

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

dead, the better.” As Janeway unspools his thoughtful but ceaselessly gloomy interpretation of our times, the goal seems to be to plunge the reader into Blackpoolian despair.

Janeway, a professor at Columbia University’s graduate school of journalism and former editor of the *Boston Globe*, believes that just about everything in American public life has turned dead rotten. In the old days, the time between World War II and the 1970s, the government and the Washington press “did business about the great issues of the day in an atmosphere of great trust.” Yes, the country faced awful problems, but national “unity” and “coherence” made the problems seem tractable.

Then public life fell apart. Politics and the press, which, working in concert, had helped knit together the broad American community, became unrecognizable. “By the late 1990s, the combination of structural decay in American governance and politics and populist nihilism about both hung over the country like a toxic cloud.” As for the future, the author glumly anticipates “more of the same.”

Janeway buttresses his argument with exten-

sive citations from academic studies, polls, journalism, fiction, and other sources, always marshaled in just-so fashion. In one passage, for instance, he calls on poet William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1947) and philosopher Sissela Bok’s *Secrecy* (1982) to evoke the mixed motives and feelings of journalists who cover politicians’ private lives. He is a master of subtle distinctions—his nuances have nuances—and his skill in making fine points sets him apart from the usual exegetes of the grand public narrative.

But Janeway’s nuances are all in service of a thesis so unrelentingly pessimistic that one wonders how a gray-area connoisseur ever came to embrace it. Eulogizing the newspaper business, he barely mentions the fact that newspapers—and journalism itself, perhaps—are being reborn on the Internet right now, which is as much a cause for hope as for despair. Though Dickens killed off Stephen Blackpool, the Industrial Revolution wound up being not half bad for humankind. One wants to ask Janeway: couldn’t the same be said of our times?

—William Powers

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