

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