Las Vegas in popular culture

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LAS VEGAS IN POPULAR CULTURE

by

Edward E. Baldwin

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Department of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 1997

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University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 1997
ABSTRACT

*Las Vegas in Popular Culture* is a survey and analysis of the depiction of Las Vegas in American popular culture. The dissertation identifies themes and patterns of interpretations of Las Vegas, a city which has come to occupy a central position in popular American mythology. The primary emphasis is on nationally published novels, short stories, and magazine articles, with a brief section on films. The material is evaluated in chronological order so that the depictions of Las Vegas can be seen in their historical contexts. Since the 1930s, writers in each succeeding decade emphasize different aspects of Las Vegas which correspond to contemporary events in the evolution of the city and of the society. Both the fictional and non-fictional accounts of Las Vegas reflect this evolution, so the literature can be seen as a continuing commentary on the unfolding story of America’s fastest-growing city.
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FOREWORD

This dissertation is a survey and analysis of the depiction of Las Vegas in American popular culture. Las Vegas has come to occupy a central position in popular American mythology; like New York and Hollywood, the city’s abundance of glamour, money, and sex makes it seem as if every human desire is within reach. However, Las Vegas’ reliance on gambling to achieve its position contributes even more to its unique sense of freedom, as does its frontier heritage. Its isolation in the Mojave Desert, far from the sea and hundreds of miles away from the nearest city, sets Las Vegas apart both geographically and symbolically from the rest of America. The hold which Las Vegas has on the American mind can be seen in the literature, both fiction and nonfiction, which uses the neon city as a setting or as a symbol, since for over 150 years people have been passing through Las Vegas and telling others what they have seen. Many writers seem compelled to offer their impressions and judgments of the city in situations which would call for objective views if they concerned any other place. A study of the depictions of Las Vegas in mass culture print outlets such as novels and magazines reveals much about the city itself, but it also shows how the city can act as a mirror reflecting the concerns of both the writers and the readers.
The purpose of this discussion is to identify themes and patterns of interpretations of Las Vegas and to show how those interpretations change over time; to accomplish this, a chronological approach is taken. The product of this endeavor is a cultural history of Las Vegas. My effort has been to provide a good balance of quoted material and commentary; my intent is to generally let the authors speak for themselves, with my contributions providing historical background, comparisons, and general comments to expand the discussion. Locally produced depictions from area newspapers and magazines are not considered under the scope of this dissertation, and neither are promotional materials distributed by the city or by the hotel-casinos. The reason for this is that my interest is in what people across the nation (and, to some extent, the world) have been exposed to in order to shape their opinions of Las Vegas through the eyes of artists, writers, and other creative interpreters, and not through the purely commercial eyes of advertising and promotion.

Although many nonfiction writers do not seem to feel bound by any restrictions on their invention or their opinions, fictional representations of Las Vegas are often even more revealing of attitudes towards the city. Few other places in America carry with them so much potential for symbolism, and a single aspect of the city can produce a multiplicity of creative responses. First, there is the presence of gambling, which can symbolize either hope or desperation. Then, there is the desert setting, which resonates back to Biblical images of aimless wandering or of spiritual revelation. Thirdly, the atomic
heritage has produced various symbolic interpretations ranging from the
darkly apocalyptic to the inspiring triumph of mankind over natural forces.
Add to these the great feats of human engineering like the Hoover Dam and
the casinos themselves, and Las Vegas is a natural place for artists to use as a
setting and a symbol. Although many of the nonfiction pieces discussed
show a certain bias, most of these depictions are cloaked under the guise of
reportage or description. This is not the case in fictional representations,
which allow the authors to give full vent to their imaginations, and which
free them from concerns about accuracy or fairness. As a result, the fictional
depictions gain power rather than lose it, for it is in the imagination that the
illusion or the mythology of a setting contributes most to a story’s theme,
symbolism, or plot; if the audience does not share the artist’s conception of a
place, the impact is lost. Therefore, Las Vegas functions in these stories as
both a physical place and as a state of mind, or as a series of shared
connotations between the author and the reader.

With the exception of the Frémont report, all of the works discussed
here date from the early 1930s to the mid-1990s. This period of time
encompasses the transformation of Las Vegas from a sleepy desert town to
one of the world’s premier resort destinations. The World War II era is when
Las Vegas first began to make a major impression on the culture, and
correspondingly it is also when the first important mass-culture discussions
of the city began to appear. The primary emphasis of this discussion is on
nationally published novels, short stories, and magazine articles, with a brief
appendix on films. Nonfiction book-length treatments of Las Vegas are considered only when they contain significant editorial material (that is, when they depart from the standard guide-book viewpoint). While every effort has been made to include all significant references to, discussions about, and treatments of Las Vegas, in attempting to make this project coherent some sources must of necessity be left out. Readers are encouraged to contact the author to correct any glaring omissions or inaccuracies.

I could not have completed this dissertation without the help and encouragement of many of my friends and colleagues, so I would like to express my deepest thanks and appreciation to Colleen and Tom Wild, Mark Bihler, Tami Konieczny, Dr. Eugene Moehring, Dr. John Irsfeld, Dr. Darlene Unrue, Dr. Robert Dodge, Dr. Elizabeth White, the helpful staff at the UNLV Special Collections Department, and all of my students who have provided suggestions for this project.
CHAPTER ONE

1844-1949
THE OLD WEST MEETS THE NEW

Nonfiction

Early Views

In its first incarnation, Las Vegas was an oasis on a dusty trail. When the great explorer John Charles Frémont traveled through the Las Vegas Valley on May 3, 1844, he found a

very large basin, at a camping ground called las Vegas—a term which the Spaniards use to signify fertile or marshy plains, in contradistinction to llanos, which they apply to dry and sterile plains. Two narrow streams of clear water, four or five feet deep, gush suddenly, with a quick current, from two singularly large springs; these, and other waters of the basin, pass out in a gap to the eastward. The taste of the water is good, but rather too warm to be agreeable; the temperature being 71° in the one, and 73° in the other. They, however, afforded a delightful bathing place. (Jackson and Spence 685-86)

Frémont’s report may be considered the first description of Las Vegas intended for a mass or popular culture; it was an important document not only because of the geographical information it contained, but it also was received by the public with great interest because it provided a vast amount of general information on life in the West, a subject which strongly appealed to
the interests and imaginations of many Americans (Nevins 192). The enormously popular book was read almost as if it were an adventure story (Rolle 65); editions of thousands of copies were issued by various publishers, and many newspapers "seized upon it and printed copious extracts. Frémont found himself one of the heroes of the hour, holding such a place in the popular imagination as... Admiral Byrd and Colonel Lindbergh later gained" (Nevins 196-97). Thus, Frémont's report stoked curiosity about the great deserts out West, and while later writers and artists would find vastly different things to describe, the area has retained its hold upon the American imagination ever since Frémont's time.

The literary and artistic expressions of this hold, however, remained essentially dormant until the early 1930s as far as Las Vegas was concerned. There are some (mostly unpublished) descriptions of life in this frontier town in the first few decades of the century; these accounts reveal the slow process of building a community in an often-harsh environment. A 1978 book by Georgia Lewis is one of the best descriptions of these early years; The Way it Was: Diary of a Pioneer Las Vegas Woman is a fictionalized version of historical events, told from the perspective of a character named Nell Davis. Originally serially published in the Las Vegas Sun, the book chronicles the young city's struggles with such problems as high crime, poor sanitation, disease (a major influenza epidemic hit town in 1920), and fires (a common occurrence; the ice plant and the dancing pavilion were just two of the major losses to fire in these years). "Nell" also describes happier events in Las Vegas history, such as the 1916 visit by Douglas Fairbanks to sell Liberty Bonds, the
pride that Nevada felt when it had a higher number of volunteers (1,447) for World War I than any other state, and the successful completion of the city's first long-distance telephone call on January 31, 1929. Las Vegas, then, was full of activity in its early days, but the small desert outpost received next to no attention from the rest of the country until the 1930s.

Birth of a Resort City

When work began in 1931 on the Boulder (Hoover) Dam, Las Vegas also started its rise to prominence. Although the dam workers were housed in Boulder City, Las Vegas experienced great prosperity as a result of the huge influx of money and people into the area. The Dam project, combined with other New Deal endeavors such as the completion of a paved road through the Mojave barrier, changed Las Vegas forever by establishing it as an important economic link to the surrounding area. Interestingly, the construction of the Hoover Dam also represents a theme which came to be crucial in the city's development as a tourist center: Las Vegas always functions as an escape. In this case, the many workers who came here to take part in the Dam project and its allied economic benefits were escaping from the Depression, while a few years later the wartime establishment of Las Vegas as a key defense center provided further escape from hardship for thousands more. Arguably even more important than this economic expansion, however, was the decision in 1931 by the Nevada legislature to legalize gambling (Moehring 20), an event which, more than any other,
shaped the modern character of Las Vegas, and which enabled the city to pitch itself as the ultimate escape.

It seems, then, that “civilization” had to catch up to this frontier town before any significant depictions of it could flourish in the mass media, and Paul Ralli’s book *Nevada Lawyer* is one of the first of these depictions. When Ralli arrived in town in 1933 he found that it

had a touch of Mexico’s Tijuana, where people loitered in the streets, and the tempo was slow. There was a lack of formality in the air, and absolute disregard for social distinction. The people were friendly, and money was loose and plentiful... loafers and moochers roamed the streets, and women of questionable reputation rubbed elbows with society... The town looked very good and ripe for the practice of law, but I wondered about it as a place to live. (1-2)

Ralli, a former Las Vegas City Attorney and longtime resident, opens his book with this description, and his last qualification proves to be a telling remark, evidence of a lingering doubt which also found expression in his later book *Viva Vegas*. Even at this early point in the city’s history, Ralli sees ample evidence of rapid change, and he is not so sure that it is for the best. Ralli returns in 1944 after a stint in the Army to find “the town completely changed. The gambling halls were still here, only more of them... There was something about Las Vegas that was strange. It had outgrown its breeches. Old familiar faces were gone. The people in the streets were jingling coins in their hands and pockets, talked money, thought money and did everything but eat it. A ‘hoopla’ atmosphere prevailed” (134-35). To illustrate this materialistic atmosphere, Ralli relates an anecdote about being approached in front of his house by a persistent stranger who wanted to...
purchase the property for a gambling hall. Ralli concludes on an elegiac tone, also anticipating his later book:

And so life in Las Vegas goes on. Old familiar landmarks, houses and small shops on Fremont Street, the town’s main street, are being wrecked by cold and disinterested wrecking concerns, and in their places are being erected bigger and more pretentious gambling halls and saloons. The gay Lotharios still come and go, but the once slow tempo of the town is fading into oblivion, giving way to the fast and ever-accelerating crescendo of life today. Only the barren, silent mountains and the sage brush on the Nevada desert remains the same. The divorce mill grinds on, and as tomorrow dawns near I wonder what it will bring. (152)

Ralli’s doubt in the midst of the city’s great economic expansion sets the tone for much subsequent commentary on the city, as many observers question whether such growth will be benign or cancerous.

A book similar to Ralli’s, mostly anecdotal but interesting for its insights into early Las Vegas, is Ralph Kelly’s Liberty’s Last Stand. Published in 1932, it is written by a Las Vegas real estate man who was recruited by the Federal Government to run a saloon (ironically called “Liberty’s Last Stand”) in order to catch bootleggers and public officials on the take. Kelly, like Ralli, paints a picture of a fairly wide-open town, where bribery and crooked dealing was accepted as a matter of course; in the end, he was not paid what he was promised by an overzealous agent looking for a big score, and he concludes that prohibition is a waste of time and money. Kelly’s disillusionment is with prohibition and the tactics of its agents, not with the moral climate of Las Vegas, although he gives the impression that the city was able to be more corrupt than what would be expected given its small size, which allowed a
network of corrupt public servants to be formed. Nevertheless, he writes that “I look back with great regret on my virtual banishment from Las Vegas. It is a splendid city in which to live, a glorious climate and perhaps the busiest city of its size in America today” (152).

Macy Lapham’s Crisscross Trails is another firsthand look at the Las Vegas of the 1930s. Lapham, a soil surveyor in the West and Southwest, stops in Las Vegas on the way to Utah and finds it “at all times a colorful, fun-loving, and somewhat restless town given to forms of entertainment and games of chance. At this particular time we encountered it in one of its wildest and most hilarious moods. It was at the period of the annual ‘Helldorado’ celebration.” This rodeo festival was established in 1935 by the local Elks Club, and it quickly became a popular annual event commemorating Las Vegas’ frontier roots (Moehring 29). Lapham describes the scene as one which recaptures “for a few brief hours something of the romance and fiction of bygone days pictured by the beloved Bret Harte and Mark Twain, and in so doing give[s] release from the tense and tangled skein of life to a people that has not forgotten how to laugh and play” (217). Helldorado is thus established here as a reference point marking the commingling of the past and the future in this transitional period of Las Vegas’ history, and the festival will continue to serve as an important symbol of the city’s heritage.

Another contemporary description of the Las Vegas scene which relies on frontier associations is C.E. Finkenbinder’s Mojave Desert Trails. Published in 1940 as a guide to driving on U.S. routes 66 and 91 (Las Vegas
Boulevard—The Strip), this book comes complete with maps, photographs, and descriptions of the attractions on those routes. Las Vegas is described as "a picturesque city of Southern Nevada, one of the last frontier towns, it still retains many characteristics of the pioneer days with licensed gambling and an ample supply of liquor establishments. Under liberal laws, this desert city provides scenes and pastimes reminiscent of the old west. Yet it is one of the most orderly and friendly towns in the United States" (53). The book also describes the pleasant results of a tree-planting program, the presence of an abundance of water from artesian wells, and the availability of electricity from Boulder Dam, which makes it "one of the best lighted cities in the U.S.A."

Finkenbinder cheerfully concludes that "You will like Las Vegas. It is easy to get to, and difficult to leave... a desirable city in which to live, or to stop for a day, week or longer" (53).

Continuing in this vein is Jonreed Lauritzen’s 1947 pamphlet Las Vegas, Nevada, for Fun and Sun. Published on the very eve of the resort era, this pamphlet provides a snapshot of Vegas before it broke wide open, and as such it is an interesting artifact of cultural archaeology. The text eagerly anticipates the new era, touting the city as "a fascinating blend of the old and the new. Yesterday, a prospector's feeble campfire; today a blazing sea of lights. Yesterday, desert stillness; today the coaxing beat of big name bands. Yesterday, Indians and Mormon settlers; today, sleek bathing beauties in resort hotel pools" (1). The lighting on Main and Fremont Streets is described as a "conflagration of neon" (15). Under the heading "Places to Stay: Resort Hotels," only three are mentioned: the Last Frontier, El Rancho Vegas, and
Nevada Biltmore. Of the three, the Last Frontier is the most expensive, with 121 rooms and a top price of $12.00 for a double room (25). Also, a helpful timetable is provided to tell how long it takes to get to Las Vegas; from Los Angeles, the train takes seven hours, the automobile takes seven and a quarter, and the plane takes an hour and a half.

Perhaps the best-known early guidebook to Las Vegas is the 1940 WPA Guide, reprinted in 1991 as The WPA Guide to 1930s Nevada. Like the other WPA Guides of the time, this one provides many photographs and descriptions of the climate, geology, plant and animal life, and history of the area, as well as detailed descriptions of various tours by automobile. “Points of interest” in Las Vegas include the new Union Pacific Station, “a satisfying example of the modern international design,” the Chamber of Commerce, the Federal Building, and the Las Vegas Racetrack and Ballpark (187). The guide also makes mention of “Heldorado [sic],” when “parades, a rodeo, street dances, and other events intended to recreate the early spirit turn Las Vegas into a rollicking hybrid of two vastly different eras” (183). The book’s description of the city is startling in its contradiction of what modern-day Vegas is like:

Relatively little emphasis is placed on the gambling clubs and divorce facilities—though they are attractions to many visitors—and much effort is being made to build up cultural attractions. No cheap and easily parodied slogans have been adopted to publicize the city, no attempt has been made to introduce pseudo-romantic architectural themes, or to give artificial glamor and gaiety. Las Vegas is itself—natural and therefore very appealing to people with a very wide variety of interests. (183)
This curious description, so jarring to anyone with a knowledge of today’s Las Vegas, gives way to a somewhat more recognizable one when the text goes on to make note of the fact that distinctions of social class are nonexistent when it comes to gambling, as “Hollywood celebrities, miners, prospectors, divorcees, corporation presidents, cowboys, and little old maids bents on seeing life at last, add to the stacks of silver dollars and watch the whirl of roulette wheels, or splash ink over the horse keno slips” (183). This notion of Las Vegas as the ultimate leveler, bringing together people of all classes in their common desire to strike it rich, is one which will be repeated many times in future literature. In all of these nonfiction book treatments, then, the old and the new are beginning to merge in Las Vegas, as the city prepares to embark on its journey towards becoming one of the most exuberant expressions in existence of the American capitalistic spirit. At the same time, the motifs are established which will color discussions of Las Vegas for decades to come.

A New Economy

The impending changes for Las Vegas applied to the city’s economy as well as to its culture. Contemporary magazine articles tended to stress the emerging opposition of Las Vegas to its more established northern counterpart, Reno. Business Week ran a short article in 1945 entitled “Reno Challenged,” describing the increasingly aggressive attempts of Las Vegas to increase its divorce business. According to the article, the city “has just hired the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency to lure what is euphemistically
called the tourist trade to its night life, its gaming tables, and incidentally its courthouse” (24). The article states that in 1944 Reno had 7,076 divorces and 14,613 weddings; the same year, Las Vegas had 2,944 divorces and 7,602 weddings. Many of these weddings were a direct result of the servicemen stationed in town who entered into wartime marriages with their sweethearts, and the economic growth of Southern California during the war also led to many wedding trips to Las Vegas. The article outlines the dueling war chests of the two cities ($85,000 for Las Vegas' publicity fund, countered by $100,000 for Reno's), as well as Reno's condemnation of a giant billboard which was found to comply with the city's building code only when the advertisement pictured thereon was changed from one for a Las Vegas hotel to one promoting Reno's July rodeo (24). The hotels themselves are also found to engage in some competitive tactics: "Such rambling, ranch-type Las Vegas hotels as the Last Frontier, El Rancho Vegas, and the Nevada Biltmore, featuring 'sun and fun,' are bent on proving that they have the edge over Reno's more prosaic hostleries...Last month El Rancho Vegas chartered a plane to 'rescue' a divorce-seeking Hollywood actress from what she deemed to be inappropriate surroundings in a Reno hotel and fly her to Las Vegas" (26). Of course, not only the hotels but the city itself, in the form of a very vibrant chamber of commerce, enticed or pressured magazines to write articles like this about Las Vegas as a means of promotion. The budding marriage trade also began to attract attention during this period; Collier's ran an article in 1941 which reported that "Building Boulder Dam, thirty miles away over the desert, used to be Las Vegas' main industry. Today, high speed
hitchin’ with a lot of showmanship is bringing in the money. Most people associate Nevada with divorce. [But] in Vegas there are eleven marriages to every separation” (Marshall 72). Thus, an economy based upon morality (or the lack thereof) is taken note of.

Besides gambling, marriage, and divorce, heavy industry also began to make its presence known as an economic force in Las Vegas in the 1940s. In 1941, construction began in Henderson of Basic Magnesium, Inc., a defense-related enterprise which became one of the largest factories in the United States and which operated at full steam all through the war (Moehring 36). A 1947 Business Week article, entitled “Las Vegas’ Industrial Hope,” discusses a brief postwar slump in the city’s business climate, although the author hastens to add that “it would be more accurate to say that [business] is no longer phenomenal. Many were spoiled by extraordinary profits reaped in 1943 and 1945” (26). The article describes the possibilities of a deal in which the War Assets Administration offered Nevada a chance to buy the Basic Magnesium project for $1 down (26). “Divorces in Las Vegas have dropped nearly one-third since the all-time high of 6,054 in 1946. This high, of course, was due largely to hasty wartime marriages gone haywire” (28). It is hoped that BMI will produce a stable industrial base in the wake of “the nation’s changed mood, when people stopped buying luxury goods and services. And Las Vegas, with its strictly luxury economy of tourists, gambling, and divorce, began to take it on the chin” (26). Diversification of the economy is seen here as one of Las Vegas’ safety nets, as there is always a suggestion in these early
treatments that the gambling boom, like the mining towns which came before it, will eventually go bust.

