, Ungar had no idea how to deal with them away from the card table. Other professionals who make their living in the biggest games are often as proficient in charm as they are at cards. I once asked one of them why amateurs would ever want to play with him, knowing they couldn't win. "My goal is to make people feel it's very classy to lose," he answered. "It means that they're obviously very rich or, if not, that they handle themselves well." Stuey, reared by thugs, had no charm. "He was an obnoxious winner and a poor sport," his biographers write, "a taunter and a braggart," who had no "understanding of the art of the hustle. Once he started playing, his competitive instincts took over and overwhelmed common sense. His mission wasn't to win money—it was to destroy people and be the best ever. As a result, he...scared away potential opponents."

Ungar threw tantrums at the table, tore up cards that offended him, swore at the dealers, and sometimes spat at them. Not only did he spend most of his life without learning how to use a knife and fork, he also ran through millions of dollars without ever having a bank account or a credit card. The first time he won the World Series, in 1980, only a few months after he started playing Hold 'em—a version of poker in which each player is dealt two cards face down and uses them in combination with the five communal cards open on the table—he was unable to collect his winnings immediately because he had no Social Security card. When he won the title again the following year, he appeared on The Merv Griffin Show, for which he was paid $300, plus a further $100 for the rerun. "Just think," he said proudly, "in my whole life, those were the only paychecks I ever received."

Sixteen years later, Ungar won the title a third time—the only player ever to have done so—but by then his life was in shreds. In New York, after his father died, his mother had become addicted to painkillers and his sister to heroin, but Stuey stuck with his addiction to nonstop action: when the card games bored him he threw his money away at the racetrack or betting sports with the bookies. He could brilliantly calculate the odds involved in playing fifty-two cards but the odds on flesh-and-blood horses and football players are harder to predict. When his debts made New York too hot for him, he moved to Las Vegas where the action never stops and the crowd he mixed with bet on everything—just to make it more interesting. But gambling is legal in Nevada, so perhaps it lacked some of the thrill it had back east and, in place of an inner life, he needed some other stimulant. So he started taking drugs—not casually, for relaxation, but in the same headlong, suicidal way in which he gambled—and by the time he made his great comeback to win the World Series for a record third time, in 1997, they had almost destroyed him. According to his biographers, he looked and smelled like a hobo and had snorted so much cocaine that one side of his nose had caved in like a punctured tire. He was also broke and had difficulty persuading anyone to stake him for the $10,000 entry fee.

That third title won him a million dollars. Half of it went to the man who backed him, the rest was gone within months, most of it on crack and coke, and the following year he was too far gone even to try to defend his title. Six months later he was found dead in a seedy hotel in downtown Las Vegas; a porno movie was running on the television and there was vomit on the floor. During his lifetime, Ungar is reckoned to have won $30 million at cards—well over $100 million in today's currency—but "the cheapest commodity in his life was always money," and he died broke. To help out his long-neglected widow and daughter, his high-rolling pals took up a collection at his funeral.

3.
Ungar’s self-destructiveness was dreadful, but the waste that went with it was worse: aside from the millions he casually threw away, he had an IQ of 185 and he used it only for gambling. Naturally, he enjoyed his fearsome reputation and the titles he had won, and he wanted them on record—if only to give his daughter something to be proud of. *One of a Kind* started as a series of interviews with Nolan Dalla, which Ungar intended to be used in an "as-told-to" autobiography. He loved fame, but he had no idea of how famous he might have become if he had lived a few years longer.

Poker may be America's national game and its second most popular after-dark activity, but until recently high-stakes poker was a small world where all the best players knew each other—if not personally, at least by name. It's still a small world at the top but now, thanks to television, the rest of the world knows who's who in it. *World Poker Tour* is the Travel Channel's highest-rated show; it is also that rarest of television successes, a show with an audience that grows with each rerun. Poker is now the rock and roll of the dot-com world, played on the Internet by millions of hopefuls every hour of the day and night, throughout the globe. When Ungar won his second World Series title, in 1981, there were seventy-five contestants and his prize money was $375,000. Last year 5,619 players anted up $10,000 each and the winner, an unknown Australian called Joe Hachem, finished up with $7,500,000, the largest prize in the history of any game or sport.

There are plenty of young Internet players who win their way into televised tournaments. Most of them wear their baseball caps back-to-front, have a Web site's brand name on their shirts, and, like Ungar, have a talent for mathematics and a restricted view of culture. Stuey's reading stopped at the sports pages; the new kids were brought up on comic books, Tolkien, and Dungeons & Dragons. Some of them make a good living from cards but few, as yet, belong to the true poker elite. The highest rollers are a tight-knit group, presided over by two of the greatest living players, Doyle Brunson and Chip Reese. Their base is the high-stakes section of the Bellagio casino's poker room in Las Vegas, and what happens there—who wins and how much—is strictly confidential.

