

Book Reviews

A Book Review and Essay by Executive Editor, Dr. Bo J. Bernhard

Reno's Big Gamble: Image and Reputation in the Biggest Little City

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"I knew that a City Attractive was bound to grow far faster and longer
than a City Notorious."

-- Reno Mayor Harry E. Stewart, ca. 1923
(quoted in the book)

The city of Reno, Nevada, has a long history in fact and in legend. As such, it was high time for a calm, objective study of this not-always-sober gambling town. This makes us grateful for the 21st century perspective that Alicia Barber, visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, provides in her recent book, *Reno's Big Gamble: Image and Reputation in the Biggest Little City*.

Barber has written what feels like an autobiography of a city, so intimate and so honest are its self-renderings. She pulls off the considerable literary achievement of turning an entire town into a compelling character riding atop a very human plot. Readers will finish this book with a deep affection for Reno, having observed up close its self-doubt, its bold presentations of self, its boom times, its failed chapters, and most importantly, its love-hate relationship with its own reputation.

This latter theme of ambiguity over a city's reputation resonates with those of us who live in Las Vegas—where locals still cringe at the ubiquitous what-happens-here-stays-here witticisms—but upon reflection, this is a theme with broader resonance as well. Residents of virtually every city alternately revel in and recoil at certain aspects of their own popular portrayals. Whether it's New Yorkers' bluntness (or in more generous self-portraits, their "honesty"), Los Angelenos' superficiality ("attention to the aesthetic"?), or Las Vegas' sinfulness ("love of freedom"?), any number of communities might be said to share this love-hate characteristic.

For that matter, surely many of us share this characteristic at a more personal level.

We might call these tendencies "inferiority complexities:" a state in which one is simultaneously proud of, and embarrassed about, the less attractive parts of one's own reputation. In Reno's case, in the middle of all of this reputational mayhem lies the age-old impulse we call gambling -- along with a handful of associated sordid industries that run the deviance gamut (from prizefighting to prostitution).

The trap for Reno was set as it vacillated between serving as an interim resting place or as an anything-goes final destination. To borrow a phrase from the always-astute College of Southern Nevada historian Michael Green: Reno started off as a place to "stop" – en route to more important points westward – and has evolved into a city that is desperately trying to become (again) a place to go. Barber shows that the city has embraced, at various times along the way: prizefighters, bowlers, gamblers,

divorcees, married couples, cowboys, miners, government workers, outdoorsmen, Native Americans, Hollywood celebrities, and any number of other characters – all in a moving-target effort to deliver what rambling¹ westerners want.

This particular depiction, however, leads me to a quibble. Early in the book, Barber states that Reno's

... mistake was, perhaps, in growing accustomed to these shifts, in continuing to accommodate cultural desires so readily without maintaining a consistent vision of what the community should retain for itself. This, in essence, was Reno's big gamble: risking its reputation, along with aesthetic appeal, time and time again, in the dogged pursuit of economic gain (2008, p. 11).

This "mistake" is one of the most frequent criticisms voiced in Reno and the discontented, and it presents itself throughout Barber's book. Oddly, this exact same community sensibility, however, has actually been hailed as the defining characteristic that has saved Las Vegas from economic ruin – indeed from its own staleness, and from its own re-emerging threats of irrelevance: the city's (and its leaders') ability to adapt, evolve, and constantly "re-invent" itself for new audiences.² These same kinds of short-attention-span theatrics cannot possibly be both a savior and a "mistake," or can they?

For answers to these and other pressing questions, let us turn now to Ben Affleck.

As it turns out, Mr. Affleck has also produced a recent literary interpretation of a gambling town. And better, it is endorsed by one of the current stars of nonfiction magazine writing, *Esquire's* Tom Chiarella.

In the April 2009 article "Ben Affleck: A smart, talented man trapped in Lindsey Lohan's life," Chiarella-as-interviewer/interpreter voices a critique rooted in the presumed pathologies of a gambling mecca.

Near the beginning of his article, Chiarella rambles thusly:

I (Chiarella) am fresh off four days in Las Vegas, just coming into the shallow end of my hangover, feeling as spiritless and empty as the very car we're riding in. 'Four days? In Vegas?' (Ben Affleck) says, the first sparks of animation lamplighting in his face. With the car door closed, the world sealed off, Affleck allows a little of himself to become known. Like every guy, he's yanked to life by the thread of his own personal chimeras related to Vegas. He's served time in Vegas. He knows a few things about a few things. He knows this: 'Man, you stayed there too long.'

When he changes lanes or looks over his shoulder, he leads with his chin. Wouldn't you, with a chin like that? He looks at me, chin first, and pronounces: 'You're just a mud turtle. That's what we call it. After three days in Vegas, you become, you know, like the lowest animal there is. Four days is too much. Freakin' mud turtle.' He rubs the pads of his fingers against his thumb, the way people do with grit, with money, and then presses his teeth together, which is how Ben Affleck laughs, starting molar on molar, bringing it up from his throat, from the depths of his chest. Suddenly we're at a stoplight, and the woman next to us holds up her cell phone, stabs at him from across the lane. White car, too — I'm not kidding. He doesn't notice. He's still conjuring the image of the mud

1 As my friend Don Feeney pointed out at his recent keynote at the 14th International Conference on Gambling and Risk-Taking, the word "rambling" appears frequently in American songs about risk and society. While this is obviously due to the convenient fact that it rhymes with "gambling," it is also true that the gerund captures much in the cultural fabric that so often accompanies and accommodates the wagering act.