**Slices of Life**

Often, the living conditions produced by this emerging economy were less than ideal. Both the economic benefits and the human costs of the Basic Magnesium project are described in a 1942 *Collier's* article entitled "The Boom Came Back." The article examines the temporary housing of the workers: "Barren as nature left this place, the scattered packing-box camps manage to make it even more bleak. A desert igloo is caught in the sun, an orange and blue adobe monstrosity, with portholes for ventilation" (English, "Boom" 48). Wesley Stout of the *Saturday Evening Post* also addressed these problems in a 1942 article, "Nevada's New Reno." The boom resulting from the opening of the new plant brought with it such problems as overcrowding and poor housing, as Stout reports that "Because there are virtually no preparations made to house this influx, the newcomers are living, for the most part, in as picturesquely squalid discomfort as the firstcomers to a gold strike. The oldcomers and the tourists are doing better only relatively. Vegas is bursting, hot, dirty, thirsty, noisy, flush and happy" (13). Stout reports on the lack of vacancies in local motels due to the huge influx of workers, and also describes the complacent attitudes of the maids, who are in such short supply that their insolence is tolerated by their managers (14). In describing the dust and heat of the city, Stout tells us that "The dust is as bad as it sounds, the heat is not" (68). Under a photograph of tent housing, the caption
reads: “The sage in boom. Anything larger than a parasol is rated a house. If it has lights, water and sewer it is a mansion, and anything beyond is pure paradise” (14). These are among the first references, then, to the troubles which Las Vegas began seeing in the late 1940s due to its rapid growth.

Stout’s is also one of the first magazine articles to discuss racial issues in Las Vegas, broaching the subject during a description of the crossing of Boulder Dam during wartime:

The dam is guarded by the 733rd Military Police–Negro. . . . On the lip of the dam itself ranked Negro soldiers armed to the teeth shoo the convoy along menacingly. . . . These troops, mostly draftees from faraway cotton fields, have been told and trained to shoot when in doubt. . . . These Negro troops are stationed at Camp Silbert in Boulder City, and travel thirty-odd miles to Vegas for their recreation. . . . [in Las Vegas] a Harlem has sprung up across the track from the original townsite. In 1940 Vegas had no more than 200 Negroes. Negro troops brought in many camp followers; then, when white labor began to wilt in the heat, B.M.I. imported Negro labor. Now 3000 Negroes live in a section of their own, without water or sewerage. The threat of an epidemic is such that health officers are moving heaven and Washington, D.C. to do something. The only assured something is a business center for the Negroes. (71)

Indeed, after the completion of the dam and the end of the war, many Blacks, former damworkers as well as new arrivals, found work in Las Vegas’ expanding resort industry, while white damworkers often moved on to other cities. Blacks benefited from the city’s booming economy by finding jobs, but they also endured much discrimination, being forced by increasingly racist housing policies (begun around 1939) to live in neglected ghettos on the West side of town (Moehring 175-78).
Questions of social justice and morality also emerge in the long, often strained, relationship between Life magazine and Las Vegas. This begins in 1942, with a photo spread entitled “Las Vegas Gambling.” There are interior shots of the Las Vegas Club and the Frontier which look startlingly low-rent to the modern observer; exposed fluorescent lighting and structural beams make these buildings look more like run-down Wal-Marts than recreational areas. The text accompanying the photographs explains that “The big boom which the town enjoyed during the construction of Boulder Dam seems like high jinks at a church bingo party compared to the preposterous prosperity of today. . . . For a town of 20,000 population (recently increased from 14,000) Las Vegas does a neat and gaudy job of shaking down dough as fast as people save it” (91). Never without some kind of agenda, this time Life adopts a curiously misogynistic tone in captions such as these: “Keno is a woman’s game. Like old-fashioned lotto or movie-house bingo, it requires little intelligence;” “Black jack is the game that inspires the ‘turn-that-damn-card’ look in this blonde’s mascara eyes” (94). And two pictures juxtaposed next to each other bear these captions: “Glamor girls are part of Las Vegas stock-in-trade. Girl at left is waiting for a quick Nevada divorce, while her friend with up-swept hair-do is a Hollywood starlet in town for a spree;” “Non-glamor girls are equally susceptible to games of chance. These intense slot-machine players are typical of Las Vegans who drop in to try their luck on the way home from marketing.” This article establishes a pattern of interpretation which will characterize Life’s coverage for decades to come; the magazine always carries an undercurrent of condemnation in its supposedly objective journalism.
In 1947 Life returned for "Las Vegas Strikes it Rich," which attributed "The big boom" to "the union between the postwar mood of the U.S. and the willing statutes of Nevada, which provide for legal gambling, all-night drinking, two-minute marriages and six-week divorce" (99). There are photos of Lucky Silver (El Rancho Vegas' gambling horse) at the roulette table, wedding chapels, and stores; the moral prod here is in Life's reporting that "Slot machines are strategically placed throughout Las Vegas, even in the food stores. Here a customer finds out whether he will buy sirloin steak, tripe, or nothing" (100). The prose takes on a sardonic tone when Life reports that "This year the [gambling] take will top $1,500,000. Some of this will help support the city's 22 churches, largely Mormon and Catholic, and some will be spent to finance Las Vegas' youth center, but most of it will be invested in civic improvements—a new race track, larger hotels and more casinos" (101). And, to keep the youngsters away from the "brightly lit casino windows along Glitter Gulch," the article notes a youth-oriented radio show on KENO, "sponsored by the city and financed largely through taxes on gambling" (104-5). It is as if the dark forces of gambling are being called upon to do something—anything—about the moral climate they engender, and Life is sure to keep after them to make sure it is done.

Fiction

Like the nonfiction accounts discussed above, early Las Vegas fiction also tends to dwell on the confrontation of old and new ways in the wake of an economic boom. One of the earliest depictions of Las Vegas in fiction is
Edwin Corle's story "Apache Bar," which appears in his 1934 collection *Mojave: A Book of Stories*. Most of the stories involve "desert rat" types, including miners, Indians, and other typical denizens of the desert, but this story takes place at a bar in the Apache Hotel in Las Vegas. In the first section, the bartender observes six people at the bar (a film producer, an actress, two professional wrestlers, a librarian, and a promoter), each of whom then gets a section told from his or her own point of view. The story ends on another day, with the bartender reading crime articles in the *Los Angeles Times* involving all of them, not knowing or caring that they had recently been in the bar. Here, Las Vegas is used chiefly as a kind of crossroads of briefly intersecting lives whose paths then disperse. The action could take place anywhere, but locating it in Las Vegas enables the writer to take advantage of the city's position as the new American boomtown. The laconic, hardboiled tone of both genres (crime and desert stories) is given expression in passages like the following: "There were six of them—mostly guests of the hotel or else motorists just passing through. He didn’t know any of them. He had never seen them before, and if he never saw them again it wouldn’t matter. They were only so many customers... so many names and nothing more to Joe. And there was no reason why it should have been otherwise" (134). Ultimately, the story reads as if it were a writing exercise in developing point of view, but it remains mildly interesting for its use of Las Vegas as both a real and a symbolic crossroads.

Another work relying on the disjunction between old and new ways is Frank Gruber's 1940 novel *The French Key*, which takes place mostly in New
York City, but the discovery there of a dead man with a rare gold coin leads to "Bad Axe, Nevada," just outside Las Vegas, to the Three Bears Mine. One of the most notable things about this novel is its description of the day-long air journey to Las Vegas: "It was mid-afternoon when the big cabin plane took off from the Newark Airport. Shortly, after dark, it settled down near the city of Chicago...They were in Kansas City at midnight and Denver at dawn. And late in the afternoon they left the plane for good at Las Vegas, Nevada—a little city sprawled out in the center of a flat, arid stretch of desert; a surprising little city, green and tree-shaded" (225). There is also an early, yet standard, description of a casino, as the detectives walk past "a Hawaiian orchestra [which] played haunting music" (229), note the dim lights and the heavy smoke, and see the familiar cross-section of society brought together by gambling: "There were workmen from Boulder Dam, twenty miles away, ranchers from the desert, men and women in evening dress from Hollywood, three hundred miles distant. There was even a desert rat or two, picturesque in alkali-stained clothing, worn, scuffed boots and whiskers" (229). After a detailed description of a few blackjack hands with a surly dealer, the action then resumes in not very interesting fashion.

Gruber returned to Las Vegas in his 1947 novel *The Honest Dealer*, in which Johnny Fletcher finds a dying man in Death Valley who gives him a poker chip and a deck of cards, telling him to "send these to Nick in Las Vegas" (14). The sense of a rapidly growing city underlies Johnny's thoughts as he thinks "'How many gambling joints can there be in Las Vegas? It's only a little town.'" (19). The new resorts on the Strip, the Last Frontier and El
Rancho Vegas, are described, as well as the fictional El Casa Rancho: “almost a
principality of its own; a main hotel and casino and dozens of cabanas and
hotel cabins sprawled behind it. The place had private macadam drives, a
little green park of its own, a swimming pool and ‘health’ club. You could
lose your money here and still enjoy yourself” (22). When the plot device of
a crooked ring of dealers and gamblers is introduced, readers are told that “Las
Vegas itself is honest. Gambling is big business and the percentages are
enough for the houses; enough and more. They don’t have to be crooked.
With the investment some of the places have they couldn’t afford to be. But
there’s money here, and wherever there’s money you’ll find fellows trying to
get it” (102). This attitude characterizes much Las Vegas fiction; even when
the city is portrayed as being overrun by crooked gangsters, the games
themselves are always described as being on the level. Perhaps a strange sort
of justification is being worked out here: gambling itself is not a problem, but
the people are who are attracted to it can be. Finally, as an example of socially
acceptable stereotyping of the time, the only nonwhite character in this novel
(indeed, in any fictional work discussed here) is a “Mexican ranch hand”
named “Pancho,” who says “‘Good evening, gentlemen,’” in “perfect English”
(169-70), thus surprising the other characters with his bilingual capability. As
we shall see, the frequency and fidelity of the depiction of nonwhites in Las
Vegas fiction lagged far behind the reality of their actual presence in the city.

As far as authors of any repute go, two of the foremost suspense writers
of this time turned their attention to Las Vegas. James M. Cain, author of The
Postman Always Rings Twice, included a brief Las Vegas gas station robbery
in his 1948 novel *The Moth* as one of many episodes in the life of the shady protagonist, John Dillon. The episode comes and goes so quickly that the impression given is that Cain simply wanted to have Dillon stop in all the current hot spots of the country, and Las Vegas was on the list. In contrast, the noted crime novelist Erle Stanley Gardner, writing under the name of A. A. Fair, set most of his 1945 novel *Spill the Jackpot!* in Las Vegas. Here, two detectives, with the delightful names of B. Cool and D. Lam, go from Los Angeles to Las Vegas to look for a girl. Upon arrival, Lam is mistaken for a member of a slot machine fixing ring when he hits a jackpot; a detailed explanation then follows on how the machines are set to pay off. Louie, a security man for the "Cactus Patch," explains to Lam that

> Y'understand, Las Vegas is different from different places. Girls come here to get a divorce. They have to wait to establish a residence. It ain't a long time, when you just think of it as so much time out of a year, but when you stay here, it gets pretty long. The girls get lonesome, and if a good-looking guy gives 'em the eye, they figure what the hell. They ain't got nothing else to do, and they fall. Back in their home town, they'd give him the icy stare, but out here, they want something to break the monotony and they're just getting a divorce so they figure it's sorta in between drinks, and a little cheating don't count. You get me? (56)

Here, the usual hardboiled notion of women as being loose or treacherous is justified by attributing these qualities to the moral climate of Las Vegas. The city influences the action in a way which is indicative of much of the fiction which will follow, as the city is often used as a kind of character or as a permeating atmosphere. Other than this, there is not much to distinguish this as a "Las Vegas Story;" that is, little specific description of the city is given.
The genre, like the city, had yet to achieve its maturity, but both were on their way by the beginning of the 1950s.
CHAPTER TWO

1950-59
MODERN VEGAS TAKES SHAPE

The 1950s began for Las Vegas with a threat to its main attraction. The city’s association with organized crime has always been a source of controversy, and in November 1950, Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee came to town for two days of hearings on the matter. The testimony during the hearings revealed, among other things, that gangster Moe Sedway was a 74 percent owner of the Desert Inn. This information, along with the rest of Kefauver’s findings about Mob-run or Mob-controlled Las Vegas casinos, led to a 1951 bill sponsored by Kefauver which proposed a 10 percent federal tax on all forms of gambling. This bill, which would have probably killed the Las Vegas gambling industry, was defeated in committee, thanks largely to the influence of Nevada Senator Pat McCarran (Moehring 89). This was only the beginning of a long history of attempts to limit or wipe out gambling in Las Vegas, but it was one of the most serious ones.

In contrast to the the pall cast by the Kefauver hearings, the period from 1950 to 1959 was characterized by the most exuberant growth in the young city’s history. The decade is especially instructive for students of the growth and the depiction of Las Vegas, for it is in the 50s that Vegas began to
realize in a major way its reputation as a premier tourist attraction. The well-publicized openings in this decade of large hotel-casinos like the Sahara, Riviera, Stardust, Desert Inn, Sands, Tropicana, and Dunes (Hess 9) helped to fix Las Vegas in the minds of many Americans as a place of limitless possibilities and endless luxury. The emergence of the Strip was "the paramount story of the 1950s," as the former Los Angeles Highway was home to all of these resorts which took advantage of the land south of the city limits to stretch out and provide the "parking lots, tennis courts, swimming pools, riding stables, and the other amenities which resort guests had increasingly come to expect" (Moehring 73). One result of the Strip's development was the 1950 establishment of Paradise City, an unincorporated township which encompassed most of the South Strip and which the city cannot annex without the permission of the county commissioners. This marked the beginning of many conflicts between the city and the county governments over issues such as taxes and utilities, conflicts which periodically flare up to this day.

In addition to the boom in tourism, the construction of a convention center in 1959 helped to establish Las Vegas as one of the country's premier locations for conventions, while extensive expansions of Nellis Air Force Base and the reclassification of part of its bombing range as a nuclear test site ensured that defense would remain an important part of the area's economy and identity (Moehring 96-98). The notion that Las Vegas represented a hybrid of the old and the new West, explored in the previous chapter, began to give way in the 1950s to a new concept of the city as an embodiment of
postwar capitalism and all of its promise, in positive as well as negative terms.

**Nonfiction**

**Fun in the Sun**

The most obvious vision of Las Vegas, and the one which had the most inspiration from the Chamber of Commerce, was the one of tourists "basking in the sunshine, dancing under the stars, and winning at the tables" (Moehring 67). Aided by materials from the Las Vegas News Bureau, some magazine writers in the 1950s never seemed to tire of describing the wonders of Las Vegas. *Holiday*'s Sean O'Faolain exulted in the lights of the city as seen from an incoming airplane: "To alight after this prolonged experience of blankness on the tarmac of the McCarran airport and drive into the sudden blaze of the Strip is like seeing a rocket go off on the Fourth of July, crackling cheekily under the stars...What a wonderful illusion!" O'Faolain seems completely taken by this illusion, writing that anywhere along this boulevard, the sky is blue, the baby clouds are white, the sun umbrellas are gold-and-cream, like the bathers, the pool is clear as the sky, the air warm and exhilarating, the deck chairs variegated as the rainbow, the mowed and watered lawns like shot silk, the flowers dazzle, the shadows are cool; at a raised finger a shapely houri sways forward with a smile to fill the pasha's glass—and all the time, indoors, is the chance of free gold.

The 1990s reader may need to be reminded that all of this is written without a trace of irony; O'Faolain ultimately pronounces Las Vegas to be "part of the
whole fantastic pilgrimage of man in search of the heart's desires," echoing F. Scott Fitzgerald's romantic description of Jay Gatsby's America as having "once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams" (182). Other writers similarly evoked fantasy worlds to describe Las Vegas as a "never-never land of exotic architecture, extravagant vegetation, flamboyant scenery and frenetic diversion" (Hill, "Klondike in the Desert" 14), and as a "Showgirl Shangri-La" ("Showgirl Shangri-La" 47).

After setting the scene of a place unlike any other in America, many magazines reported that Las Vegas was the place to go for the entertainment dream of a lifetime. The cutting edge of popular culture was out there in the middle of nowhere, and writers expressed wonder and awe at the variety of stars and shows which could be seen in "the carnival city in the desert" (Comstock 254). Throughout the 1950s, major magazines such as Time, Newsweek, The Saturday Evening Post, Look, and Life all ran articles about the entertainment opportunities in Las Vegas. Some pieces discussed the huge amounts of money being paid to top entertainers; Look produced a four-page portfolio of photographs of big stars such as Betty Hutton, Milton Berle, Red Skelton, Vic Damone, Spike Jones, and Anna Maria Alberghetti in performance, accompanied by their names on the marquees of the various hotels at which they were appearing ("Vegas Hits the Talent Jackpot"). Likewise, The Saturday Evening Post ran a picture of all of these stars at a barbecue and provided a rather breathless profile of a reviewer of Las Vegas acts for Variety who, "in what passes on this dusty Broadway as an average show-business fortnight, covered the openings of Gower and Marge
Champion, a Latin Quarter Revue, Liberace, Nelson Eddy, Joe E. Lewis, and Peter Lind Hayes and Mary Healy” (English, “Million-Dollar” 68). Near-Homeric catalogues of American royalty such as these were calculated to impress, appealing to our culture’s tendency to worship celebrities as if they were gods. The presence of so many stars in one place portrayed Las Vegas as a Pantheon or an Olympus of these secular deities, amazingly accessible to mere mortals.

Some magazines sought to educate their star-struck readers while pandering to their voyeurism. In a typical display of its “tsk-tsk” attitude, Time pointed out that “the stars, of course, are just an added attraction, gold-horned Judas goats who lure the herds of tourists to the gaming tables” (“Las Vegas: It Just Couldn’t Happen” 30). Likewise, Life magazine, always providing a moral viewpoint for its readers, asserted that “to performers the work is a mixed blessing. Usually they fritter their huge wages away in the gaming rooms and, like lower-salaried mortals, leave Las Vegas far poorer than when they came in.” The references to “mortals” and to “gold-horned Judas goats” in these articles underscored the public’s reverence for their pagan gods which the editors of the magazines were anxious to diffuse. Life’s moralistic stance did not, however, prevent it from running an accompanying photograph of girls in a Sahara chorus line, shot from maximum crotch-viewing perspective (“Gambler’s Gala”). This is a common technique of critics of Las Vegas: to provide sensational and titillating hints of the city’s decadence while affirming traditional middle-class values.
While the most popular names in show business were touted as regular performers in Las Vegas, innovations in entertainment were noted as well. New performers or unique productions were reported on, with the sense that Las Vegas was so jaded that it required continuous novelty to hold the attention of its patrons. *Newsweek* proclaimed in 1953 that “this desert oasis is now the entertainment capital of the country,” and described “a new gimmick, long-hair talent,” which was calculated to appeal to high rollers. Opera singer Mimi Benzell played the Thunderbird, Ezio Pinza played the Sands, and Lauritz Melchior played the Sahara, although Mario Lanza is reported to have turned down $25,000 per week at the Sands because of the cigarette smoke there. *Newsweek* concluded that these “long-hair performers” were “willing to forget their pride and sing over the clang of the slot machines and the buzz of voices around crowded tables, because that desert gold will make up for lean pickings at Carnegie Hall next season” ("The Desert Song" 48). In another genre, *Time* devoted its “Show Business” page on August 17, 1959 to three new acts in the “neon-painted desert,” including “Ecstasy on Ice” at the Thunderbird, which featured “nudes on ice.” Again mixing mild sexual excitement with a slight sense of condemnation, *Time* noted that “finding good-looking girls who could skate was no trouble; finding skaters who would work seminude was somewhat more difficult; finding strippers who could also skate was next to impossible.” The “artistic integrity” of the show, though, was saved by Leny Eversong, a 280-pound Brazilian singer who “is worth the price of admission” on her own ("Big Week in Vegas" 60). The moral high ground was thus saved; no one could
accuse *Time* of encouraging people to see the naked women, but the magazine could take credit for promoting a legitimate (non-prurient) talent.

