chiatrist) and Ishmael Beah, author of the best-selling book *A Long Way Gone,* which describes his experience as a child soldier in Sierra Leone. Burroughs's foster family disputes his account; reporters questioned details and the chronology of Beah's war years.

The genre's appeal persists, however, and Yagoda examines its development with a journalist's thoroughness, beginning with a few modern milestones: the *Million Little Pieces* fiasco; the record $10 million advance paid to Bill Clinton for *My Life* (2004); the bizarre sagas surrounding both O. J. Simpson's *If I Did It* (2007), his supposedly hypothetical confession of how he murdered his ex-wife, and Peter Golenbock's "inventive memoir" detailing the sexual exploits of Mickey Mantle.

Yagoda tends to lean on extended excerpts, and some readers may skim the longer quotations. But the narrative accelerates as he chronicles the first half of the 19th century, when the "most original and remarkable American autobiographical subgenre . . . drew on narratives of conversion, repentance, captivity, and adventure," as in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). The mid-1800s were dominated by works from P. T. Barnum, Ulysses S. Grant, and Mark Twain, all accomplished storytellers and showmen. Barnum, "perhaps the greatest self-promoter of all time," eagerly and candidly described many of the hoaxes he perpetrated during his performances, including the Feejee Mermaid, "likely the result of someone surgically connecting a fish tail with a monkey's torso and head."

The 20th century saw the birth of the "as told to" memoir, as well as the modernist tradition of transforming autobiography into fiction, exemplified by such classics as Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1922–31) and Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar* (1963). In the last several decades, Yagoda observes, memoir has become more open, even graphic, and authorship has been "democratized"—no longer confined to celebrities and politicians. Today, nearly anyone with a hard-luck story can foist it upon an often eager public.

And what of truth in memoir? In closing, Yagoda excavates the cases of Burroughs, Frey, and numerous others whose integrity was challenged—on the grounds of mere exaggeration for effect, the restructuring or shuffling of chronology, or, in Frey's book, outright lies. Ultimately, Yagoda concludes, "once you begin to write the true story of your life in a form that anyone would possibly want to read, you start to make compromises with the truth."

Eric Liebetrau was the managing editor and nonfiction editor of *Kirkus Reviews* until it closed at the end of last year.

Card Studs

Reviewed by Aaron Mesh

COWBOYS FULL:
The Story of Poker.

By James McManus. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 516 pp. $30

Not long after graduating from college, I, like millions of other enthusiasts infected by the millennial poker craze, developed a slightly unhealthy interest in no-limit Texas hold 'em. Nearly every Friday night, I bellied up to a basement card table or, if a home game couldn't be found, ventured out to an East Tennessee bar called Mayo's, where tournaments of dubious legality and $50 buy-ins started every half-hour. Sometimes I won. More often I watched my weekend pocket money go out the door in somebody else's pocket. After bad nights, I would brood over the suspicion that my inability to bet aggressively signaled a deficiency of character.

I wasn't alone in drawing this parallel. Among James McManus's many insights in *Cowboys Full* is the observation that Americans have long used their homegrown game—a modified French bluffing contest—to define the kind of people they want to be:

The game of poker may be as American as apple pie, but its image has never been as wholesome.

shrewd, bold, unflappable, and streetwise. In tracing poker's lineage from Mississippi riverboats to televised tournaments, McManus argues that gambling strategies influenced national history from the fresh-start aspirations of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal (named after the shuffling and distribution of cards) to the deployment of the insuperable atom bomb (described by a Manhattan Project scientist as "a royal straight flush"). Devised in polyglot 1800s New Orleans and honed on riverboats, poker developed as a uniquely American recreation: a contest played by free-market people, each individual convinced he was a little more equal than everyone else.

