

Artificial intelligence can't reproduce the mind's complexity. And the loose confederation of mystics who study consciousness barely make sense.

Horgan's writing is vivid, intelligent without being jargony, and personal without being condescending. The amount of research he has done on the mind sciences—which barely communicate with one another—is impressive. And the reader can't help but share his impatience with studies on ill-defined subjects, theories that are not only unverified but unverifiable, endless debates over the relative importance of heredity and environment, and highly educated people who want to test psychoanalytic theory with artificial intelligence or explain consciousness using quantum theory. "When it comes to the human brain," he writes, "there may be no unifying insight that transforms chaos into order." The reader can't help but share that suspicion.

Another thing the reader can't do—at least this one can't—is fully trust Horgan's assessment. He says his goal is to redress his earlier message that the mind's complexity overwhelms neuroscience. Yet this book's message, extended to the rest of the mind sciences, is exactly that. Another goal, he says, is to look at the mind sciences with the proper mix of hope and skepticism, and thereby "protect us from [our] own lust for answers while keeping us open-minded enough to recognize genuine truth." But the book details plenty of grounds for skepticism and none for hope.

Let's assume that the stated goals are window-dressing, that Horgan set out to look for the limitations of the mind sciences, and that he found what he looked for. We distrust scientists who reach conclusions this way. We should distrust science writers who do too.

—Ann Finkbeiner

Contemporary Affairs

THE BIG TEST: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy.

By Nicholas Lemann. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 406 pp. \$27

In *The Promised Land* (1991), Lemann analyzed poverty and race by looking at the "great migration" of American blacks after World War II. Now he analyzes class and race by looking at college admissions tests and affirmative action. Like his earlier book, *The Big Test* is full of valuable insights.

A staff writer at the *New Yorker*, Lemann goes back to the roots of the dreaded SAT (originally the Scholastic Aptitude Test, then the Scholastic Assessment Test). The test originated in Harvard University president James Bryant Conant's desire to transform the university's undergraduate body from an aristocracy of birth to an aristocracy of intellect. The author chronicles the 1948 creation of the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the parent of the SAT, which has tried to perform the mutually inconsistent functions of monitoring the test and marketing it. He also recounts the inevitable appearance of an industry that helps students—those who can afford it—boost their test scores, despite early protestations that this

was impossible; the research on the correlation between test scores and socioeconomic status, aborted because it would necessarily entail delicate social judgments; and the short, unhappy life of the Measure of Academic Talent, which adjusted SAT scores based on the student's family background, but only for internal consumption in the ETS research department.

In Lemann's account of the SAT, this tool designed to eliminate the class system has simply spawned a different but equally rigid hierarchy. He argues that the test (and its graduate school siblings), by directing some young people to the top universities, determines admission to elite status much too early, and does so based on childhood education rather than adult performance. And elite status, once conferred, tends to adhere. He would substitute a more protean system in which "the essential functions and the richest rewards of money and status would devolve to people only temporarily, and strictly on the basis of their performances; there would be as little lifelong tenure on the basis of youthful promise as possible. . . . The purpose of schools should be to expand opportunity, not to determine results."

Conant discovered a letter in which Thomas Jefferson sounded a meritocratic note,

embracing the “pure selection of . . . natural aristoi into the office of government.” (In another context—and in a phrase that Conant said he would never be so tactless as to quote—Jefferson proposed that “20 of the best geniuses . . . be raked from the rubbish and be instructed at the public expense.”) Replying to Jefferson’s letter, John Adams wrote: “Your distinction between the aristoi and the pseudo aristoi will not help the matter. I would trust one as soon as the other with unlimited power.” In Lemann, Adams’s healthy skepticism lives on.

—Adam Yarmolinsky

DOUBLE DOWN:

Reflections on Gambling and Loss.

By Frederick and Steven Barthelme.
Houghton Mifflin. 198 pp. \$24

IN NEVADA:

*The Land, the People, God,
and Chance.*

By David Thomson. Knopf. 330 pp.
\$27.50

Frederick and Steven Barthelme were no ordinary gamblers. They were college professors and writers who blew an inheritance from their father—some quarter of a million dollars—in a riverboat casino at Biloxi, Mississippi. The Barthelme brothers knew what they were doing while they were doing it, and, in *Double Down*, they describe the process with extraordinary insight and humor.



They liked gambling for what it is—an escape into another world where, sometimes, magic things happen.

“Early on,” they write, “you notice that winning and losing are not so different. . . . The dizzying adrenal rush is much the same whether the chips come back to you or go in the dealer’s rack. . . . It’s not whether you win or lose but that you *play*.” They discovered that they liked their fellow gamblers, too. “We found that we understood these gamblers bet-

ter than we understood the men and women at the university, people who—full of purpose and high sentence and often considerable charm—seemed curiously reduced when it came to vision and possibility.” (Love that Miltonic “high sentence”!)

Double Down ends, surprisingly, not with the ruin of the rake’s progress, but with the casino’s blundering and accusing the Barthelmes of cheating—and that on a night when they had lost more than 10 grand. (The charges were later dropped.) Still, the casino’s obstinacy has helped produce this fine addition to the literature of gambling, a moving celebration of the urge to take a chance.

In *Nevada* allows Thomson to zoom his camera over the length and breadth of this casino-laden state, a place situated “on the edge, on the wire, a bit off to the side” of America, yet profound in its influence on the whole country. An English-born film critic and historian (and a very good one), Thomson conjures up myriad movie stories, as if pitching for funds to make an art film. His extended description of Frank Sinatra, allowing his music to “just issue forth like long narrative lines, telegraph lines in the desert,” is worth the price of admission alone. And Thomson is especially revealing about the nuclear side of Nevada: the drama, the testing, the fallout—a more fearful movie script about the biggest gamble of all.

In *Nevada* is an evocative (if sometimes overwritten) tribute to the desert beauty of Nevada and the author’s fascination with Las Vegas. As with some movies, Thomson writes, we might have been better off without them, but can you take your eyes away from the sight?

—David Spanier

REPUBLIC OF DENIAL:

Press, Politics and Public Life.

By Michael Janeway. Yale Univ. Press.
216 pp. \$22.50

Reading this book, I kept thinking of Stephen Blackpool, the worker-hero of *Hard Times*, Dickens’s 1854 rebuke of the early industrial age. “Tis a muddle,” the poor soul says toward the beginning of the novel, establishing what will become his sad mantra. “Tis just a muddle altogether, an’ the sooner I am