In the midst of all of this excitement, a few writers managed to discover that Las Vegas was actually a community where real people lived and worked. The *Newsweek* headline “Las Vegas: Nice People Live on Divorce, Gambling” neatly expressed its sense of surprise that anyone could lead a normal life in this city. The article reported that behind the gaudy facades of the Strip and Fremont Street are residential districts seldom seen, and even then unnoticed, by tourists. There are quiet, tree-shaded streets more reminiscent of New England than of the Southwest. There are 30 churches. True, there are slot machines in the supermarkets, but not enough Las Vegans lose their food money to make it a civic problem. (Slater 32)

Likewise, a *New York Times Magazine* article delved into the life of the town and claimed that “Las Vegas’ most eye-filling show of female charm is not at the casinos. It unfolds every afternoon at Market Town, the shopping center at the end of the ‘Strip.’” And sure enough, the article was accompanied by photographic proof: an attractive blonde woman was pictured pushing a shopping cart, and she was identified in the caption as a dancer who, “here doing her marketing, is also a volunteer worker with handicapped children” (Hill, “Las Vegas is More than the ‘Strip’”). The purpose of these articles seems to be to reassure readers that they were not missing out on something: even those who live in one of the most glamorous places in America still have to attend to mundane activities like shopping, and the inhabitants are not all pleasure-sated sybarites who feed off of the labor of everyone else. The special mention given to charity work seems also to be an attempt to show
the rest of the country that beautiful people have a social conscience as well. This could be seen either as a sympathetic look at a misunderstood community or as another publicity stunt devised to reassure potential visitors who wondered about the morality of it all. Whatever the underlying reason, though, it is an interesting counterpoint to the criticisms of Las Vegas as a town without basic human values, which will be examined later.

Bombs and Gangsters

Once the attractions of Las Vegas were described, national attention in the early 1950s turned to an important aspect of the historical period: the atomic bomb testing which occurred just outside the city. Las Vegas’ ability to capitalize on any situation was emphasized in most of the coverage, which also made ample use of the obvious metaphor of a big scientific and strategic gamble being played out in this location. A New York Times Magazine article entitled “Atomic Boom Town in the Desert” exemplified the tone taken by the mass media when reporting on the explosions. The article reported that “Las Vegas can be described as pleased with its new acquisition... the town’s publicity man has had the local hairdresser create an ‘atomic’ coiffure and has rushed out to the nation’s press a collection of pictures of bathing beauties equipped with Geiger counters” (Hill, “Atomic Boom Town in the Desert” 14). The link between the town’s gambling industry and the bomb was made most explicit in the now-famous photograph, which originally appeared in Life, of a mushroom cloud over the shoulder of Vegas Vic and the Fremont Street skyline, and the caption “Wherever You Look There’s Danger In Las
Vegas.” The accompanying text noted that the picture “illustrates two of the riskier aspects of life in the 20th Century” (“Wherever You Look There’s Danger in Las Vegas” 37). A more detailed description of life in Las Vegas during the nuclear testing was given in a New Yorker article which described the bomb-watching parties and the paradoxical existence of the brilliant scientists who lived in the hotels of this gaudy town (Lang). In general, though, the bombs were depicted as yet another spectacle in an already-spectacular place.

Another concern of the 1950s, and one which gained more circulation as time went on, was the presence of organized crime figures in everyday life. The Kefauver Committee hearings in 1951 focused attention on this issue in regards to Las Vegas, and the widespread knowledge that Bugsy Siegel played an important role in the city’s growth served to increase awareness and interest in gangsters. The political climate of the 1950s may have also contributed to the suspicion of devious forces at work under the surface of things, with the McCarthy hearings and the subsequent “Red Scare” providing grist for the conspiracy-minded (Chafe 105). It is possible, however, to come away with two radically opposing viewpoints regarding the influence of gangsters on the Las Vegas scene if one relies upon contemporary accounts. A Sports Illustrated article quoted the Chairman of the Gaming Control Board as saying that “‘there are constant rumors of hoods, and when there are we move quickly under the breadth of the law to run these rumors down. Invariably, there is absolutely no proof...Costello, Kastel and Lansky were all either directly or indirectly here for a while—and they left’” (Rudeen 20).
Likewise, Paul Ralli’s enthusiastic *Viva Vegas* asserted that “The men who own the Las Vegas casinos are men of character, personality and unusual ability. Gangsters and racketeers are not welcome” (119). A considerably different viewpoint, though, appeared in a *Reader’s Digest* article, which stated that “there are racketeers in the woodwork of many of these multimillion-dollar casinos. They are taking the customers, the state of Nevada and the U.S. government for a ride. It’s the mob’s biggest haul since Prohibition” (Velie, “Las Vegas” 138). Sid Meyers’ *The Great Las Vegas Fraud* also condemned the presence of organized crime: “Las Vegas’ fantastic gambling structure is controlled by hoodlums and racketeers...who are labeled respectable citizens in Nevada, but who are in reality cut-throats and law-defying thugs” (35). Meyers’ book was a precursor to Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris’ well-known exposé *The Green Felt Jungle*, which informed the reader that “though there are many big hoodlums in Las Vegas operating openly as licensed owners in plush Strip casinos, there are many more who operate behind legitimate or semilegitimate fronts” (60). Meyers, though, was a much harsher critic of Las Vegas than Reid and Demaris, charging that “the tragic story which is Las Vegas is there for anyone to see...when you enter Las Vegas you set foot in a catacomb of hell” (19). As rabid as this criticism may seem, it was apparently nearer to the truth than those who denied or downplayed mob influence, as later historians confirmed that “the contribution of reputed underworld figures goes beyond their hotel-building activities. To some extent, these men even influenced the suburban development of the metropolitan area,” as in the establishment of Paradise
Township in 1950 to stay “independent of [the city of] Las Vegas” (Moehring 242-43).

The Not-So-Good Life

Sid Meyers’ book deserves special attention for its overwhelming hostility to everything that Las Vegas stands for. Although Meyers insisted that he was “not anti-gambling,” he attacked the “pretentious scale” of it in Las Vegas, as it “adheres only to the worst of a bygone era—and fosters on the gullibility and greed of human nature” (33). The evil of gambling pervades every aspect of life; “there is no laughter and gaiety in Las Vegas” (47), and visitors become “morbid, mean and morose” after a short time at the tables (34). Even the dealers were criticized: “one would have to travel far and wide to find a meaner, uglier and greedier bunch. . . the overall majority of them are not very bright” (106). Meyers predicted that “legitimate business structures” (71) would soon take over, and then gambling would be outlawed. As extreme as Meyers’ criticism was, though, it was not unique; it had its roots in concerns voiced by other, more balanced writers. A 1950 Woman’s Home Companion article answered the question “Should Gambling Be Legalized in Your Town?” with a definite “no,” concluding that “Las Vegas has bought prosperity at the price of complete and ever-growing dependence on a nonproductive, parasitic and corrupting trade” (Maisel 44). Even Paul Ralli, the ultimate booster, engaged in some soul-searching when he admitted to “a creeping doubt” that Las Vegas is “a good place to live in. . . More than anything it is a question of values. You find yourself gradually
ceasing to retain hard-won basic standards. . . You become saturated with a certain easy-come, easy-go philosophy that is rooted deep in gamblers. . . Also, there is too little future opportunity for the children" (37-39). This is an extraordinary statement, as the rest of Viva Vegas is almost comical in its naive enthusiasm for the city. Ralli's ambivalence points to the remnants of traditional middle-class misgivings about the basis of Las Vegas' economy. Gambling is not, and never has been, part of the Puritan work ethic, and not even the most positive commentator can reconcile the two.

This hostility or ambivalence regarding the moral climate of Las Vegas is evident even in the "straight news" stories which appeared in national magazines in the 1950s. These stories purported to be objective in reporting facts rather than providing description or analysis, but objectivity seems to be close to impossible when Las Vegas is the subject. This can be seen in the appearance of several stories which speculated that the boom was about to end, and it was often accompanied by the suggestion that Las Vegas was getting what it deserved: Life observed that, "like a gambler on a prolonged winning streak, Las Vegas had the feeling its run of luck couldn't end. . . But when the excitement of the opening [of three new hotels in 1955] died down, the town looked at its new places where customers were scarce and the betting light and wondered: Had Las Vegas pushed its luck too far?" ("Gambling Town Pushes Its Luck" 20). This article was accompanied by pictures of "idling croupiers dawd[ling] behind their roulette tables," a "little-used pool," and a "lonely lobby" (25), to show how expectations of packed houses were not being met. Time reported, with its characteristically value-laden prose,
that "part of the trouble was due to the fact that the number of new suckers had not kept pace with the new gambling facilities" ("Snake Eyes in Las Vegas" 97). The New York Times Magazine was less judgmental in its 1956 analysis, attributing the minor economic slump to the new hotels going overbudget on their construction costs, the engagement in "a prohibitively costly competition for entertainment," and the management by "men experienced in standard motel operation, but unworldly in the ways of gambling" (Millstein 64). Business Week, however, said the same year that "Lady Luck appears to be smiling again on Las Vegas," due to strategies such as approving a bond issue for a convention center, attempting to bring more diversified industry into the city, and raising the once-free or cut-rate prices for the entertainment and restaurants ("Las Vegas Hedges its Bets").

Interestingly, the earliest description of Las Vegas' downfall came in a 1950 Newsweek article, which detailed moral, not economic, trouble. "Last week," the magazine noted gravely, "it began to look as though the free and easy way of life was contagious—in the wrong quarters. . . . The high-school basketball team, it was rumored, had got noisily drunk in Reno," and some juveniles had broken into a railroad car and stolen a case of whiskey. "The storm broke," however, when a school board meeting addressed the problems of teen pregnancy, the existence of a "non-virgin society in which sexual experience was a prerequisite for membership," and wanton "love-making. . . on the school's rear steps." Those present at the meeting blamed the city's lax morals, exemplified by "the strapless dresses common on Las Vegas streets [which] had no place in the schoolrooms." The article concluded that,
following these incidents, "Las Vegans began looking uneasily at the neon lights of the gambling casinos and wondering about the whirring, clattering machines of their biggest business" ("Las Vegas Twilight?"). This article is a direct antecedent of Paul Ralli's moment of self-doubt in the midst of his boosterism.

The First Analyses of Las Vegas

In addition to news-based, current-event-driven stories, Las Vegas itself sometimes became the subject of analysis in the 1950s, as if it was somehow symptomatic of the general trends at work in U.S. society. In one of the few references to racial tensions in the city, Katharine Best and Katharine Hillyer's Las Vegas: Playtown, U.S.A. reported that "any Mississippi sharecropper bracing a Greasy Spoon for a meal can rest assured he will not be contaminated by the presence of Negroes... No motels, hotels, casinos or restaurants will serve the colored" (Best and Hillyer 135). Their chapter on race relations in Las Vegas deserves special credit, for almost nowhere else in 1950s literature was the subject broached. The entire book is a well-written, balanced look at the city; more than just a guidebook, it is a thoughtful analysis of the workings of Las Vegas.

Another distinguished critic of Las Vegas was The Nation's Julian Halevy, who saw the city as an escape, just like the recently-constructed Disneyland: "both of these institutions exist for the relief of tension and boredom, as tranquilizers for social anxiety... Their huge profits and mushrooming growth suggest that as conformity and adjustment become...
more rigidly imposed on the American scene, the drift to fantasy will become a flight" (513). Harper's printed a similarly judicious appraisal of the city, with the conclusion that your reaction to it will depend upon the kind of person you are. The Strip is basically unwholesome. One cannot help moralizing. Remember, however, that what you see meets with the approval of the sovereign people of Nevada, and that some millions of tourists drop in each year without coaxing to try their luck... Try to look upon the place simply as a phenomenon. (Pearce 82)

This type of nonfiction magazine piece represents the best of what was written about Las Vegas in the 1950s; neither a puff piece nor a Jeremiad, it attempted to place the city in the context of the entire society, and the Harper's article is admirable for its recognizing that much of one's response to the city is related to one's entire personality and moral or intellectual outlook.

**Fiction**

Alice Denham's 1955 short story "The Deal" describes the objectification and commodification of people in an overly materialistic world. An early ancestor of the 1993 film *Indecent Proposal*, "The Deal" describes what happens when the struggling artist and cocktail waitress Linda is propositioned by Alf the Albino, "the greatest poker shark in the West" (143), to have sex with him for $1000. Linda is an outsider to Las Vegas, symbolized by her sensitivity, her artistic skills, and her non-glamorous appearance: her "hair was plain brown, a rare color in Las Vegas," and she wore a "plain gray shirt and gray cashmere and saddle shoes" (142, 143). Alf, on the other hand, is in his element in Las Vegas, and his grotesque
appearance mirrors the city's deceptive sheen: he is "the quintessence of blond decay," with a "yellow toupee and... smooth poreless skin, like thin dough about to tear, [and] the same sick blue underneath, an old baby with a withered turkey neck and chin" (142-43). Ironically, Linda, who is the victim of objectification, herself dehumanizes not only Alf, but the entire crowd she is sketching in the casino. She intends to "record the bawdy greedy oversexed sterility and expensive starvation of the Las Vegas dying" (146-47), so that she can test her skills as a painter. The people all have "gaudy faces and glassy eyes," and she sees them as "dissonant color patterns, glittering facades of faces, one painting after another." As an artist, colors are important to Linda: she notes the people "jammed against the green felt crap island and the red-and-black roulette wheel of the luxury hotel, in luxury-ridden neon-glutted Las Vegas" (142). This equation of the people with the artificial landscape becomes internalized after the liaison, when Linda is "feeling like all the neon on the Strip" (155). The story almost has a twist ending when Linda considers not taking the money, but she decides to in the end because "it was simply a matter of choice, your way of selling yourself" (156). A possible hope for the future is glimpsed when Linda returns to the hotel bar and flirts with a young air force pilot, a "knight in blue" (151), who symbolizes the vitality which she has lost. This pilot may also symbolize the future of Las Vegas in its position as a national defense and technological center, as some observers hoped that this development would lessen the area's dependence on gambling and produce a more respectable and diversified basis for the economy.
Another fictional account of the high personal cost of operating in Las Vegas is told in William R. Cox's 1955 story "Las Vegas Trap." This story involves an independent dealer, Nick Crater, who runs afoul of the mob when he punches out a well-connected gangster named Buster during a high-stakes card game and takes off with the money. He and Meg Bond, a barmaid at the "Flaming Arrow Hotel," decide to leave town, pursued by men in the employ of Sam Makowski, "the paunchy, balding, former consul of an eastern murder syndicate, now turned legitimate" (53). This legitimacy is precarious, however, as Crater is now "duty bound to report [Makowski's illegal activities] to the Greek and High-Play Monte and other legit members of the fraternity. When this news got around, it could ruin the Flaming Arrow" (8).

Crater is an outsider, one of the many independent operators around Las Vegas, and because of this he is not trusted by the mobsters. As Buster reports to Sam, "You can't trust Crater... He'll rat on us, Sam. A gambler, sure. A hanger-arounder. But not one of us" (8). This sense of group identity serves as a plot device, since Crater is forced to flee from the organization which he has angered, but it also reinforces the story's depiction of Crater as a lonely outsider, much like Linda in "The Deal." Crater's beloved sister died of heartbreak and polio, and his army buddy was killed in the line of duty as a policeman. Crater and his friend were "going to open a [gambling] joint in Jersey after the war" (28), and at the end of the story Crater considers taking Meg to Hawaii to "open a small place of their own" (40). Thus, gambling for Nick is seen as the fulfillment of the American Dream; instead of opening a shop or a bar, Nick ironically sees gambling as the way to a respectable life.
Things would have been all right for him in Las Vegas had he not crossed the wrong people. It is significant that in this story gambling itself is not condemned; the unsavory people connected with it are the trouble. Adopting the argument of those who wanted to purge all gang interests from the casinos, the story proposes that if good people like Nick and Meg were allowed to run things, casinos would be safer, more respectable places.

There is an interesting subtext in this story concerning the treatment of minorities. In one of the only instances of a nonwhite being a major character in 1950s Las Vegas fiction, Nick and Meg become involved with Andy Perez, a young Mexican-American with a wife and a baby. On the run in California, Nick and Meg stay at a motel where the owner is murdered following a poker game in the motel office. Perez is framed for the murder by two of the other players, both prominent businessmen in "Suntown, California." Nick and Meg help Andy and his wife Angelina escape a lynch mob because they are touched by the way that the couple expresses their complete love and devotion for each other, agreeing that they "haven’t seen in a long time, what they have" (27). As they are trying to get out of town, Buster and his goons show up, a shootout ensues, and the appropriate people are killed. The Andy-Angelina story is a parallel subplot to the Nick-Meg story in that both couples are trapped in a bad situation and are being pursued by dangerous people. The familiar conceit of third-world, uneducated people being somehow more in touch with the basic aspects of human goodness is expressed here. Although it is sentimental, the subplot effectively shows how people with their hearts in the right places will ultimately triumph over evil.
It is ironic that a stereotype was needed to express this notion, but it is remarkable that the characters were used at all. In the stories we are examining, there is only one other major nonwhite character (a Hispanic-Irish mix), and virtually no minor nonwhite characters either. In this way, 1950s Las Vegas fiction mirrors the social reality of the city: “to preserve its hard-won image as an all-American vacation town, Las Vegas felt compelled to keep its hotels, casinos, pools, and showrooms ‘lily white’” (Moehring 173).

The suggestion in “Las Vegas Trap” that the underworld hides behind legalized gambling is pursued in Jack Waer’s 1955 novel Murder in Las Vegas. In this story, the low-level mob functionary Steve Walters, a “local Vegas boy” (8) made good, is framed for two murders by his boss, Sam Talmadge, to cover up mob involvement in prostitution and pornography. Walters sardonically reports that Talmadge is “a ‘financier’ who admitted to certain club interests in Vegas, but they were entirely legitimate” (79). Talmadge’s excuse for framing a good employee is that “if the investigation goes too deep it could ruin my operations in Vegas” (49). Walters explains how a small-time hood like himself can rise in Las Vegas, where “if you have style and keep impressing the right people, you can get into the class stuff, might even wind up with a nice refined spot in the Hacienda Club in Las Vegas which is in Nevada, an action where the suckers know good grammar and wouldn’t think of misspelling their names on an I.O.U.” (9). Presumably, the “Hacienda” was intended to be a fictitious name, since the novel was published in 1955, the same year the Hacienda opened, and the novel was most likely written before then. Nevertheless, the Strip’s artificial landscape
is used to good effect. One of Walters' hangouts is the Desert Club, which is "cool and modern with lots of redwood and natural rock put together for the best artistic effect, and against the flat desert setting it appeared to be in perpetual flight" (17). It is not uncommon in Las Vegas fiction for a merging of the characters and the city to occur; the "flight" of the architecture of Las Vegas mirrors Walters' own flight from the mobsters who set him up. Walters flees to Los Angeles, where the story concludes amid car chases and shootouts, but the scene of the crime and the setup is in Las Vegas, giving an extra metaphorical boost to the intrigue of the underworld.

Perhaps the most ambitious fictional chronicle of the mob in Las Vegas is Irving Shulman's epic 1951 novel *The Big Brokers*. This 570-page, *Brothers Karamazov*-like story traces the expansion of a group of eastern Jewish gangsters into semi-legitimate businesses like car dealerships, finance companies, jewelry shops, and Las Vegas casinos. The head of the organization, Itzik Yanowitz, chooses three men, Larry, Mitch, and Bull, to run the "Las Vegas Riviera" on the Strip (this novel was published four years prior to the opening of the actual Riviera hotel-casino). The novel shows how each one of these men falls victim to his own weakness: Larry ends up becoming an alcoholic and flying off to Mexico with part of the casino's bankroll; Mitch rats out his bosses and gets sent to prison for manslaughter; and Bull's conscience gets the best of him (a weakness in this context) after he murders a man and he turns to Orthodox Judaism. The theme of the novel is that these men (boys, really) have been taken out of their element and placed in a situation which they cannot handle. They felt confident in "the old
days,” when “a guy worked someone over. Or stuck up a bookie joint. Or handled a protection route. . . . But this! Managing a hotel and casino! . . . were in Las Vegas to revitalize an investment of a million dollars, if not more. . . . The sum was staggering” (8). The excess endemic to Las Vegas proves to be the downfall of them all, as their every whim is catered to. Money, women, and booze are available on demand, and the corrupting force of it all ruins the men and their hotel.