Five years ago, however, confused rumors of a gigantic game began to circulate: a billionaire banker from Dallas had come to the Bellagio wanting to play as high as the professionals cared to make it. Previously, the biggest game at the Bellagio had been for limits of $4,000 and $8,000 (i.e., players would bet in units of $4,000 in the first two rounds of betting, then $8,000 in the second two rounds). The banker, Andy Beal, preferred $10,000 and $20,000, and wanted to go higher. The pros eventually obliged, reckoning Beal to be just another rich fish waiting to be landed. They started playing him in February 2001 and went on intermittently, whenever Beal had time to spare, until May 2004. By then, the stakes had been raised to an astonishing $100,000–$200,000, making it the biggest game in history. Michael Craig's *The Professor, the Banker, and the Suicide King* is a fascinating account of what happened.

Professional poker players are notoriously reticent about their wins and losses, so Craig, a lawyer who loves poker, must be an exceptionally sympathetic listener to have got them to talk about the marathon so freely and in such detail since the sums involved were so enormous as to seem unreal. High-stakes poker players have always inhabited an alternative universe in which money has no meaning except as a way of keeping score, and what you do with your chips—when and how you bet or check (i.e., pass up your opportunity to bet) or raise—is simply a form of communication. The goods and pleasures those chips could buy in the real world are of no interest to the high-rollers until they get up from the table. When Andy Beal came to town, however, the stakes became so high that the real world reappeared in their calculations and they began to fear for what Doyle Brunson calls "the poker economy."

On his first visit, Beal left the Bellagio $100,000 ahead, which the pros took as a good sign, indicating that he had got lucky and would be back. They figured correctly, but underestimated their man. Beal wasn't just a brilliant businessman who had gone from fixing broken TV sets to owning his own bank; he was also, among other achievements, a self-taught mathematician who had worked on Fermat's Last Theorem. When he turned to poker he wanted to start at the top and beat the best players at their own game:

Andy would never be able to match them for experience and instinct. On the other hand, he felt he could match—and maybe exceed—their ability to work out the right play based on the odds with the brute force of his intellect and
Back home in Dallas after his first trip to Vegas, he wrote his own program in BASIC, ran millions of hands through a computer, studied the results, and practiced constantly, in the belief that he could beat the pros by perfect calculation of the odds and unwaveringly correct play. And because the top players have extraordinary powers of observation and could pick up "tells" about the cards he held and how he might play them from the smallest clues—from the way he breathed, the tone of his voice, the look in his eyes, or the throbb of a vein in his neck—he also concluded that he must eliminate all traces of personality. The next time he sat down with the pros at the Bellagio he wore wraparound dark glasses and earphones clapped to his head to keep out the small talk. He must have looked like some robot from an alien planet, but people who play poker at this level are like the finest intelligence agents; they know practically all there is to know about disguise, duplicity, and betrayal.

Beal's one true advantage was his wealth but he could only make that count if he played them "heads-up" (i.e., one on one), and raised the stakes so high that his opponents were out of their "comfort zone." Comfort zone is a curious concept for people used to playing for hundreds of thousands of dollars, but Craig has a telling example of what it means. In one of the later games, when Beal's opponent left the table to go to the bathroom, his place was taken by Lyle Berman, the venture capitalist who founded the World Poker Tour: "Berman played four hands, two of which he immediately threw away, forfeiting the blinds [the compulsory bets]. He lost $900,000."

No one had ever wanted to play so high before and, though the pros were sure they could beat him, Beal owned a bank and they were only able to take him on by pooling their resources and playing him as a team, each in turn. That was how Beal wanted it but, with hindsight, it was a mistake. It is hard enough for an amateur to go up against the world's best poker players, but to take them on in sequence, each of them starting fresh while he was tiring, was a reckless decision that gave them an extra edge.

He also played too long. One of the many talents that goes to make a professional poker player is the ability to concentrate for hours on end, then quit when his or her concentration begins to falter. Amateurs, even gifted amateurs like Beal, get too caught up in the game to know they are tired; they lose their focus, persuade themselves it is only a momentary lapse, then start throwing their money away. Beal was a formidable disciplined player, but Vegas was not his hometown and he never slept well there; that, too, gave the pros an extra edge.

Just how much they won in the end Craig doesn't say—several million, certainly, though not as much as some of them claimed and nothing like enough to disturb Beal's comfort zone. But it wasn't easy for them and there were times when Beal did so well that he had them running scared. In one day, Craig reports, he won nearly $12 million, half of it from the great Chip Reese. No other amateur had done that before or is ever likely to do it again. Beal's battle with the pros may have cost him a lot of money, but in the real world, where Goliath virtually always beats David, he finished up looking like a winner.

Notes

[3] Johnny Moss also had three World Series titles, but won them outright only twice, in 1971 and 1974. He did not win his first title at the inaugural World Series of Poker in 1970; he was voted champion by the other players.