2 A scan of recent national headlines reveals several variants of this same theme: "New Titans of Las Vegas Reinvent Old Formula," "Can Las Vegas Re-invent Itself Again?" and "Las Vegas Needs to Re-invent Itself Again, Gaming Industry Expert Says."

turtle: 'You know, living down there, in some pond somewhere, breathing in the mud. It's just hard to resurface.'

I am fighting off the urge to assume anything... He's already been right about a couple of things: how long is too long to spend in Vegas, the preponderance of white automobiles (*an apparently spot-on observation Affleck made earlier in the article - Ed*).

I respect wisdom.

This, as much as anything else, is what happens in Las Vegas: one succumbs to temptation, and then to the temptation to capture "VEGAS!" (always sans its "Las") in its distilled essence, and then finally to share – presumably with other smart folk – a knowing, common understanding of what the city truly "is."

Rarely do any of these wise insights take us to "Las Vegas" (necessarily plural) however – or anywhere off of the single gamblin,' ramblin' road that bisects its city center, for that matter.

The same has so often been true of Reno – until now. Reno now has its own autobiography, focusing heavily and refreshingly on the lived experiences of those who inhabit it (as well as those who visit it). Along the way, there are so many compelling tales, and so many fascinating lives.

We meet residents for whom "the town's saloons, gambling clubs, and brothels served as ugly remnants of a frontier past in dire need of a burial, once and for all (p. 46)," and we feel for them when their burial efforts fail and their past continues to haunt their present. As Barber introspectively notes, throughout its colorful history, Reno locals frequently seemed to be on the defensive, "convinced that the town needed to purge itself of its depravities" (p. 48). Ultimately, we feel for Renoites when they cannot purge. But alongside them, we also revel in Reno, depravities and all.

Another revealing vignette: when the town attempts to decide whether to allow the divorce industry to continue to flourish, a local controversy erupted "over whether to cultivate and exploit Reno's notoriety, or to attempt to eliminate the cause of it... The fact that Reno was becoming known, on such a massive scale, for an activity directly opposed to the maintenance of stable homes was indeed a travesty to those who had long tried to convince outsiders of Reno's stability and respectability" (p. 69).

This would not be the last time that these tensions erupted in Reno. Later, when the town debated the merits of gambling, the reputational issues were even more pronounced – after all, in contrast to the divorce industry (which at least attracted the wealthy to Reno, as only the well-to-do could afford to take the six weeks off required to satisfy legal residency requirements), "gambling was not considered glamorous or successful in attracting the 'right sort' of people," (p. 71). In fact, as Barber skillfully illustrates, gambling often came in dead last when comparing the sins – clearly behind the brutalities of prizefighting and the moral depravity of divorce, and perhaps even behind the evils of prostitution. All, however, have found a more or less happy home in Reno at some point during the town's life span.

Gradually, a distinct tale of two cities begins to emerge in *Reno's Big Gamble*: there is the "real" Reno that locals inhabited, and then there is the Reno of the popular imagination.

... the 'real Reno,' boosters asserted, was the respectable university town, a typical American landscape inhabited by families who went about their business just like everyone else. At the same time, the idea of the 'real Reno' helped residents to justify the existence of certain businesses in their midst by asserting to themselves, as to outsiders, that the true and authentic town was clearly distinct from the commodified image so widely propagated by the media (p. 91).

Once again, reputation is a central character here – and she’s a fickle one. In a revealing analytical connection, Barber notes that we might think about “reputational capital” in the same way we think about Pierre Bordieu’s “cultural capital.” In contrast to the latter concept, reputational capital incorporates “the desirable cultural attributes of a city, and yet applies also to attractions and attributes that might not fit under the traditional rubric of “culture,” such as, in Reno’s case, gambling or quick divorces” (p. 223). Surely, the French would frown, but does this not ring true for gambling-centric tourist towns?

Here, Barber links the intimately familiar (reputational angst) with the distally familiar (that Bordieu guy) and then leaves us with something completely new to think about. Good books provide readers with nuggets that stick somewhere in our consciousness, and judging by the number of pages folded over in my copy of the book (for re-visiting later on), I am quite certain that many of Barber’s insights will re-surface in my own research, teaching, and thinking.

As with Ben Affleck, then, it appears there is wisdom here -- albeit a deep kind of wisdom that is so often lacking in other accounts of gambling towns. The deeper wisdom here casts light on those who seek to shed reputation (an especially daunting task in a century where past transgressions are eminently Google-able). It also speaks wisely to the perils of re-invention (an especially poignant cautionary tale in a postmodern world). These are but some of the lessons that Reno teaches us – lessons that are now accessible through the pages of Alicia Barber’s excellent book. As happens with striking regularity, and as indeed this publication so often argues: the ostensibly superficial world of gambling often reveals depths in our “real” world beyond.

References

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