The central symbol of the excess of Las Vegas in *The Big Brokers* is “Cherry,” a vulgar monstrosity which Bull chooses as decoration for the bar: “a life-size, real-skin, nude doll with blonde hair, reddest mouth, and startling black eyebrows and eyelashes. . . . every hour on the hour the doll’s stomach undulated for a full minute while the rosy nipples of her real-skin rubber breasts glowed brightly with a startling incandescence” (132). When this show began, “the people at the counter screamed with glee, made ribald and derogatory comparisons with the women in their company, and exclaimed over the doll which continued to gyrate with mechanical sensuality for a full sixty seconds” (173). Bull’s religious conversion later in the novel leads him to reject Cherry as a “golden calf,” saying that “It isn’t right to make things look alive. . . . Ask God” (342). That Cherry symbolizes the worship of the false idols of money and sex is made explicit here; what is also evident is that she represents the subjugation of the women in the novel, who exist mainly either to sleep with or to slap around. Women are constantly objectified as “nice-looking gash,” “Goddamn slut[s],” and “tramps,” and the conversations are punctuated with strange misogynist
remarks such as "there's nothing like a double-jointed babe with muscles" (171, 270, 159). The gangsters often violently beat their women and enjoy it, as when Mitch hits a woman "across the side of her face, felt some relief in striking her, and slapped her hard across the head" (270). If there is any doubt as to the attitude of the men, it is dispelled when Shulman writes that "they didn't want, need, or enjoy women, but they had screened women until they were in their proper place: to take care of a guy" (289). Women, never seen as very important in the man's world of Las Vegas, are here devalued even more than usual.

The role of the mob in Las Vegas is accepted as a matter of course in The Big Brokers. In fact, the title itself is ironic: the "brokers," or investors, in the gambling palaces are all mobsters and criminals. A series of rhetorical questions attempts to convey the prevalent attitude:

What difference did it make if a St. Louis syndicate had put up sixty-four percent of the backing for the Amarillo?...If one of the dealers at a place on Fremont Street had once been a minor member of Murder Incorporated? If the other boys had records or had made lurid headlines? They were on the right side of the law now, with social security numbers and living clean. (324)

There is a sense of retribution, though, not only in the outcome of the stories of Mitch, Larry, and Bull, but in the introduction of real-life events surrounding gambling: "Now they've got a big guy from Tennessee--Kefauver...and he's supposed to be lookin' into rackets and stuff. So let'm" (564). This is spoken by one of the minor characters who is preparing to leave town after the debacle of the Riviera, and the implication is that it is well past the time for such housecleaning. By the end of the novel, Mitch understands
why one would hate Las Vegas: “The goddamned wind never stopped blowing, the mammoth neon signs drilled in the eyes, and the effen desert was a trap—with the Riviera a prison in the sand” (439). Mitch’s woman, Joyce, takes a final look at the city and sees it as “the whole human amalgam of every passion, lust, and tension... the rich hot colors, its beautiful, reckless, and dangerous power, its magnificent corruption” (569). Like Lot’s wife, Joyce looks back upon the doomed city, but she escapes to pronounce her judgment.

The use of a central symbol in The Big Brokers to express the essential nature of Las Vegas is repeated in Richard S. Prather’s 1951 novel Find this Woman, but in an even more obvious way. Much of the action in this novel revolves around Victor Dante, who is described by private eye Shell Scott as a “‘gambler—a smart one. . . . He’s got a lot of influence around here now. And that influence, they tell me, is not only political but police’” (41).

Interestingly, there is no mention whatsoever of the mob; Dante is an independent operator, although the Police Captain of Las Vegas says that he “would like very much to hang something on Victor Dante. . . . But he is a man with much power and many friends, and there seems to be nothing. . . . wrong with him” (76-77). The overriding symbol of the novel is a hotel-casino on the Strip owned by Dante and called, predictably, “Dante’s Inferno.” The casino is a true vision of Hell, and the fictional description of it surely surpasses even the most satirical observer’s vision of Las Vegas:

the building was huge,... fronted with ten thousand square feet of velvety green lawn. Equally distant from the two sides of the lawn and out close to the street, a statue of Satan stood, forty feet high and bathed in a wash of crimson from spotlights at its base. . . . The figure itself was slightly
crouched, the evil head bent forward as if peering into the cars that passed all day and all night in front of it.

The front of the building is adorned with red neon lights, so that "the entire face of the building seemed to be covered with leaping flames that occasionally shot higher than the roof." People walked through a "monstrous face with the gaping door for its mouth" in order to enter the casino. The crowning touch, though, is provided inside the casino itself, which is decorated with murals on all four walls of hundreds of naked figures: in chains, being consumed by fire, being whipped or beaten or stretched on racks. It seemed that all the tortures of all time were being employed on the straining figures, but on no face was there any expression of pain, or any expression at all. These were blank, set faces with dull, staring eyes, and all the faces were exactly the same. These were the eternally damned and the eternally dying who could never die, existing forever till all senses were dead and living itself was death. (53-54)

In this section, Las Vegas actually becomes Hell; while Sid Meyers makes the same comparison, it takes the loosened constraints of fiction to produce such a potent symbol of the horror that critics saw in the city.

An interesting use of local color in Find this Woman is in its setting at the time of Helldorado, "The wildest, shootingest, rooting-tootingest ruckus since the West was really wild. . . . Four days when Las Vegas, which jumps plenty all the year round, jumps clear up into the air and clicks its spurred heels" (22). This "Mardi Gras with pistols" (32) provides a key moment in the plot when Dante's men capture Scott and brazenly parade him through the casino, tied up and in full cowboy garb, with a sign around his neck reading "hoss thief." The kidnapping is carried out with no one the wiser, as Scott
reflects that "downtown and even here on the Strip scenes similar to this were going on, the only difference being that this was a little more elaborate than most. Men had been thrown into Helldorado jail for no reason at all; other men were waving guns at the sky... Yeah, they could get away with it" (95). Prather thus uses both aspects of Las Vegas, the Wild West and the modern resort, to depict the city as a dangerous place. Finally, another convention is skillfully employed in the identification of people with objects, in this case the merging of a person with one of the games of chance. Scott has a dream about the ball in a roulette wheel, but when he looks carefully he realizes that "it wasn't a white ball at all but a tiny naked blonde, and she was running like hell because there, loping along behind her and right in the groove, was Freddy [a lady-killer bartender at the Desert Inn]" (24). The sense of entrapment and objectification is nicely summarized in this vision of Scott's. The novel itself is a fairly conventional crime story of double-crosses and false identities, but Prather deserves credit for his good use of the real and imagined aspects of Las Vegas to propel his story, and he produces perhaps the most effective use of the city as a symbol.

Another example of hard-boiled Las Vegas fiction is Steve Fisher's 1958 novel *No House Limit*, which describes an attempt by a rival syndicate to ruin Joe Martin's Rainbow's End casino by employing a professional dice player, Bello, to try to break the bank in a three-day craps marathon. The story is played out as a battle of wills between the owner and the gambler, but it is in the subplots that the novel is most revealing in its attitudes and most resembles the misogyny displayed in *The Big Brokers*. Vegas in this novel is
a man’s territory, and the women surrounding the action are entirely subsidiary. Thus, a waitress named “Cottontop” is described as “a kind of cute scarecrow: or a flippy-floppy rag doll with white braid hair” (184-85), and a woman with whom Joe Martin is involved is a “miserable conniving doll-faced slut” (215). Even Dee, Bello’s lady companion, is described as “an exotic little peasant” (201) having an “angelic-waif face” (46). Dee is meant to be a sympathetic character, as she is trying to escape the influence of Bello, but her depiction only underscores her subservient role in the novel, and it shows the lack of regard for women in general.

An interesting sidelight of No House Limit is its attempts at realism, for almost every chapter begins with a section on Las Vegas, gambling, or other aspects of the setting. These sections, taken apart from the novel, would provide a fairly good guidebook for the visitor to Las Vegas. Rules of the games are discussed, as well as casino procedures and terminology, and Fisher even provides information about area attractions such as the Boulder Dam, which we are told is “the biggest in the world, [and] is seven hundred and thirty feet high and a thousand feet wide” (106). Factual material like this shows that Fisher obviously did his research, and it provides an interesting counterpoint to the fictional action in the novel. These descriptive sections are akin to the techniques of Henry Fielding or Herman Melville in that they provide a larger frame of reference than the merely fictional, and they help to elevate the novel somewhat beyond the ordinary crime drama.

Probably the best-known of the 1950s Las Vegas fiction is Ian Fleming’s 1956 novel Diamonds are Forever, which features James Bond investigating a
The depiction of Las Vegas in this novel is that the suave Bond makes his way effortlessly through each of these cities, all luxurious refuges of the rich, but only Las Vegas is described in negative terms. Fleming’s attitude towards the city may be analogous to Bond’s derisive comment about American gangsters, who he describes as “mostly a lot of Italian bums with monogrammed shirts who spend the day eating spaghetti and squirting scent all over themselves” (17). Bond’s Chief of Staff attempts to disabuse Bond of this notion, telling him that “those are only the ones that you see,” and that “gambling is the biggest single industry in America. . . . Get hold of the Kefauver Report if you don’t believe me.” It is, the Chief of Staff assures Bond, “all owned and run by the underworld” (17). The organization in this case is, appropriately enough for a diamond-smuggling enterprise, “The Spangled Mob,” run by the Spang brothers, who also operate illegal wire services and other unsavory businesses from their Las Vegas hotel, the Tiara.

Although Fleming’s British snobbery is not explicit, the condemnation of Las Vegas as a vulgar, quintessentially “American” place runs throughout the novel. Bond is bedeviled from the moment that he arrives by the heat, which hits his face “like a fist,” turns the road into “frying concrete,” and produces “a glittering spray of light-splinters [which] pierced Bond’s eyes, . . . and he felt his shirt clinging stickily to his skin.” Bond ironically observes “an elegant drive-in restaurant” on the Strip called a “GASETERIA,” which offers “HOT DOGS! JUMBOBURGERS!! ICE-COLD DRINKS!!!” (117, 121,
The aggressive capitalization and exclamation marks convey the obnoxious elements of the city. However, it is not only the physical aspects of the city that are condemned; the very people themselves are ugly and uncouth. At his hotel pool, Bond decides that “only about one per cent of the customers should be allowed to wear bathing suits” (124). Seeing people at the slot machines “reminded Bond of Dr. Pavlov’s dogs, saliva drooling at the treacherous bell that brought no dinner, and he shuddered at the empty eyes and the flaccid skin and the half open mouths and the thoughtless minds” (126). These descriptions of the city and the people are in marked contrast to the descriptions of the other places Bond travels to. In London, he goes to “the London Diamond Club,” which has “neat white portals” and is “smart” and “luxurious” inside (24); the “House of Diamonds” in New York is “elegant,” “discreet,” and “handsome” (50, 56), and the resort at Saratoga, New York, is full of “peace and serenity” under the “green majesty of the elms” (100). Las Vegas, on the other hand, is “hot and stuffy,” “sultry,” and characterized by “a new school of functional architecture which he [Bond] dubbed the Gilded Mousetrap School, its main purpose being to channel the customer-mouse into the central gambling trap whether he wanted the cheese or not” (121, 125). It seems that Bond is simply too elegant for this desert city, and the impression is reinforced by the climax of the Las Vegas portion of the novel, which takes place at Spang’s personal “ghost town way out on Highway 95” (137), a kind of private dude ranch and Wild West town. The primitive nature of Las Vegas’ culture thus asserts itself as Bond gets into
trouble out there in the uninhabited desert, and the city degenerates into its natural state of wilderness before the reader's eyes.

Another fictional sleuth who is too cool for Las Vegas is Homer Evans, "the suave criminologist" (15) who is the hero of Elliot Paul's 1956 novel *The Black and the Red*. The improbable plot of this mystery revolves around the attempt of a Las Vegas hotel owner to lure the famous French chef Jean-Pierre Sabin to his casino, so that Sabin's superior taste buds can sample the desert soil to test for the presence of oil. Sabin, like Bond but more explicit in his criticism, continually expresses horror at being in the "wild lawless Western outpost" (15) Evans populates his book with stock Western figures such as Alkili Ike, Parentheses Pete "(so nicknamed because of the relationship between his bow legs and other outer appurtenances)" (140) and Mercury Matt, old prospectors and cowboys. Paul apparently fancies himself a writer of high-brow Literature, describing himself in his author's note as one of the founders of "transition, the startling avant garde magazine of the Parisian expatriates." This makes for some insufferably pretentious prose, including some unintentional humor, as when the conflicts between the one-dimensional characters are described as being "on a level with Dostoyevsky's historical duel between Raskolnikov and Pytor Petrovich" (202-3). It is sufficient to summarize Paul's attitude by saying that he connects Las Vegas to past civilizations like "Babylon and Ninevah, Tyre and Sidon, the wild dream of all ages, a kind of sur-reality our epoch can salute and nourish, a peak of pleasure second to none which ever has erupted since the Coming of Man"
Although this comparison is not unique, Paul's style makes it particularly difficult to take seriously.

An interesting sub-genre, consisting of two works, exists in the 1950s and concerns religious miracles taking place in Las Vegas. The first work is a play called *Seven Nuns at Las Vegas* and was produced by the "University Theatre and the Department of Speech, University of Notre Dame, July 25, 1954." In this play, the entire convent of Saint Genesius, nuns and all, has been mysteriously moved from South Bend, Indiana, to Las Vegas. It turns out that this is the result of Sister Columba's prayers to Saint Joseph to help her with her rheumatism. Saint Joseph himself has chosen the location, as Sister Columba explains: "when St. Joseph said he would take me to where the weather was warm and I could walk again like a young girl, I thought he meant he was taking me to Heaven--and I'm surprised as you it should be Las Vegas" (White 17). The mere presence of the convent has a transforming effect on the city, as a radio announcer reports that

> every night club and tavern and cocktail bar in the city is closed. The vacationists have not left; they are still here; but they refuse to drink; they refuse to gamble; all normal activities have ceased in Las Vegas. . . there is a new fad in Las Vegas, a kind of game called contemplation. I do not understand it myself, but it seems to be played by just thinking. Nothing like it has ever been tried before in Las Vegas. (White 23)

In true Vegas fashion, the casino owners attempt to capitalize on the religious revival by establishing a "Convent Refreshment Station" next to the convent and offering "Hot Dogs, Beer, Barbecue, Coca Cola, and Relics."

Faced with the loss of their patrons, the "Board of Directors of Amalgamated
Night Clubs” offers to combine Father O’Brien’s “instruction classes with a floor show and cocktails...They say he has a better personality than Marlene Dietrich” (White 33, 44). Naturally, these requests are refused, and, far from engaging in the corrupting commerce of Las Vegas, the convent takes in three of its most stereotypical denizens: Peaches, Baby, and Boots, who are laid off from their jobs as casino hostesses and decide to become nuns. As expected, they loosen up some of the stricter sisters, teaching them the “gypsy dance,” while becoming examples of the power of faith to transform anyone. In the end, Sister Columba asks St. Joseph to return the convent to South Bend, and the casino owners are transported along with them, presumably to lead more spiritual lives. No mention is made of whether the residents and tourists in Las Vegas return to their gambling and drinking.

Another story with a miraculous theme is Robert Nathan’s 1956 novel The Rancho of the Little Loves. In this intensely Catholic novel, a Convocation of Saints decides to “send to earth one of our number, to remind men to love one another” (9). The ambitious Blessed Pierre maneuvers to get his friend St. Odule to be the one appointed for this mission, intending to go to Paris, Geneva, or some other beloved center of European culture. Instead, their directions get mixed up and they arrive “in the Mojave desert approximately six thousand miles west of Geneva, Copenhagen, and Paris, France” (16). Moreover, they arrive at the Rancho of the Little Loves, a brothel on the outskirts of Las Vegas, but “Conchita [O’Rourke] was the only girl at the Rancho Los Amores Pequeños, and the Rancho had only one customer, Mr. Robert Teagarden. . . . Without experience or knowledge of the
world, she had given her heart to her first customer” (28). Thus, the Heavenly envoys meet up with the most virtuous Hispanic-Irish prostitute ever, and most of the book is devoted to their attempts to make the haughty Teagarden, “a man of dignity and distinction, and a headwaiter at The Winds Hotel” (28), aware of the devotion of the beautiful and faithful Conchita.

A subplot involving the gullible St. Odule being taken advantage of by a gang of toughs who plan to rob the casino on Christmas Eve provides the necessary complications which require the miracle to set things right. In the casino, Odule prays to God for help when it appears that the evil men are preparing to commit mayhem, and “it appeared then to the trembling guests that the ceiling of the hotel split apart like thunder; an intolerable brightness blinded them, an odor of frankincense assailed their nostrils, and fire descended on the room to the sound of trumpets” (162). This, it turns out, is St. Augustine and his attending angels sent down to protect everyone from harm, and the angels break into a chorus of “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” The single example of cynicism in this novel appears at the end, when the loose ends of the story are wrapped up, and it is noted that after the would-be thieves were “swept away like chaff by a great wind, they were reunited two thousand miles to the east, and went into politics. It did not seem to them that their lives had changed in any way” (166). Thus, in both The Rancho of the Little Loves and Seven Nuns at Las Vegas, Las Vegas is seen as a place in need of spiritual help, but not so far gone as to lose all hope. In this way, these two works are quite touching in their simplicity and their faith in the goodness of men and the benevolence of God.
Interestingly, the two works which specifically deal with religion in Las Vegas have Roman Catholicism as their subject. This may be either a reflection of the heritage of the Latin American inhabitants of Las Vegas, like Conchita, or of the mythical view that sinful Italians are running the city, but it is also interesting that, in all of the fictional works examined from the 1950s, there is not a single mention of a Mormon character. There is a strong Mormon community in Las Vegas, and Mormons were the original white inhabitants of the area, but Mormonism may have been too far from mainstream American beliefs to warrant an extended treatment of it in popular fiction. Likewise, depictions of the Native Americans who live in the area are conspicuously absent from mass-culture portrayals. In this way, the fiction of the time reflects the conservatism of the 1950s, and advances in civil rights and in the recognition of diverse cultures in fiction as well as in real life were yet to come.
CHAPTER THREE

1960-69
CASTING A CRITICAL EYE ON LAS VEGAS

In the 1960s, the nation's continuing prosperity, coupled with the increasing availability of jet travel, meant that more and more Americans than ever before now had the discretionary income to be able to vacation in Las Vegas. As a result, the growth of the city and of its resorts continued unabated, but like the rest of the nation, Las Vegas experienced some troubled times in the 1960s. The city's urban problems began to be felt even as the tourists kept rolling in, and, like many American cities, Las Vegas had a particularly difficult time in the areas of civil rights struggles and racial tensions in this decade. A 1960 agreement between the NAACP and several downtown and Strip hotels resulted in the workplace integration of nearly all of them, but most of the jobs held by Blacks were of the maid/busboy variety, not of the higher-paid and more visible dealer/waitress type (Moehring 186). Job and housing discrimination continued to fester in Las Vegas throughout the 1960s, and school desegregation was the root cause of a series of riots that broke out towards the end of the decade. Things got especially out of hand in West Las Vegas on October 6-7, 1969, when "gang-related assaults sent twenty-three people to the hospital" (Moehring 192), leading to Governor Laxalt's ordering the Nevada National Guard on alert. Looting, fires, and random
assaults caused the police to seal off the area and to fire tear gas into crowds of Black youths in order to get them to disperse.