In his last book, *Positively Fifth Street* (2003), McManus wryly recounted his improbable fifth-place finish in the 2000 World Series of Poker while on a reporting assignment; as a historian, he is no less lively and nimble. Not a page of *Cowboys Full* goes by without a crackerjack yarn, as McManus shows how the game, like the country, grew in respectability even as its nature remained fundamentally freewheeling. He compares steamboat cardsharps of the 1830s to the bling-sporting rappers of today and makes a case for poker as the true national pastime, capable of righting baseball's wrongs: Arnold Rothstein, the mobster who fixed the 1919 "Black Sox" World Series, was shot dead after refusing to pay his losses in a stud game he thought was rigged. McManus revives the legends of high-stakes gunslingers Wild Bill Hickok and Doc Holliday, but he also shows how friendly games became a staple of the FDR and Truman Oval Offices. Poker even hewed the destiny of Richard Nixon, who as a World War II Navy lieutenant used his "iron butt" to endure marathon sessions of five-card draw; the $8,000 in winnings he brought home helped stake him to a political career.

In its second half, *Cowboys Full* shifts focus to the late-20th-century rise of poker

as a global spectator sport, with an emphasis on epic Las Vegas tournaments at Binion's Horseshoe casino and emergent World Series of Poker celebrities such as the laconic Texan Doyle Brunson and cocaine-addicted whiz kid Stu Ungar. The game's "grittiness and peril might help to explain why its outlaw cachet continues to linger," McManus writes, "even when today's live games are played mostly by well-scrubbed folks sipping mineral water in state-sanctioned card rooms." Cheating may have diminished—though it continues to crop up in online games—but players still feel that they're getting away with something.

McManus suggests a more philosophical side of the game in the person of Herbert O. Yardley, a code breaker, spy, and poker instructor whose nonchalant resilience over three wars and countless careers becomes the book's running joke. Yardley's own book, *The Education of a Poker Player* (1957), counseled honesty and patience as the virtues of the poker table. "In the end," McManus writes, quoting the journalist Al Alvarez, "what he is describing is not so much a game of cards as a style of life." The game that began as a haven for scofflaws, layabouts, and swindlers can build character, too.

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SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

The City's Limits

Reviewed by Catherine Tumber

GREEN METROPOLIS: Why Living Smaller, Living Closer, and Driving Less Are the Keys to Sustainability.

By David Owen. Riverhead. 357 pp. $25.95

From the moment Henry David Thoreau drove a post into the shores of Walden Pond, the American environmental movement declared its hostility toward cities—those sooted handmaidens of industrial despoliation into which, by 1920, half the American population was smooshed. The argument against urban congestion was moral, aesthetic, and increasingly grounded in science. Yet in spite of the hygienic improvements of Progressive-era municipal reforms, the birth of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, and the more recent recognition that auto-dependent suburban sprawl poses grave environmental hazards, cities remain the bane of environmentalists. Today's movement to "green" cities with more open parkland, urban agriculture, and ecologically minded building design belongs to a long tradition.

Contrary to environmentalism's anti-urban bias, David Owen argues, New York City—the *ur*-metropolis itself—is among the greenest human settlements on the planet, measured in terms of its carbon footprint. "The average New Yorker," he points out, "annually generates 7.1 tons of greenhouse gases, a lower rate than that of any other American city, and less than 30 percent of the national average." And the beauty of it is that New Yorkers don't even have to try—or to care. Simply by not driving, and by living on top of one another in small apartments stacked in tall buildings, the denizens of Gotham do more for the environment than the most strenuously eco-friendly composter can imagine.

For those unfamiliar with the environmental argument for urban density, *Green Metropolis* (which developed from a 2004 article Owen wrote for *The New Yorker*) is a fair place to start. Owen devotes a good part of his book to showing that high-tech green fixes—developing an electric-car industry, constructing Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)–certified buildings, and going off the grid with residential solar panels and other technologies—offer false comfort, as long as they perpetuate our dependence on automobile transportation. Such measures do little more than flatter the vanity of architects, engineers, and high-end, conspicuously green consumers, while providing a convenient