Despite its problems, though, the 1960s saw Las Vegas continue to take the shape which is familiar to us today, as major resorts such as the Aladdin, Landmark, International (now the Hilton), and Caesars Palace opened in this decade. Caesars Palace is especially important because it can be seen as the first manifestation of the concept of the totally themed resort which is so prevalent now. While resorts such as the Frontier, Stardust, and Sahara were also themed to a certain extent, it was Caesars Palace which took the idea to its limit. Its evocation of period and place on a massively detailed and over-the-top scale is now echoed in the pyramid and Sphinx of the Luxor, the medieval castle of the Excalibur, and the South Seas pirates of Treasure Island, among other resorts. As Las Vegas was engaging in its constant evolution, many commentators in the 1960s began to question the basis for the city's success. This questioning produced some of the era's most important and influential writing about Las Vegas.

Nonfiction

Troubles: Mob/Skimming/Racial Tensions

One perspective on Las Vegas is that it is a city built by outlaws, a notion which fits nicely into the "wild west" aura of the city. Even though gambling is legal in Nevada, in its first few decades the "experts" in the field must have learned their trade someplace else, where it was illegal. Reports of
organized crime’s involvement in Las Vegas have been circulating almost since the city’s inception, and the 1960s was a particularly active decade for the examination of this problem. The most thorough investigation by a magazine in these years is by Fred J. Cook of The Nation in 1960. His report, “Gambling Inc.,” examines the Mob’s presence in various American cities, and the section on Las Vegas is entitled “Las Vegas: Golden Paradise.” Cook begins dramatically with the attempted assassination of gangster Frank Costello by a “fat, waddling gunman” (297), after which a slip of paper was found in his pocket listing the Tropicana’s gambling proceeds. Taking this as his cue, Cook writes that “Nevada’s legalization of gambling was one of the greatest boons ever bestowed on the American underworld by a grateful government” (298). The methods are detailed by which the Mob gained control of casinos by putting up respectable front men, as are the illegal activities of money laundering, tax evasion, and skimming. Cook refers to these scandals as “the other side, the darker and little-publicized side, of the Nevada experience” (302). Cook must be referring here to publicity generated by the city and the casinos, for the “dark side” of Las Vegas had by this time already become legendary in American culture.

Cook resorts to a moralistic judgment at the end of this well-researched article when he writes that the lesson to be learned is that “nothing corrupts faster than easy money and that no money is easier, faster, more corruptive than gambling money” (302). Up to this point, Cook has emphasized the corruption of the mobsters, but in his last paragraph he points to evidence that gambling is corrupting the moral fiber of the citizenry as well, pointing to
the "exceptionally large and costly police forces" of Reno and Las Vegas, and he ends with the portentous information that "there have been years when the Nevada suicide rate was more than double that of the rest of the United States" (302). Thus, Cook condemns Las Vegas not only for harboring dangerous criminals in its primary enterprise, but also for promoting the kind of moral rot that inevitably accompanies it, whether it is legal or not. This argument is potent for many critics of gambling in general and of Las Vegas in particular; for some, it seems that even if every single mobster were removed, the town would still deserve censure for its reliance on a vice for its survival.

Probably the best-known exposé of Las Vegas in the 1960s is The Green Felt Jungle by Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris. The thesis of this 1963 book appears in the metaphor of the title and on the first page: "Las Vegas is a city in statistics only. In every other respect, it is a jungle--a jungle of green-felt crap tables, roulette layouts, and slot machines in which the entire population, directly or indirectly, is devoted to fleecing tourists" (1). The "fleecing" goes beyond the unbeatable odds of the tables, however; the main thrust of this book concerns the mob's control of the town through behind-the-scenes ownership and its involvement in activities such as skimming, money laundering, tax evasion, and even murder. Reid returns to the city in his 1969 book The Grim Reapers, a "city by city probe" of organized crime in America. His chapter on Las Vegas updates The Green Felt Jungle, with a report on Jimmy Hoffa's investment in Caesars Palace (thus providing the chapter's title, "Teamstertown, U.S.A.") and an appendix repeating Reid's
earlier methodology: he provides lists of licensees of all the major casinos, showing which ones have mob ties. The impact of these two books is somewhat muted by Reid’s writing, which is a strange blend of straight reporting, tabloid-style sensationalism, and near-racist generalizations. For example, when Reid discusses Meyer Lansky in The Grim Reapers he characterizes him as “perhaps the last of the big-time Jewish gambling racketeers with a vested interest in the Vegas Temples of Mammon, though he long ago abandoned his belief in the moral concepts that have shed greatness through the centuries on the race that produced him” (219). In examining the influence of respectable businessmen like Howard Hughes and Kirk Kerkorian on the city, Reid asserts that “Vegas has changed little except externally” (243), and that racketeers still abound behind the facades of the legal owners of casinos. The overly sensational, moralistic statements of Reid often produce the same effect as some of the pulp fiction novels which will be discussed later. The result is that the presence of organized crime seems as fictional as the many detective yarns involving Las Vegas, a serious credibility problem given that most of what Reid described was in fact true.

The noted reporter Fletcher Knebel engages in the same type of moralizing when he explores the skimming problem in a 1966 Look article, in which he finds that in Las Vegas, “Officials suffer from a persecution complex. . . . The city sees a darkling conspiracy to invade the casino counting rooms, demolish an honorable commerce, put the captains of local industry behind bars and raze [the city] to the gray and barren desert from whence it sprang” (Knebel 75). In contrast to the earnest Reid, Knebel uses a highly
sarcastic tone throughout his piece. He describes the local feelings against "J. Edgar Hoover's G-men," who are seen as "foes of gainful enterprise, mockers of privacy and tentacles of a grotesque bureaucracy in Washington," and he reports that "anybody who happens to be Attorney General of the United States is viewed as a despot intent on wrecking home industry." Knebel quotes Governor Grant Sawyer referring to the skimming investigation as "'Nazism'" [sic], and Caesars Palace President Nathan Jacobson calls Robert Kennedy "'a maniac who ought to be in jail'" for his actions as Attorney General. Knebel thus depicts politicians and gambling industry officials as paranoid and out of control, so vehement in their tirades that Knebel is forced to take notes on Caesars Palace stationary when he runs out of his own paper. Knebel at this point takes full advantage of the irony of wealthy, cutthroat gambling industry spokesmen crying about persecution, describing the letterhead which depicts "a chesty female dripping grapes into the mouth of a reclining Roman equipped with toga, laurel wreath and phallic dagger" (76). Words like "vendetta" and "persecution" are enclosed in ironic quotation marks to indicate the level of paranoia afoot in the city. Jack Entratter, Sands president, "clam[s] up" when questioned about skimming, then "charge[s] that major advertisers had pressured Look into sending a writer to Las Vegas to denigrate the city. Why advertisers would want to do in Las Vegas was not explained. . . . A visitor soon gets the feeling that the entire Eastern Seaboard lies awake at night scheming the demise of poor little rich Las Vegas" (78). It should be noted, though, that many state and local officials pushed hard to keep the gambling industry clean; Governor Sawyer
was instrumental in the creation of the Gaming Control Commission and the Black Book of individuals forbidden to even enter a casino (Moehring 54-55), but Knebel omits this information from his report.

As is often the case with reporters covering Las Vegas, Knebel then proceeds from the main topic of his article to a broader criticism of the city and its visitors. He continues in the same satirical and negative vein when he describes the Strip as "the most prodigal, garish and blinding 3 1/2-mile stretch of buildings in the world. . . . Electric signs hammer at the eyeballs and sear the brain" (78). Knebel notes that "It is a favorite, occasionally belligerent, observation of Vegans that their city is like a hundred other American communities, chockful of churches, Boy Scout troops, civic associations and PTA's" (82), but he presents a series of facts to refute this, asking the reader to "Name another city of 130,000 people that can boast...almost daily listings in the classified ads for three 'Anonymous' groups: Suicides, Gamblers and Alcoholics" (82). Knebel concludes with a brief summary of the mob-related troubles in Las Vegas, then writes that "Fun in Las Vegas is attended by taut muscle, sharp eye and tight nerves," because "gambling attracts predators" (86). This article is one of many that examine the "price" of gambling, but Knebel's distinction is that he considers its debilitating effect on those who own, run, and depend on the casinos for their livelihoods, as well as on the "suckers."

Other discussions of skimming include a 1963 New York Times Magazine article (actually, three photographs and a brief text) entitled "Clouds Over Las Vegas," which notes that "The big question is how much more than
$122 million [the casinos] gross, for the city has the largest collection of underworld characters in the country, a crew skillful at making loose change disappear” (80). Newsweek, using the same metaphor of darkness in the world’s brightest city, reports in 1966 that testimony in a state gaming-commission investigation “cast a pall over the bright lights in Las Vegas” (“The Game is Skimming” 18). The article ends on a cynical note, speculating that “certain interested gentlemen in Las Vegas, Miami and Chicago” would withhold comment on these charges “until the investigations are finished, and the skimming can begin again in earnest” (19). These articles seem to accept skimming and other illegalities as part of the standard operating procedure in this city run by crooks.

A rare mention of an entirely different problem in Las Vegas is given in a 1969 Newsweek article entitled “Racial Roulette,” which reports that “last week, in a flash of racial firebombings, lootings and killings, the ultimate American city finally came face to face with the ultimate American problem” (48). The article points to “the same discontents that had lit the fires elsewhere: unequal employment, de facto segregation and police harassment.” The article thus makes an attempt to show how Las Vegas is similar to other areas of urban unrest in the late 1960s, but the unique nature of the city determines the tone of the last mention: as the unrest was happening, “Frank Sinatra, Bill Cosby and Dean Martin were keeping the conventioneers happy” downtown, and “one groggy, bleary-eyed blackjack player said: ‘There’s a riot? You kidding—in Vegas?’” (48) The image of Las
Vegas thus prevails, even over one of the most troubling urban problems in the country at this time.

**Economics and Capitalist Heroes**

In 1960 the staid *Economist* reports that the new Convention Centre [sic] is open, "giving the town a symbol of legitimacy," and the article expresses the hope that this will enable Las Vegas to "overcome its reputation as a gambling hell and put the economy of Las Vegas on a sounder basis" ("Las Vegas Goes Respectable" 627). The use of the word "hell" is particularly revealing here, as it indicates the attitude of this highly proper and prestigious money magazine towards the city, and the tone of the article is one of relief that Las Vegas has finally figured out how to earn money properly. Indeed, the article approaches actual enthusiasm, however judicious, when it says that "the new centre is keeping clear of betting and of the gangster element which is said to control it" (627). A month earlier, the same magazine had reported with approval that "the operators of the hotels and casinos, used to sound accounting methods, are not disposed to risk the money obtained through the speculation of their patrons to gamble themselves" ("Gamblers Play Safe" 112). This article outlines the investments that are made by the shrewdest players in the gambling industry, such as mutual funds, municipal bonds, and blue chip stocks, and not in the casinos themselves. The *Economist* notes that this strategy is "insurance against a day when wagering may be ruled illegal in Nevada, or the Congress of the United States may slap a punitive tax on gambling profits" (112). In
other words, the industry is aware that it may only be able to get away with its fun for a short while, until the outside world wises up. At the end of the decade, though, *Business Week* tells its readers that many investors are seeing good returns on stocks in companies such as Resorts International and Webb [Del E.], proving that “owners of gambling stocks have fared better than gamblers themselves” (“Investors Take a Chance on Chance” 139). The article notes that “At least eight of the 15 largest hotel-casinos in Las Vegas have joined up with public companies in the past three years” (139), thus disproving the *Economist*’s assumption that the smart money would stay away from gambling-related investments.

The increased respect for Las Vegas investment in the 1960s can be attributed to two men: Howard Hughes and Kirk Kerkorian. These men put the full force of their resources and, perhaps more importantly, their reputations, behind their incredible amassing of property in Las Vegas. While Hughes eventually became a mythical figure, both he and Kerkorian were often seen by commentators in the 1960s as visionaries, with all of the ambivalence that that word connotes. Even Del Webb, lesser-known by most people than Hughes or Kerkorian despite his ownership of the New York Yankees in the 1950s and early 1960s, merited a lengthy report by Tom Alexander in *Fortune* in 1965 on his casino-building activities. The report is characterized by a sense of wonder at the type of man who would attempt to make it in Las Vegas, for by doing so “Webb is taking on an industry and a community that are remote from the world described in business schools” (Alexander 131). This article is unique in that it downplays, rather than
hammers at, the city's unsavory elements: "The gangster problem is a real one, but it is frequently overstated by outsiders. Most of the bloodletting and other sordid events that form the basis for exposés of Las Vegas are between five and twenty-five years old" (132). Alexander includes The Green Felt Jungle in this category, referring to it as "shrill," even though its authors were not "outsiders" to the city. The article concludes with the oft-stated doubts as to whether the boom would last, as one banking executive is reported to feel that "there is no overcapacity problem yet, but that the limit is being approached. . . . He thinks Las Vegas could support perhaps two more major hotels, one of which is under way" (196). These predictions are always ironic in hindsight, but this article does communicate the impression that Del Webb is both intelligent and risk-taking, important attributes for a successful man in the casino business.

Kirk Kerkorian was a nationally known giant of the industry during the 1960s. Although he was not then as high profile as the reclusive Howard Hughes, Kerkorian did attract much attention for his investments and his lifestyle. A 1969 profile in Fortune begins with an anecdote about Kerkorian flying in his DC-9 from Las Vegas to London simply to speak with his bankers. The reader is told that "his airplane is almost an extension of his personality, like a motorcycle to the leather-jacket set. . . . It seats twenty-three, sleeps seven, and is divided with walnut paneling and furnished with beige and brown chairs and sofas" (Ross 144). A rock critic from Harper's, flying on the plane to review Elvis Presley's opening night at Kerkorian's International Hotel, describes the giddy effect of so much luxury:
Kerkorian's DC-9 is enormous. It is furnished like a series of doctors' waiting rooms—functional and durable. One quickly adjusts to chairs which convert to couches, space to move around in, and the absence of the authority one bows to on commercial flights. We become instantly unruly. The steward asks people to remove papers from a table during takeoff. No one does. Seat belts are unbuckled too soon. [A man] sits in Kerkorian's personal chair, is asked to move, and goes back to it five minutes later. A couple of the critics are lighting up in the bathroom. They float out, red-eyed and hazy. Rock music is coming from a cassette. (Hentoff 28)

This passage is particularly revealing for the loss of restraint the writer feels due to the trappings of extreme wealth. The reporters and critics on the plane revert to childlike behavior in the face of such riches, and the profiles of Kerkorian and Hughes are always accompanied by the subtext of this amazing wealth. An attempt is usually made to assure readers that the men are human like the rest of us, but this is always undermined by the awareness that they have a veneer of riches that most of us will never experience, which essentially turns them into supermen.

The Fortune profile reports that Kerkorian's opening of the International enabled him to become "a local personality ranking in status next to Howard Hughes" (Ross 186). A 1969 Business Week article tries to hype this competition between the millionaires by noting the financial histories of the two men. "Kerkorian's first confrontation with Hughes occurred when he outbid Hughes for the Flamingo in 1967," the article states, then "Kerkorian decided to match strides with Hughes in the airline business" ("Duel of Aces in Las Vegas" 50). The notion of men battling each other with hotels and airlines fits the larger-than-life image of Las Vegas and of those who enter its economic arenas. Hughes, then, is especially
fascinating to commentators of the period, because, as one 1967 report puts it, "the money that Howard Hughes has been betting in and around Vegas lately has left even this sophisticated town a little breathless" ("Hughes Gambles on Las Vegas" 80). The report, from Business Week, achieves its greatest power in an accompanying aerial photograph of the Strip showing "what Hughes is doing," including owning the Sands, Desert Inn, and Frontier, as well as various land parcels and options on others.

While the economic activities of Hughes provided material for a number of reports, the man's mystique elevated him from a businessman to a legend. Ovid Demaris, co-author of The Green Felt Jungle, turned in a lengthy and fascinating piece for Esquire in 1969 entitled "You and I Are Very Different from Howard Hughes," in which Demaris speaks to a number of Hughes' top associates but, of course, never gets a personal interview. The article is in effect an oral history, since Demaris has to compose his article from the statements of those who work for Hughes. Hughes' reclusive nature is undoubtedly what makes him such a compelling figure, in addition to his vast wealth. Demaris explores the many personae which Hughes had assumed throughout his career, including "The Film Tycoon," "The Aviator," "The Playboy," "The Superpatriot," "The Industrialist," "The Corporate Man," and "The Eccentric," pointing to the ever-changing nature of the man. Hughes' top assistant, Robert Maheu, invites Demaris to attend a meeting of the "Table of Twelve," Hughes' main men in his organization, and the parallel to the disciples of Christ is unspoken but clear. A 1968 Look article by Jack Star poses the question "What is Hughes up to?" (74), pointing...
to the essential mystery of the man. It is this enigma which makes Hughes
the living symbol of Las Vegas in the 1960s, for he represents all of the city’s
fabled attributes: its wealth and glamour as well as its danger and weirdness.

Life in Las Vegas

On the odd occasion, commentators in the 1960s turn their attention to
the citizens of Las Vegas, usually expressing surprise that the city is an actual
community where people live and work. On the most prosaic level were the
contributions of R.P. Sauer, Director of Public Works, to American City. The
first describes the “problems in street-sanitation work which are probably
peculiar to this city alone” (Sauer, “Street Cleaning” 93) due to its twenty-
four-hour lifestyle, its explosive growth in population and in paved roads,
and its desert weather conditions. The second article discusses street lighting
in this “progressive” city, made possible by bond issues (Sauer, “City of Bright
Futures” 120). Along the same lines, in Recreation magazine in 1961, former
assistant superintendent of recreation Gordon D. Hunsaker outlines the
“extraordinary lengths [the community has gone] to provide its young with
the recreation facilities they need to grow up properly” (Hunsaker 178). These
facilities include sports programs, arts-and crafts classes, the building of parks,
and other activities designed with “the welfare of [the city’s] children” in
mind (178). However mundane these articles may seem, they are
illuminating for their insight into the nuts and bolts of providing civic
services to a twentieth-century boomtown.
Another, more ambivalent look at everyday life in the city is given in a 1969 *Fortune* pictorial entitled "Another Las Vegas," which includes photographs of churches, schools, and shopping centers. The text, though, is somewhat pessimistic, using the gambling metaphor to explain the life of the residents when it says that they are "trying, against heavy odds, to lead the good life as it is conventionally defined" (151). These odds include overcrowded schools, "a high incidence of major crimes, cases of venereal disease among teen-agers, and suicides. It has no provenance or historical roots to help it through such crises" (151).

The spiritual strength required for Las Vegas' unique problems is represented in a 1968 *Newsweek* article on Rick Mawson, "Chaplain to the Strip," who ministers to the "night people of Las Vegas—the barkeeps, musicians, card dealers and chorus girls" (81). Sadly, though, the article reports that the previous week Mawson's superiors ended the ministry and "suggested that Rick go back to theological school for a little 'retooling'" (81). The official quoted in the article says that Mawson was recalled because he was "'too sympathetic [with the needs of the night people]. He couldn't stand back and be objective about them'" (81). Mawson thus succumbs to the very lure of the city that causes the ruin of its gamblers: the sense of getting caught up in the action to the exclusion of all other concerns. In another portrait of a savior of sorts, *Time*, in its only coverage in the 1960s of a "normal" Las Vegas story, profiled new School Superintendent Byerly Newcomer in 1965, who is "shrewd enough to realize that the collective conscience of Las Vegas is bothered by the area's dependence on its dubious industry" ("Las Vegas'
Impressive Newcomer” 94). Newcomer’s innovations include greater local control of the schools, flexibility in scheduling classes, and encouragement of innovations in educational ideas. The photograph of the square-jawed, crewcutted, and bow-tied Newcomer is designed to inspire confidence, as if he was the one man who could get down to serious business in a city full of flakes.

**Cultural Commentary**

It is when the critics of culture turn their eyes upon Las Vegas that the importance of the city to American mythology is most apparent. Reviewing the shows on the Strip provides many opportunities for critical commentary on the shows themselves and on the city. *Life* magazine has a tradition of titillation under the guise of amused detachment where Las Vegas is concerned, best expressed in a 1960 pictorial entitled “Paris Come-On in Vegas.” Even the title could be a sexual pun, but the article is ostensibly about the craze for French-themed shows such as the “Folies Bergere” at the Tropicana, the “Lido de Paris” at the Stardust, and “La Parisienne” at the Dunes. The text plays on the idea that “before the year is out more visitors will have seen Parisian revues in Las Vegas than in Paris itself” (51). The photographs are of provocatively posed showgirls, capped off with a revealing picture of a showgirl wearing only shoes, a spangled G-string, and a huge feathered headdress. The caption further escalates the sexual tension by informing the reader that “on cue she lifts up her parasol and struts across the stage with almost no covering at all” (57). Likewise, in 1963 the *Saturday
Evening Post features an article on the “Lido de Paris” show entitled “French Dressing,” in which it is alleged that “the real star of the show is the stage itself” (24), with its various spectacular moving parts. However, immediately opposite is a full-page photograph of three nearly naked girls suspended over the heads of the audience, somewhat lessening the impact of the statement about the stage. Newsweek reviews the “Casino de Paris” show at the Dunes as “the quintessential use of theater as physical stimulation together with the reduction of thought to zero,” yet ultimately praises it because “in a city of money it makes sense; it makes more than sense, it makes more money” (“It Makes Money” 90). Thus, the show is perfect for the tasteless, vulgar, showy, and expensive setting, and especially because it turns a profit. Lastly, Life joyfully welcomes the opening of the Circus Circus in 1968 with a five-page pictorial which juxtaposes pictures of the innocent acrobatics of the circus performers above the casino floor with captions which inform the reader that the gamblers “lay bets on whether or not [the high diver] will make it [65 feet into a 5x9-foot patch of foam rubber]” (“What’s That Up There?” 50-51). While this is probably apocryphal, it perfectly summarizes Life’s view of Las Vegas as a jaded, even perverted, modern-day Sodom or Rome (the text quotes Juvenal’s famous “bread and circuses” statement and concludes that “it was left to Las Vegas to imagine that people might desire both at the same time” (49)).

The previously mentioned review by Marge Hentoff of Elvis’ opening at the International slides into a review of the city itself: “the luxury hotels are most alike in that they are not luxurious. Massive brass turns into
polystyrene at a touch. Thick shag rugs are made from synthetic fibers. The service in the coffee shops is slow. . . . It looks, quite literally, like Hell” (Hentoff 30-31). Hentoff seems to regard Elvis and Las Vegas as the same thing; she is alienated from each as she writes—oddly invoking T.S. Eliot—that “I wish, for a moment, that he had been one of my heroes...I do not think that he will sing to me” (34-36). The article ends on a note of strangeness when Hentoff notes “the costumey aspect of Las Vegas. Everywhere, someone is dressed in a bastard version of some ancient or modern national dress. . . a busboy with manacled wrists draws my attention. ‘What are you supposed to be?’ I ask. ‘I think,’ he says, I am an Egyptian slave’” (36). The report is somewhat impressionistic, in that it is left to the reader to draw conclusions as to the significance of this costume.

Tom Wolfe is one of the best-known commentators on Las Vegas in the 1960s. His classic 1964 Esquire article, “Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can’t hear you! Too noisy) Las Vegas!!!” was later included in his collection The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby and in the 1995 anthology Literary Las Vegas. In this piece, Wolfe applies his exuberant journalistic style to the city, resulting in one of the funniest discussions extant. His musings on the various types of gamblers and casino managers, the incessant noise (both aural and visual) prevalent in town, the costumed waitresses (“a stimulus that is both visual and sexual—the Las Vegas buttocks décolletage” (6)), and the democratic nature of the place produce some of the very best writing about Las Vegas. Wolfe’s main point is that “Las Vegas has become, just as Bugsy Siegel dreamed, the American Monte Carlo—without
any of the inevitable upper-class baggage of the Riviera casinos. . . . At Monte Carlo there are still Wrong Forks, Deficient Accents, Poor Tailoring, Gauche Displays, Nouveau Richness, Cultural Aridity--concepts unknown in Las Vegas" (13). Part of Wolfe's stylistic mastery lies in his use of the ironic capitalization which transforms these attributes; Las Vegas, of course, is home to all of these, but it is the cultural snobbery against them which is absent.

Wolfe returns to Las Vegas in a 1969 Architectural Design Article, "Electrographic Architecture," in which his style matches the frenetic attempt to grab the viewer's attention that he sees in the signs and architecture of the city: "[The designers] have been building not to catch the eye of the art world but of people driving by in cars. . . . It's as simple as that. . . . A very liberating thing, the car. . . . Millions of Americans roaring down the boulevards and strips and freeways in 327-horsepower family car dreamboat fantasy creations. . . ." [Ellipses as in original.] This style anticipates Hunter Thompson's in his soon-to-be-published book Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.

Joan Didion is probably second to Wolfe in terms of the stature and popularity of critics of Las Vegas at this time. Her short article "Marrying Absurd" appears in the Saturday Evening Post in 1967, and it contains one of the most succinctly characteristic descriptions of the common intellectual view of the city. Didion writes that "Las Vegas is the most extreme and allegorical of American settlements, bizarre and beautiful in its devotion to immediate gratification, a place the tone of which is set by mobsters and call girls and ladies'-room attendants with amyl nitrate poppers in their uniform pockets. . . . Las Vegas seems to exist only in the eye of the beholder" (18).
Didion employs the same stylistic device as Wolfe when she describes a new bride, a product of one of the wedding chapels that proliferate in town: "She meant of course that [the wedding] had been Sincere. It had been Dignified. She had it on a phonograph record to prove it" (18). Interestingly, here Didion’s approach achieves the opposite effect of Wolfe’s; Didion is using the ironic capitalization to indicate the tacky absurdity of anyone who would get married in Las Vegas, whereas Wolfe’s point is that these distinctions do not matter here.

Of the many other commentaries on Las Vegas culture which appear in national magazines in the 1960s, a few more are worth noting. A 1965 Ebony article ("Vacation in Las Vegas") is one of the few to even mention a black perspective; the text contends that "Despite Las Vegas’ once-shabby history of racial prejudice, there seems to be little or no hold over in the current atmosphere. . . . The cluster of posh hostleries along ‘The Strip’ now accept Negro guests and they are no longer barred in Strip or downtown casinos" (180-82). The accompanying photographs feature two black models as they gamble, sightsee, sunbathe, and go to shows, and the overall effect is entirely positive. Not so for an arch "Talk of the Town" report in The New Yorker upon the occasion of the 1966 opening of Caesars Palace. The new hotel-casino is saluted "with awe, as perhaps the biggest and silliest architectural throwback of all time. . . . We think of Nero in Hades, shaking his head in wonder and envy. Rome—his Rome, which he rebuilt with broad streets and splendid villas—was never a patch on Vegas. He might just as well not have bothered to burn the old one down" (25-26). A similarly jaundiced view of
Las Vegas, this time visually, is given by the great cartoonist Ronald Searle in a series of drawings for Holiday in 1960. Obese tourists in skintight, gaudy clothing pull slot machine handles while a table of bald businessmen stares up at a nearly-nude showgirl. The most stunning illustration, though, is the last, a full-page rendering of a topless showgirl with enormous feathers and fabrics cascading off of her head and her G-string. The audience consists of the usual prune-faced, cigar-smoking caricatures, but the graceful lines delineating the dancer bestow upon her a grace and beauty in spite of the grotesquity of her surroundings.

One last word about magazine reporting deserves attention, to illustrate the strange attitude of Time magazine to the city. Like Life, Time seems to want it both ways: temptation and judgment go together when Las Vegas is the subject. In a 1969 article (“Las Vegas: The Game is Illusion”), the city is described as “sick” and “a jet-age Sodom, a venal demimonde” and “the ultimate affront to taste.” The newsworthiness of the article stems from the opening of the Landmark and the International Hotels the previous week, but this is merely a pretext for the harsh criticism of the article, which ends with the information that “the distant future may hold some hope...depletion of the water table over the past 20 years has caused the whole town to sink 3 ft. At that rate the earth may swallow up the city of Las Vegas--in a million years or so” (22). Time’s criticism of the city is especially interesting in this case, appearing as it does in an issue with a cover story on “The Sex Explosion.” The cover depicts a nude couple standing behind a giant fig leaf with a half-unzipped zipper running down its center, while the article
includes photographs of nude scenes from "Hair" and "Libertine." The text is an attempt at reasoned discussion of this "issue," but the titillating subject virtually overpowers the commentary. Like Las Vegas, *Time* uses sex to sell itself, but unlike the magazine, the city makes no attempt to clothe it with a veneer of respectability.

As a result of its increasing growth and popularity, book-length treatments of Las Vegas begin to appear with greater frequency in the 1960s. Besides those already mentioned, a notable discussion is Ed Reid’s 1961 book *Las Vegas: City Without Clocks*, which is a standard guidebook with chapters on local history, colorful characters, life for the residents, and other fairly mundane topics. Reid alludes to some mob involvement in Las Vegas, but this is nothing compared to the stridency which dominates *The Green Felt Jungle*. In fact, the contrast is sharply defined in the openings of the two books. *City Without Clocks* begins: "Las Vegas at night is a gigantic, fully drawn bow of lights notched with an arrow of red and yellow luminescence. The bent bow is the fabulous Strip, which curves from east to west. The arrow is Fremont Street, known as Casino Center, and is aimed at Reno 400 miles to the north" (9). This almost-poetic metaphor is in direct opposition to the sinister jungle metaphor which opens the later book. Reid continues in this sometimes bathetic vein, as when he describes the lonely life of a showgirl: "Many a beautiful nude on stage, regal in appearance, goes home alone and sobs herself to sleep—one lonely 19-year-old English girl does this clutching a toy teddy bear" (168). When he turns his attention to the mob
later in the decade, Reid seems to lose this sentimentalizing tendency and
turns to a more sensationalistic style.

Another book-length critique of Las Vegas was Las Vegas, City of Sin?,
a 1963 compilation of magazine articles and other previously published
material. The book is most interesting for its predictions about the city’s
future. The most startling prediction is that “There will be no gambling
houses in Las Vegas in the year 2013” (Taylor & Howell 112). The authors
contend that increased government regulation, coupled with pressure from
church groups and an increase in new industry, will lead to the demise of
gambling, because if “half a dozen workers come home without their
paycheck their wives [will] band together to harangue the city fathers” (113).
While the accuracy of this prediction remains to be seen, another prophecy is
uncannily accurate, if twenty or so years off the mark:

There will be 750,000 residents in Vegas Valley by the year
2013. . . . It will have a thick cover of smog between the
mountains. Traffic will be snarled at West Sahara Blvd. and
West Charleston from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. There will be
ten golf courses where there was only one in 1946. . . . Where
once row on row of green felt tables stood there will be a
variety of attractions to amuse the modern guests.
Attractions not dreamed of yet. (113-14)

This prediction is remarkable for its accuracy in 1997; the only inaccuracy is
the underestimation of the population by about 250,000 people.

Finally, 1962’s Las Vegas: Zoomtown, U.S.A., by Jack Murray, is an
enthusiastic but lightweight book of humorous anecdotes and chamber-of-
commerce delight at the glamour and celebrities of the city. Noting “the
numerous so-called writers who rushed to our town on a twenty-four hour
'look over' and sold their distorted findings like hotcakes,” Murray writes that he “would rather gain and hold the respect of all Nevadans and maintain the love and admiration of the Best City of The [sic] All which has become a part of me, instead of becoming an overnight heel for greed and profit” (6-7). Murray seems oblivious to the obvious irony of this statement, as his book is nothing but a shill for the city built on greed and profit. We have come full circle, then, from the direst criticism to the sunniest praise for Las Vegas, indicating that Joan Didion was correct when she wrote that the city “seems to exist only in the eye of the beholder” (Didion 18).

**Fiction**

Fictional treatments of Las Vegas in the 1960s continue to exhibit the same kinds of subjective viewpoints as nonfiction ones, with the heightened intensity characteristic of the artistic ability to focus in on elements of the city for symbolic or metaphorical purposes. Ken Cooper, in one of the few serious critical discussions of Las Vegas fiction, contends that “The fiction of Las Vegas is inseparable from its coincidental proximity to the Nevada Test Site and the manner in which that project was justified” (530). While in actuality the Test Site figures only in a very small percentage of Las Vegas fiction, it is true that a handful of writers have seen it as significant. A common manifestation of this is seen in Frank Waters’ novel *The Woman at Otowi Crossing*, which uses the nuclear tests as a background for larger spiritual issues. Thus, a disillusioned character finds a spiritual affinity in a town with “constant crowds of people with flushed faces desperately searching for
pleasure that had no joy in it" (251). This deadness is echoed in Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream*, which “points Vegas-ward, toward a confrontation with the American Dream, now revealed to be a corrupt nightmare” (Cooper 537). While not a Las Vegas novel per se, Mailer’s book uses the city as an apocalyptic symbol of the worst in America.

Along the same lines, Herbert Gold’s novel *Fathers* ends in Las Vegas, with the narrator-son meeting his estranged father in “one of the piles of pink masonry and violations of symmetry which make up the Las Vegas Strip” (290), and here the father meets up with a childhood friend, now a gangster involved in the management of one of the casinos. Here, the city is again used as a symbol of the alienation that has existed between the father and the son, and placing the meeting in Las Vegas enables Gold to use the built-in irony of the city’s phoniness and its corrupt underpinnings.

Likewise, Jack Richardson’s play *Xmas in Las Vegas* relies for its effectiveness on the tension of a disintegrating family spending this traditionally family holiday in Las Vegas, of all places. One of the characters parodies the star of Bethlehem when he bitterly states that “If there’s any sign in heaven it should be ‘You can’t beat the house’” (268). This line expresses both the bleakness of the setting of a beloved religious holiday in the most commercial city on Earth, but it also uses the gambling metaphor to underline a basic pessimism about human capabilities.

W.T. Ballard’s *Murder Las Vegas Style* continues in this noir style, a hallmark of detective or pulp fiction, which the majority of the fiction involving Las Vegas can be classified as. Upon closer examination, though, it
is often surprising how an author can manage to make an individual stylistic or thematic point in the midst of some quite pedestrian story. Ballard's is a fairly conventional detective thriller, but some of its descriptions are notable for their existential bleakness. Rather than relying on conventional gambling metaphors to express disillusionment, this novel uses the physical geography and the landscape of the city. When the narrator talks on the phone to a woman in Los Angeles, he is acutely aware of "her voice across the wires and the wireless relay station in Death Valley" (37), and the surrounding desert is described as "a weird landscape, as vacant as the lifeless spaces of the moon" (121). When in downtown Las Vegas, the narrator finds it "hard to visualize the three hundred miles of silent sand surrounding the spa in every direction" (25), and on the way out of town "the sound and fury of the streets were as if they had never been and the car was alone and lonely and small under the great space of the stars" (27). This is one of the best examples of how Las Vegas' isolation contributes to an artistic rendering of its nature or "soul." One look at a map will show how the city is surrounded by hundreds of miles of land which is inhospitable to human life; unlike most major cities of the world, there is no approach by water, and it is this geographical fact which accounts for much of the potency of the descriptions of Las Vegas as a world apart.

The desert setting of the city contributes greatly to the symbolic richness of much Las Vegas fiction, but another aspect of setting is also crucial to some writers' thematic concerns: the man-made landscape, or the architecture of the nightclubs and casinos. The often-noted similarities between Las Vegas
and Disneyland seem to be parodied in this description of the “Mod Mouse” in William Nolan’s *The White Cad Cross-Up*: the club is “half a block down Fremont, with a cockeyed rodent in a tux blinking in red neon across the facade” (24). In Jane Sears’ *Las Vegas Nurse*, there is a wonderfully evocative description of the “Eagle’s Lair:”

> It was, by far, the most grotesquely glamorous structure she’d ever seen in her life. Even from this distance it looked sensual and decadent, as was the man who owned it. Special fill had been trucked in from Bakersfield when it was built five years ago to provide a mock hilltop, atop of which the hotel sat like a misshapen bird of prey, wings spread into long low roofs, beaked head tipped slightly to one side as if it surveyed its [sic] victims as they walked willingly between the giant clawed feet on either side of the driveway up a slight ramp and right into the monster’s craw. (78)

The predatory nature of the casinos, and of Las Vegas itself, achieves near-perfect expression in the symbolism of this monstrous structure. Particularly interesting is the characterization of it as both sensual and grotesque, as if a whole new level of perversion was being achieved here. Another example of this is appears in Aben Kandel’s *The Strip*, in which the narrator, a compulsive gambler, muses that “my fetish is chips. Someday I’ll graduate to where they must be poured on my face and chest and genitals for the ultimate orgasm” (75).

The interior landscapes of Las Vegas are often as important as the exterior ones. In *Candyleg*, a novel by the co-author of *The Green Felt Jungle*, Ovid Demaris, the fictional Arabian hotel-casino is described as having “green-topped crap tables lined up in neat rows like coffins. Around them the weary players looked as enthusiastic as pall bearers...it looked like a mass
wake" (50). Another common metaphor is expressed when "a blast of hot air straight out of hell" (49) hits a character upon arrival at the airport, thus furthering the idea that Las Vegas is not only populated by the dead, but that they are damned souls as well.

The thriller genre has a number of conventions about tough talk and he-man attitudes, but the Las Vegas subdivision of these works contributes its own distinctive flavor. Candyleg involves a plan to heist $2 million from the Arabian as part of a mob setup to seize control of the casino from "a bunch of Jews" (29), but ironically it was the Jewish mafia which held the most control in Las Vegas anyway. The novel is also notable for its brutal treatment of women, as there are a number of beatings and attempted rapes, and various women characters are referred to throughout as "whore bitch" (116), "stupid" (70), "chickie" (119), and "noisy, bitchy, trouble-making dame" (141). The presence of actual prostitutes in Las Vegas, a common element in these stories, adds to the viewing of all women as possessions, sex objects, or manipulators. This misogynistic attitude is also expressed in J.M. Flynn's The Screaming Cargo, in which a free-lance pilot and casino owner named Sean Bard encounters a fifteen-year-old Mexican prostitute: he "caught her by the hair, pulled her from the bed and slapped her. . . . He let her fall back on the bed. Brown, naked, very lovely with the color coming up in her cheeks where his fingers had mashed the flesh" (17). The fetishism of violence is in full force here, as is the typical attitude towards nonwhites. The novel is punctuated by corrupt Mexican police and a variety of "wetbacks" working in Las Vegas, another realistic detail used for dramatic purposes.
Since sex is widely regarded as one of the commodities for sale in Las Vegas, it is of course a major element in many stories involving the city, but as usual there is the distinctive Las Vegas twist. One characteristic of the detective genre is hostility towards homosexuals, and this is seen in a couple of Las Vegas novels as well. In John MacDonald’s *The Only Girl in the Game*, a celebrity is given a half point of ownership in the “Cameroon” casino in order to lend some glamour to attract tourists. This celebrity is “a middle-aged, corseted, western-hero faggot, with a lisp hidden somewhere in his drawl, and a permanent expression of noble, enduring humility” (38). This characterization could be another way of symbolizing the use of facades in Las Vegas to conceal its true, perverted nature. A more overtly homophobic element runs through Matt Harding’s *Las Vegas Madam*, in which a football player is sent to Las Vegas by a gorgeous woman to rescue her son from the clutches of one “Puffy Lansing,” who runs a gang of “queers” and “punks who, boasting of their sexual prowess, had labeled themselves Los Toros—The Bulls” (15). This name seems strange for a group of homosexuals, being hypermasculine: “each member had to wear abroad the official Los Toros sweater, a huge emblem of a bull mounting a cow across its back” (43), but the derogatory terms directed towards them are definitely gay in nature: “fruiter,” “homo” (35), “queer” (36), “morphidite” (103). Sex of all kinds abounds in this novel, though; numerous scenes of intercourse, rapes, and spankings occur, and even Lansing’s nightclub act is flamboyantly sexual, with people dressed as cows and bulls running around and “the finale was when the cows sank on all fours, the Bulls mounting” (125). *Las Vegas Madam* is thus
probably the most sexually perverse novel about Las Vegas, right down to its
cover illustration of an insanely voluptuous woman barely covered by the
thinnest of sheets.

The symbolic use of elements specific to Las Vegas continues in
Anthony Glyn's novel The Dragon Variation. Here, the culture of the
marriage chapels explored by Joan Didion is used as an expression of the
difficulty of establishing a meaningful relationship. A middle-aged, divorced
male character seems to share the same attitude as Joan Didion when he
reflects that "If there was one place in the world where he was not going to
marry Debbie [his young girlfriend] it was the Romeo and Juliet Wedding
Chapel. Or any of them, come to that" (158). There is a dual subtext at work
here; on the one hand, the passage is a judgment on the tackiness of the
whole enterprise, and on the other hand it is an ironic statement about the
resistance of a character who claims to desire commitment, yet will not do so
in the one city where one can get married any time, day or night, with
practically no notice or preparation. This section is unique among Las Vegas
fiction in that it is from the perspective of a male character; usually, it is a
woman who comes to Las Vegas to satisfy the six weeks' residence
requirement to get rid of her husband, then embarks on a new start for
romance. For this character, though, rather than liberation, Vegas represents
spiritual deadness and isolation, as he stands in Caesars Palace "Marooned in
a Roman courtyard in the middle of a desert, cut off from the outside world"
(144).
Perhaps the strongest, and strangest, expression of the malaise of Las Vegas appears in Robert Kirsch’s novel *The Wars of Pardon*. In this introspective and philosophical novel, John Moore, a gambler, soldier of fortune, and mystic, reviews his eventful life. An accident left him blind, but this was compensated by a new ability to sense good or evil in the people around him. In a true Vegas plot device, Moore is hired by the “Sultana” casino to sense bad checks and cheating gamblers, and it is here that Moore decides to look back on his journey through life and decide what to do next.

The novel is heavily weighed down with intense philosophy and overwrought prose, but it remains interesting nevertheless. A typical section of Moore’s self-absorption runs like this: “Eyeless in Las Vegas, I find myself sapped and in chains, shorn even of the action which in the past gave me the illusion of a life consciously spent, of decisions made, of hurts inflicted, of all the rest. I hate the city. Suddenly it seems purgatory” (233). The purgatory image is standard, and another one involves nuclear testing. This heightens the novel’s sense of fear and alienation as the unwitting tourists “try their private luck in the monstrous gamble which is going on around them. That way they can pray for thirteen passes in a row; they do not have to pray for the survival of the world” (23). To complete this dark and religious novel, Moore eventually regains his sight and goes off into the desert in Biblical fashion to become a mystical cult leader.

A final symbol of the alienating atmosphere of Las Vegas involves the mafia. Many stories describe underworld control of the city to indicate just how far removed it is from most other American locales. A character in
William Cox's *Murder in Vegas* agrees with Ed Reid when he says that the mob ""can't show here, but they got the money and now they use smart lawyers instead of hoodlums"" (51). The most obvious example of this, of course, is Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, in which Michael Corleone decides that Las Vegas is ""where the future is for the Family...Some friends of ours own a good percentage of the hotel and casino so that it will be our foundation. Moe Greene will sell us his interest so that it can be wholly owned by friends of the Family...I'll make him an offer he can't refuse"" (383-84). This mafia family thus enters Las Vegas by using a combination of entrepreneurial vision and good old-fashioned bloody threats and intimidation. The effect of such underworld control of the city is described by Frank Kane in *A Short Bier*:

> He wondered if the hicks knew how high the stakes really were in a town that turned its municipal controls over to hoodlums who'd been run out of most other cities. Here they had practically seceded from the union, were almost a country of their own, and they ran it with pistols and baseball bats. (70)

Kane here clearly expresses the common view that Las Vegas is a world apart, not only due to its legalized gambling which produces an economic base different from average America, but also because the community is run by people who would be arrested anywhere else for what they are doing. The result is a view of Las Vegas as a frontier outpost where normal rules do not apply; this can be liberating (especially for the outlaws) but it can also be disorienting for the citizens who look for order and law in order to conduct their affairs.
In spite of all of the gloomy musings which Las Vegas seems to inspire in many writers, there are some who find hope in the city. In contrast to *Xmas in Las Vegas*, Frank Gilroy's play *The Only Game in Town* uses gambling as a positive metaphor; this is one of the few works where a character who really needs to win actually does. The story revolves around a dancer and a piano player (two Vegas archetypes) who are trying to raise enough money to start new lives. After winning, then losing, then winning again, and engaging in some hesitant steps towards a romance, the two finally decide that "granted that marriage is a most faulty, wheezing, pitiful institution, right now it's the only game in town, and we're going to play it" (101). Here, the vicissitudes of life mirror the instability of gambling, but for once the characters come out winners.

Another, more lighthearted look at Las Vegas comes in Mason Williams' narrative poem *The Night I Lost My Baby (A Las Vegas Vignette)*. While this is not a particularly profound poetic effort, it is an entertaining poem, illustrated with photographs of slot machines, Cadillacs, security guards, and other Las Vegas visuals. The poem is concerned with the search for the narrator's girlfriend in this "oasis of towering tinsel/And tawdry decorum/Where the idle mind/Can indulge for small pittance/In smaller pleasures." The poem ends on a joke, but overall it effectively conveys the manic nature of the city and the unexpected poignancy of the human interactions here. The city seems to encourage the use of symbolism to express the meaning of Las Vegas, further demonstrating the aptness of Joan Didion's statement about the relativity of one's perceptions. As Las Vegas
entered the 1970s, these perceptions were further shaped by the continuing evolution of the city and by its increasingly important position as a destination for larger numbers of Americans than ever before.
The 1970s were relatively tame for Las Vegas; the city’s population and visitor count continued to grow, but this decade lacked the feverish pace of the 1950s and 1960s. Howard Hughes departed in 1970 as mysteriously as he had arrived three years earlier, having acquired the Desert Inn, Sands, Frontier, Landmark, and Silver Slipper, a television station, and the North Las Vegas Airport, in addition to extensive land holdings all over the city and other high-profile ventures. Hughes’ legacy was that his “presence alone... added an enormous degree of long-needed legitimacy to the city’s tarnished image” (Castleman 65). This image was proven to be justified a few times in the 1970s, as Deke Castleman explains:

In 1973...past owners of the Flamingo pleaded guilty to a hidden interest by Meyer Lansky from 1960 to 1967. In 1976, the audit division of the Gaming Control Board uncovered a major skimming operation that amounted to a full 20 percent of slot revenues at the Stardust... [and] in 1979, four men were convicted in Detroit of concealing hidden mob ownership in the Aladdin Hotel. (67)

Las Vegas was thus in a transitional period in this decade, as Mob figures were slowly being ejected from the casinos while corporations began their consolidation of the city’s gambling market. This increased corporate
presence was most visible in actions such as the Hilton's takeover of Kirk Kerkorian's International and of the Flamingo in the early 1970s (Hess 92).

The many changes in ownership meant that not as many new hotels were built in the 1970s as in previous decades; the 1973 opening of the MGM Grand (now Bally's) was the era's most important addition to the Strip. Off-Strip, casinos such as Sam's Town and Palace Station opened in recognition of the growing market for locals, and they have spawned a whole new series of casinos around the valley which emphasize low table limits, plenty of slots, and cheap food. The city held its collective breath in 1978 to see what the effect of legalized casino gambling in Atlantic City would be, and it took a few years before the verdict was in (it turned out to be good for Vegas). It is as if there were a few years, then, when the explosive growth of Las Vegas calmed down enough to allow several high-profile writers to offer their judicious appraisals of the city, for this was the most fruitful decade so far in terms of cultural commentary on the significance of it all.

Nonfiction

Exploring the Significance of Las Vegas

For its unique perspective, a good place to begin examining attitudes towards Las Vegas in the 1970s is in Bert Lane's 1976 guidebook Las Vegas: Shelter, Food, Sex. One would expect to find information on shelter and food in any guidebook, but an extended discussion of available sexual opportunities is absent from most books covering American cities. Lane
includes a forty-page chapter on sex in Las Vegas, beginning, surprisingly, with Paiute courtship rituals, and going on to cover topics such as prostitution (legal and illegal), strip clubs, adult bookstores, and the like. Although he presents this information evenhandedly and free of moral commentary, Lane does editorialize at the end of the section when he contends that the city’s leaders are “compelled to alleviate the city’s sense of guilt by convincing the world that ‘We are not as bad as you think we are’” (229). Lane, here acting as a psychologist for the city, attributes the lack of attention paid to sex in civic promotions to a sense of guilt, while the truth is probably more pragmatic: anyone looking for sex in Las Vegas will find it, and those who aren’t looking don’t need to be reminded that it is there.

For those concerned about the moral welfare of Las Vegas, Jim Reid’s *Praising God on the Las Vegas Strip* can be seen as a complement to Lane’s book. Reid, a minister, here presents an account of his ministry to workers on the Strip. Like Rick Mawson (discussed in the previous chapter), Reid suspends judgment on the dealers (casino and drug), prostitutes, cab drivers, bellhops, and the many other types of people who make Las Vegas function at all hours of the night. Reid senses that these people need God’s word and comfort just like anyone else, so he organizes Bible studies, has counseling on demand with the aid of a telephone pager, conducts services in hotel ballrooms, and counsels suicidal workers and tourists. Reid’s many anecdotes of lost souls redeemed by his ministry are inspiring but pedestrian; the same stories could take place in any big city, and the only difference here seems to be the twenty-four-hour nature of Reid’s enterprise. The first chapter is the
only one with a true Las Vegas touch as Reid describes how he became inspired to do his work: upon going to see a late-Saturday-night performance of “Mame” with Celeste Holm at Caesars Palace for his wife’s birthday, he wonders what the people in the show will do for spiritual guidance on the Sabbath the following day. Right there in the showroom, Reid decides to put into action the Biblical injunction to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s, and he names this chapter “The Things that are Caesar’s.” After this promising start, however, Reid fails to exploit the many other obvious metaphors which we have seen used by writers of fiction and nonfiction to express the spiritual void of Las Vegas.

This void is expressed, however, in probably the best-known and most popular book about Las Vegas to date: Hunter S. Thompson’s Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. This 1971 effort is the best example of Thompson’s “gonzo journalism,” a drug-soaked, hallucinatory rampage which is subtitled “A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream.” The text, accompanied by Ralph Steadman’s manic and grotesque drawings, presents an highly subjective, paranoid view of Las Vegas as both the center and the downfall of American culture. On the pretext of covering the Mint 400 auto race for a “fashionable sporting magazine in New York,” Thompson and his Samoan attorney consume ridiculous amounts of drugs and alienate everyone they come into contact with. The Tom Wolfe techniques of ironic capitalization and slightly exaggerated detail are used to good effect throughout the book, as when Thompson observes that
A week in Vegas is like stumbling into a Time Warp, a regression to the late fifties. Which is wholly understandable when you see the people who come here, the Big Spenders from places like Denver and Dallas. Along with National Elks Club conventions (no niggers allowed) and the All-West Volunteer Sheepherder's Rally. These are people who go absolutely crazy at the sight of an old hooker stripping down to her pasties and prancing out on the runway to the big-beat sound of a dozen 50-year-old junkies kicking out the jams on 'September Song' (156).

Thompson's style is at its peak in this book, as he produces many sharp observations of the vulgarity surrounding him. Nothing escapes his notice or his scorn: "The Circus-Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war" (46); "The [Flamingo] is far more than a hotel: It is a sort of huge under-financed Playboy Club in the desert" (109). Thompson's persona is of a whacked-out party animal, but his writing is the vehicle for some serious meditations on the state of the nation as a whole, as the subtitle indicates. The sterility of American culture in the wake of the revolutionary 1960s provides the subtext for Thompson's portrayal of the city and of those who visit it. This attitude underlies the book's wild descriptive passages, but Thompson is explicit about it just one time, when he reflects on the lost promise of the 1960s:

There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning...that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil...So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (68)
The book, then, is ultimately an elegy for what might have been, as well as a thundering condemnation of what America has become, symbolized and culminating in Las Vegas, "The Heart of the American Dream."

A book similar to Thompson’s in its attribution of a negative psychic force to Las Vegas is John Gregory Dunne’s 1974 Vegas: A Memoir of a Dark Season, which chronicles Dunne’s dark night of the soul as he goes to Las Vegas in the midst of a nervous breakdown. Here, the city serves as the “perfect place where one could look for salvation without commitment” (19), a “paradigm of anti-life” (27). Dunne somewhat perversely believes “through the travail of others I might come to grips with myself, that I might, as it were, find absolution through voyeurism” (28). Pursuing this notion, he recounts at length the stories of various quasi-fictional characters such as Artha, a prostitute, Jackie Kasey, a lounge comic, and Buster Mano, a private detective. Dunne seems to revel in the squalid descriptions of these characters and their lives, and in so doing achieves some measure of solace for his wounded psyche. The implication is that Las Vegas is the place where one must bottom out before any subsequent healing can begin, as Dunne writes that

I had arrived in Vegas an emotional paraplegic, obsessed by death, and there I found a kind of peace. There in that Genet vision of hell my own version seemed tolerable; there among the Snopeses of the free-enterprise system life did not seem so bad....I can offer no guarantee that everything you read actually happened, only that insofar as it was perceived by my fractured sensors it was true. Then the pieces were back together, and in the fall I went back home. (238-39)
Dunne's book is thus as subjective as Thompson's, although the two authors differ in their presentation of the soullessness of the city: Thompson uses exaggerated paranoia, while Dunne adopts an ironically detached stance. Both writers, though, view Las Vegas as the epicenter of psychic turmoil, and both of their books describe that turmoil in memorable ways.

Another important writer, Mario Puzo, offered his observations of the city in his 1976 book *Inside Las Vegas*. Puzo's tone differs from Thompson's and Dunne's; where Thompson is a mad prophet and Dunne is a voyeur, Puzo is a sympathetic fellow-traveler. The book, essentially a full-length photo essay, is written in an informal style, with Puzo presenting himself as an experienced, even "degenerate" gambler (16), explaining the attraction of a place like Las Vegas to people like himself. Puzo is not blind to the reality of the city; he writes that "Nothing can be done about the feeling that Vegas is an uncouth, money-grubbing, sex-and-sin-laden metropolis, vulgar in its architecture and its culture" (18), but he contends that "it is no small tribute to the dazzling alchemy of American democratic capitalism that the whole operation has turned out to be one of the most creditable achievements of our society. Decadent society though it may be" (22). Puzo's point is that in Las Vegas as in life, we are all losers (gamblers as well as non-gamblers), but that we can still retain some sense of dignity, as expressed in the many straightforward photographs of gamblers, dealers, strippers, and other common denizens of the city. Puzo does not seek to judge; the most compelling passage in his book is one in which he comments on the tendency
of “writers and intellectuals” to dwell on the cliché of pathetic old women spending hours playing the slot machines:

Surely they [the writers], of all people, should know the meaning of pity. I take pleasure in seeing those old women intense as little children, waiting for cascading silver to fall into their laps, oblivious for those few hours to approaching death. . . . Yet they are reproached for not worrying about Vietnam, the coming atom bomb war, the destruction of the world’s ecology. . . . Why should they give a fuck? They have lived their lives and they have paid their penalties. (111)

Puzo, then, represents the human face of Las Vegas, while Thompson and Dunne are more concerned with broader social and psychological issues. Taken together, though, these three books represent some of the best writing about Las Vegas. This effort of Puzo’s is much more compelling than his rather bloated 1978 best-seller Fools Die, a novel which involves goings-on at the Xanadu, yet another fictional hotel-casino run by scheming entrepreneurs whose operating philosophy is “You have to get rich in the dark” (231). Puzo is at his best when he brings the faces of Las Vegas into the light.

Portions of these books often appeared in prominent magazines of the era; Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas appeared in its entirety in Rolling Stone, and both Dunne’s and Puzo’s books were excerpted in Playboy. Dunne also contributed a short article to Esquire in 1976 entitled “Caesar, Cleopatra and Meyer,” in which he continued his technique of examining the people who, as he puts it, “know how to grease the system to make it work” (32). He reports on a conversation overheard in the steam room at Caesars Palace concerning the political intrigue surrounding an out-of-town police chief, and writes admiringly of his friend Meyer, who once “hired himself out as
muscle to a shylock” (36). Dunne's point is that everybody in Vegas knows somebody, and that it is these connections that enable the city to function as it does. When, at the end of the article, Dunne tells a prostitute that he is a writer, she asks if he knows Bernard Malamud, as “He knows my father's first cousin by marriage” (36). Thus, Dunne's world as a writer turns neatly in upon itself and he becomes a part of that other, connected world, if only by distant relations and acquaintances.

Dunne's wife, Joan Didion, weighed in with her further thoughts on Las Vegas in another Esquire article, "Getting the Vegas Willies." Didion writes that she experiences "the Vegas fright" on a trip to see her friend Helen Reddy perform at the MGM Grand, and that "the fright comes because I do not understand" (32). She then reels off a number of quintessentially Vegas phenomena which she, as an intellectual writer, cannot comprehend, such as "why anyone would arrive with his wife in Vegas for the weekend and rent a pink Cadillac Coupe De Ville" (32), and what allows "large numbers of solid citizens to land at McCarran and enter cheerfully into the spirit of a Genet brothel" (44). This use of the same writer as her husband to evoke the spirit of Las Vegas is telling, for the two writers have different views of the city; Didion consistently approaches it with the air of a highbrow who cannot fathom the tastelessness of it all, while Dunne seems to accept the city more on its own terms. Didion refers to Dunne in her article and writes that he understands Vegas better than she because "anyone who could keep an empty duplex apartment off the Las Vegas Strip and sleep in a motel a few blocks away has some instinct for the radical immateriality of the place, and also for
the willies” (49-50). Dunne, then, despite being as much of an intellectual as his wife, is more attuned to what makes the city run, while Didion, in this article as in her other writing about the city, only feels the willies.

_Esquire_ ran another Las Vegas article, Robert Alan Aurthur’s “Hanging Out,” in 1974. Also included in the later anthology _Literary Las Vegas_, this piece captures the frenzy surrounding the big-name headliners on the Strip, as seen through the eyes of Aurthur and his friend Harvey Orkin, the entertainment director for the Hilton. As Orkin deals with star egos and demanding junketeers, Aurthur describes the poolside activities of “what appears to be a small child wearing a striped caftan and a big, floppy hat,” but who in fact is “one of the littlest lady midgets in the whole world” (30). The midget looms (if a midget can be said to do so) in the background as Orkin conducts his business while talking to Aurthur, and at the end of the article she approaches the whining junketeer (he had to wait too long for his comped gourmet meal) and asks him “The last time you were out, when Elvis was here, didn’t you take out my cousin Velvet?” After a long pause, the junketeer replies that he did, then says to the midget that “I saw you walking around before . . . but I didn’t recognize you” (34). This strange exchange is important in underscoring Aurthur’s main point, that entertainment (and, by extension, all other aspects of life) in Las Vegas has reached such a heightened peak that the visitor, symbolized by the junketeer, becomes completely jaded to the point of obliviousness.

Another expression of the jaded nature of both the city and its visitors is explored in Dan Greenburg’s 1973 _Playboy_ article entitled “It’s Just Like
You’re Two Rubber Titties.” This article is paired with an excerpt from Vegas: A Memoir of a Dark Season, under the overall title of “Love and Lust in Vegas.” The graphic presentation of these two articles is quite striking: a large fold-out breast dominates the first couple of pages. Greenburg’s article consists mainly of anecdotes from various showgirls he interviews, replete with stories of orgies, lesbianism, public sex, prostitution, and other prurient pleasures, making the article seem like the prototype for the depiction of showgirls in the film of that name. Greenburg seems to be fulfilling the anticipated fantasies of Playboy’s readers when he writes that he wondered “what it was like to be that beautiful, that sexy, that bored, that kinky” (220).

The main body of the article is pretty much what is to be expected, given the subject and the venue, but Greenburg makes an interesting sociological point near the end when he considers Las Vegas to be

   an intensification and a parody of the war between the sexes. . . Las Vegas is also a study of people who are deprived of things such as conventional family constellations, who substitute Mafia bosses for fathers, showgirls for daughters and lovers of their own sex when none of the opposite sex seem suitable or trustable. . . . And showgirls—who are the most attractive, calculating, vulnerable, poignant, sophisticated, naive women I have ever met—are the perfect citizens of that twilight world. (274)

While the description of the showgirls is somewhat romanticized, Greenburg does connect with the ideas of Thompson, Dunne, and Didion when he theorizes that Las Vegas itself contributes to the psychic rootlessness of its denizens.
Looking at Las Vegas

In addition to depicting the psychic landscape, in the early 1970s some commentators turned their attention to the physical manifestations of Las Vegas. The best-known example of this is Learning from Las Vegas, by the architectural team of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. This 1972 book is presented in “hypertext” form, as marginal commentary runs alongside triple-spaced text; there are many small, even postage-sized, photographs, which become annoying because of the first edition’s folio size—a lot of white space simply hangs there. As far as the text goes, it is a precursor to discussions (such as the present one) which seek to appreciate Las Vegas on its own terms as an important artifact of our popular culture. Thus, on the first page, Venturi et al. contend that

The commercial strip, the Las Vegas Strip in particular—the example par excellence—challenges the architect to take a positive, non-chip-on-the-shoulder view. Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment, because orthodox Modern architecture is progressive, if not revolutionary, utopian, and puristic; it is dissatisfied with existing conditions. (1)

The architectural analysis of this book is somewhat beyond the scope of the present discussion, but the essential thesis is that Las Vegas represents “not chaos, but a new spatial order relating the automobile and highway communication in an architecture which abandons pure form in favor of mixed media” (11). Thus, signs are as important as the buildings they advertise, and everything on the Strip is geared towards the automobile rather than towards the pedestrian, as in traditional city layouts. Reviewing
the book in *Newsweek*, Douglas Davis contends that “Venturi wastes far too much time in this book deriding his colleagues for missing the glories of the Las Vegas... vernacular and far too little time explaining how ‘high’ architecture can learn from it and thus escape the rigidities of the International School” (Davis 95). Nevertheless, the book is important in that it is one of the first serious discussions of a usually neglected or ignored subject.

At the same time as Venturi et al. were gaining publicity for their work on Las Vegas, Brian O’Doherty wrote an article for *Art in America* that expressed virtually the same kinds of ideas. His 1972 article “Highway to Las Vegas” acknowledges Venturi when he writes that the huge signs outside the casinos are a quasi-kind of vernacular that is hard to define, and the masterpieces of this uncertain zone. How uncertain can be seen by the way the signs, when they are written about at all, are taken out of context and dumped at the two extremes of camp and Pop phenomenology. (89)

O’Doherty, though, seems to fall into this very trap that he criticizes when he makes much of the fact that every sign has two sides, and that “They are not mirror-imaged. If they were, the lettering on one side would read from right to left” (86). According to O’Doherty, this means that “Passing up and down the Strip one develops an idea one is constantly breaking a plane, going through a mirror slightly flawed by its asymmetry” (86), thus inducing a “molecular shudder” and doing strange things to one’s body image. It is probably safe to say that, out of the hundreds of millions of people who have
cruised the Strip, this notion has occurred only to O'Doherty and, perhaps, to Hunter Thompson on one of his psychedelic excursions.

Another, far more practical and interesting, discussion of the physical properties of Las Vegas appears in the December 1978 American Institute of Architects Journal, in John Pastier's article "The Architecture of Escapism: Disney World and Las Vegas." This article picks up where Julian Halevy's (see chapter two) left off, and is a detailed examination of how each resort area is laid out. A series of short sections compare parentage ("both places are colonies of Hollywood" (27)), legendary heroes (Walt Disney and Howard Hughes), the suspension of time, the political jurisdictions, theming, and many other aspects of the two areas. All of this is Pastier's way of showing how Disney World and Las Vegas are both "special monuments to pragmatism. Their aim is to provide the greatest pleasure for the greatest number, which means that they shoot for the middle nine times out of ten" (27). Although the AIA Journal is not exactly a popular culture document, this article is one of the best ever written about how Las Vegas operates, on both a physical and an emotive level. Pastier is a perceptive interpreter of the city and its meanings, and he shows how it and Disney World are "the four-dimensional realization of a great American dream: In their very different and very similar ways, Las Vegas and Disney World are places where it's Christmas every day of the year" (37). Anyone wishing to gain a true understanding of how the physicality of Las Vegas accomplishes the city's desired ends should take the trouble to find this article.
Adult Pleasures

Of course, Las Vegas differs radically from Disney World in many important ways, the most obvious of which involves the very adult-oriented entertainment available there. The sexual atmosphere has already been discussed in this chapter, but drinking and gambling are also powerful attractants to Las Vegas in the eyes of many people. Two Esquire articles published in the mid-1970s explore these aspects of the resort. Jack Richardson's 1975 "The Las Vegas Contender" is a detailed and dramatic, even heroic, account of his run at the baccarat and blackjack tables, and is characterized by what he acknowledges himself as "grandiloquent self-dramatization" (155). Usually, descriptions of hands of cards are excruciatingly boring; reading about, hearing, or watching someone else gamble can be painfully dull, but Richardson manages to infuse his article with a certain amount of insight into the psychology of the gambler. Like Mario Puzo, Richardson attempts to make the reader understand what drives the gambler when he knows the odds are against him, and his concluding words illuminate his motivations. As Richardson basks poolside in the sun, he vows that he will return to the tables "only after I was certain that I once again possessed the naive and noble mind of a gambler who must believe that he is one whom the gods are not indifferent to" (224). Thus, it is the feeling that one has a special relationship with the forces of chance that keeps the gambler going; if the gambler loses, it is because there has been a temporary glitch in this arrangement.
Jay Cronley’s 1977 *Esquire* article “The Drinking Man’s Guide to Las Vegas” is likewise an attempt to show the inner workings of a personality type who is a Las Vegas cliché. Cronley describes how, after losing miserably for two days while sober, he decides to get stewed and experience Vegas that way. He causes a disturbance at an Ann-Margret show, upsets a high roller by whistling at his young companion, and ends up leaving town two dollars ahead. His conclusion is that “although Las Vegas seems different, the difference is only superficial: deep down, all the world loves a drunk” (114). Cronley’s article, fictional as it seems to be, yet is important in its underlying theme that one’s inhibitions can be completely unleashed in Las Vegas and nothing will come of it; in fact, one might even come out ahead. In this way, Cronley is similar to Richardson in that he feels somehow protected by higher powers; his final statement is simply another way of putting it.

**The Dangers of Las Vegas**

No matter how safe one felt in Las Vegas, there were still some problems which would not seem to go away. Lester Velie returned to his muckraking stance with a 1974 *Reader’s Digest* article entitled “The Underworld’s Back Door to Las Vegas,” in which he outlines the contribution of the Teamsters’ pension fund reserves to various casinos which are, or which have been in the recent past, mob-controlled. Jay Sarno’s involvement with mob figures while he was overseeing the construction and operations of Caesars Palace and Circus Circus is detailed, and Velie writes that the pension fund reserves are “financing further penetration of legitimate business and
[they] provide capital for dirty business—loan sharking and dope smuggling, for instance” (214). Velie’s charges of Mafia influence seem to be proven in two articles which appeared the same week (March 14, 1977) in Newsweek and Time. These articles, respectively titled “Another Hoffa Case?” and “Vegas Vanishing Act,” discuss the disappearance of Al Bramlet, leader of the Culinary Union in Las Vegas. On a trip back from Reno, Bramlet was met at the airport by three men, after which he called a Dunes hotel executive and asked that a payment of $10,000 be made to a friend. The money was never picked up, and Time surmises that Bramlet ran afoul of some Mafia associates over a proposed clinic-pharmacy “where ailing union members would receive medical treatment and drugs,” and the Mob and Bramlet would skim off the profits. The problem, Time reports, is that Bramlet “kept insisting on a bigger cut for himself,” and just two weeks before his disappearance the union voted down the clinic idea. These two factors left Bramlet “in the awkward position of not having come through for the Mob” (21).

Interestingly, Newsweek omits any mention of the Mafia, instead listing a number of other enemies of Bramlet, including “younger union members” who “charged Bramlet with favoritism,” and “a number of Las Vegas hotel owners,” who were upset over “a sixteen-day strike that Bramlet called last year” (Steele and Kasindorf 23). Whatever the true story was, Lester Velie’s contention that something is still wrong in Las Vegas seems to have been borne out. Certainly, Bramlet ran afoul of someone who held a grudge, as he was eventually found in the desert “dead, stripped of his clothes and shot in the head and chest” (Mosle 151).
A different sort of danger is discussed in a 1979 *Psychology Today* article by Jerome H. Skolnick, "The Social Risks of Casino Gambling." Skolnick is a sociologist and a law professor, and with these credentials one would expect a fairly rigorous study; unfortunately, the article presents almost no hard data supporting his thesis that increased availability of gambling in places like Atlantic City will result in major social and economic problems for the people within reach of it. It is specifically casino gambling that Skolnick singles out as harmful, since lotteries and off-track betting takes place "in an atmosphere that breeds a degree of restraint" while the "casino gambler, egged on by the ambiance of the casino" (57), is more likely to lose control. More serious is the specter of increased crime, but again, Skolnick only cites one statistic to back this contention. Instead, he relies on blanket statements that "casino gambling is likely to attract more 'shadiness'--a wide category that includes organized crime, dirty money, and profit-skimming" (58). Most critics of gambling, as we have seen, provide ample evidence that their criticisms are valid and that gambling is a serious social problem; however, Skolnick depends on "what-ifs" to make his point, and thus makes a weak one.

A more critical view of the problems facing Las Vegas is in a 1972 *Business Week* article, "Urban Problems Dull the Glitter of Las Vegas." This is a solid, fact-filled report on such issues as the divided political jurisdiction of Greater Las Vegas, declining employment in non-gambling enterprises, increased crime, and a strained welfare system. However, the article also notes positive economic news such as the increased appeal to the growing number of locals of casinos like the Showboat. Of course, an observer like
Skolnick would see this as a negative, as the casino is taking the money of hardworking people instead of tourists. The article also notes that blacks were becoming more important to the city’s economy, as “they are more visible in more and more of the higher-paying jobs: waiters, waitresses, and casino dealers” (41). Thus, while beginning with a discussion of the city’s problems, Business Week points to some positive economic and social trends in a balanced look at what was happening in Las Vegas in the 1970s.

**Blacks in Las Vegas**

Blacks in Las Vegas, both as workers and as visitors, received more print attention in the 1970s than ever before. A 1972 *Ebony* article (“Las Vegas: Entertainment Capital of the World”) first recounts the history of discrimination against blacks in Las Vegas, then reports that “All of this has changed now—all of it” (178). The author, Louie Robinson, writes that

> An estimated 90,000 blacks pass through Las Vegas yearly, and they are all welcome to sleep and eat any place, see any show they choose and lose every penny they have ever earned at the gambling tables. And, as now required by law, 12 to 14 per cent of those employed here are blacks or other minority workers. (178)

Robinson also applauds the efforts of local black activists in helping change the racial climate in Las Vegas. The article is illustrated with a number of photographs of these leaders, along with black celebrities who were now free to stay in the hotels at which they perform. One full-page photo is an echo of the publicity shots of the 1950s, with a large group of black entertainers, all raising their fists, standing in front of the Caesars Palace marquee advertising...
Harry Belafonte and Nancy Wilson. These two are included in the picture, along with Sammy Davis Jr., Ella Fitzgerald, Redd Foxx, Sonny Charles, and other legends. Ebony's approach here is to recognize past injustices while celebrating present successes for blacks in Las Vegas.

Another Ebony article, “School for Gamblers,” appeared in 1971 and reports on a “federally funded school for casino dealers,” with money from the Department of Labor going to teach “a job skill for the hard-core unemployed in Nevada’s largest industry—gambling” (Deni 55). The program benefits mainly blacks, although “there have been a few Indians, Mexican-Americans, Orientals and a couple of whites” (60), and the article praises its black originators, including “Clarence Ray, one of the first black dealers in Las Vegas” (56), and Rev. Leo A. Johnson, at the time the leader of the program. Again, numerous photographs illustrate the presence of successful black graduates of the program, as well as depicting its leadership and the black gamblers who patronize the program’s graduates.

Black Enterprise also publicized Las Vegas’ changing attitude towards blacks. A 1973 article (“Las Vegas: Bright Lights and Booming Tourism”) runs through a brief history of discrimination, and reports that

The language in Vegas today is money, pure and simple, and the establishments only see green. Blacks can not only play at the blackjack, poker and baccarat tables but some blacks now also operate them. If the traveler resides at the $23 million Union Plaza hotel, he will find that the assistant manager is black. (68)

The increasing presence of black casino executives is also noted in a 1979 Black Enterprise article simply entitled “Las Vegas,” in which Knolly Moses
reports that there are “an increasing number of blacks moving into management positions at the hotels” (54). Moses also writes of the little-known “black side of Las Vegas,” including the Sugar Hill Cocktail Lounge, where he “felt a cooler ambiance than I had found downtown. Half the people there were black tourists who had done their gambling for the evening” (54). Black magazines were thus discovering that Las Vegas was no longer the “Mississippi of the West,” even if the white media generally ignored this. From the musings of major writers to the social and economic realities for minorities in Las Vegas, then, the nonfiction popular culture outlets in the 1970s addressed some issues of enduring importance.

**Fiction**

In contrast to the nonfiction, there are no real standouts among 1970s Las Vegas fiction, although some authors managed to infuse the usual assortment of clichés with some originality. Several authors in the 1970s sought to produce epics which encompass the many varieties of lives and personalities that make up Las Vegas. Usually, these novels suffer from overplotting and too many characters. Marilyn Lynch’s *Casino* (1978) is one of these novels, a kind of *Peyton Place* in the desert with a cast of characters including a casino owner, a dealer, a fading comic, a prostitute, a businessman on a junket, and a compulsive gambler, all of whom are at the Silverado hotel-casino. It seems to be a requirement of this kind of novel to include a metaphorical description of the physical nature of the casino, so outside the Silverado
This aggressive symbol underscores the fact that all of the characters are in some way in thrall to the casino, and all of their lives will be wrecked because of it. One of these characters is Gabe Nesbitt, a rare instance of a sympathetically-portrayed gay man, a choreographer who remains closeted because he thinks that "to be homosexual was a sin against God and mankind" (256). Gabe’s problems with his true identity, though, are shared by most of the characters, as they struggle to define themselves against the monolithic influences of the Silverado and the city. As Teddy Night, an aging showgirl and part owner of the Silverado, struggles with her own notion of self-identity, she reflects that “nobody pulled the switch on Las Vegas. But she had control of her own switch; on, off, right, left, up and down. Pick a direction, any direction, and go. The choice was all hers” (413).

In the end, then, she and the other characters are left on their own, to “roll the dice,” as it were, against the backdrop of an uncaring Las Vegas.

A similar technique is used in Las Vegas, a 1974 collaboration between Arthur Moore and Clayton Matthews. Here, the action is at the Klondike, where the casino displays a similar physical symbol of aggression: “everywhere a motif in keeping with the Alaskan gold rush of 1898. In front of the casino building was a hundred-foot-high totem pole, an enormous, notched phallus sheathed in neon tubing like a prophylactic” (7). The same group of losers inhabits this novel, all pursued by their demons, and the
conclusion is the same as well: “No matter what happens, Las Vegas rolls on--the slot machines clanking, the dice tumbling, the wheels spinning, the cards dropping, the tourists coming and going as regularly as the tide” (277-78).

Another example of this genre is Arelo Sederberg's 1974 60 Hours of Darkness, in which Jim Carpenter, the top executive of the New Century, deals with the kidnapping of his son just as the casino is about to have its grand opening. The focus on Carpenter helps to unify the novel, making it tighter than the other two, as he grapples with labor problems and all of the other headaches associated with his job. However, despite its strengths, this novel suffers from its many stereotypical nonwhite characters, such as a group of “Negro and Mexican welfare demonstrators” (149) and some Japanese businessmen on a junket, who “dressed in gray and black suits,” wore “black shoes and black ties,” and were “precise and military” (40). Also, there is Valerie Lynn, a black entertainer who is described as “a child, a beautiful, sad Negro child, lost and helpless” (136), and a group called the “Southern California Chapter of the Gay Liberators of America,” who are “two dozen grim, sweaty homosexuals in lavenders and purples and reds,” protesting “discrimination in the employment of the third sex on the Las Vegas Strip” (149). And that is not all; a group of black dealers is threatening to strike, provoking the comment by one character that “A Negro who gives you a bad time is a nigger” (60), and the kidnapping of Carpenter’s son is carried out by two “bisexuals, heroin mainliners, ex-cons” (224). It is as if the minority groups absent from almost all of the rest of Las Vegas fiction show up here to take their hits.
Two books from Pinnacle Press involve righteous heroes out to correct the wrongs of the criminal elements of society. These books are both parts of different series, and each one makes a stop in Las Vegas to take out the trash. Lionel Derrick’s 1973 *The Penetrator: Blood on the Strip* details the exploits of Mark Hardin, a Vietnam War hero and part-Cheyenne Indian. Hardin has made a lifetime vow to “strike back at crime wherever he found it” (13) after investigating treasonous acts by Army brass and being beaten up because of it. Hardin goes to Las Vegas to pursue “The Fraulein,” who operates a white slavery/prostitution ring out of the “Pink Pussy Casino” (24). The description of this casino is reminiscent of some of the more extravagantly-imagined ones from previous decades, “from the hot-pink paint job on the outside to the two-story pink cat that moved its long tail and winked from a huge eye” (57). Everything about the casino, including its name, is calculated to provide a contrast to the moral righteousness of Hardin: “Pink cages were sprinkled around the casino floor. Each one sat on a four-foot-high pedestal and inside each bamboo cage writhed a dancer. Most of the girls were topless, with flesh-pink G-strings so small they were hard to find” (58). Hardin, like an angry God, destroys the place by blowing it into “a pile of stone, ashes, and melted plastic chips” (158).

Another morally indignant hero is Mack Bolan, in Don Pendleton’s 1971 *The Executioner: Vegas Vendetta*. Bolan is a one-man strike force against the Mob, and he goes into action in Las Vegas by assassinating key Mafia figures. These Mobsters are all Italians involved in skimming,
extortion, and the usual nefarious activities, and when Bolan begins his work as “The Executioner,” the entire city trembles:

The Vegas Strip has a ‘grapevine’ second to none in the world. Despite efforts by both police and underworld to quiet the fact of the Executioner’s presence in town, the word spread among the regular residents with the vigor of an uncontrolled forest fire. (127)

Las Vegas is portrayed as a lawless city, run entirely at the whim of the Mob, which “regarded Las Vegas as an open city, meaning that no one family exercised territorial jurisdiction over the underworld action there—the field was open to any and all” (26). Bolan thus has to straighten things out, which he does with the ferocity of an avenging angel. One of the most interesting things about this novel is the way in which the city is transformed from an urban jungle into a fearful frontier outpost, all because of Bolan’s actions. Pendleton writes that “all about Las Vegas—the city of strangers—faces suddenly became important, almost an obsession, for those who lived and worked there. Police accosted everyone who seemed to stand out a little from the crowd; frequently they accosted one another” (129). It seems to be a characteristic of mid-seventies popular culture to construct heroes in the mold of Bolan, as seen in such films as Dirty Harry and Death Wish; Bolan and Hardin are both representatives of the lone man against the forces of evil, and Bolin feels at the end that he has beaten “the house at their own game, and cleaned out the bank” (187).

Sometimes these stories of blood revenge can have surprisingly subtle undertones. In Charles Durbin’s 1970 novel Vendetta, a standard mob tale in which a functionary goes to Las Vegas to settle a debt, the desert landscape is
malevolent, rather than the inhabitants of the city. Ansie, the collector, is about to embark on his task when he notices that "Far to the West, the mountains baked and scowled under a sinister blue sky. Ansie squinted up at an excessive brightness which was shot through with patient malice" (105). Ansie also goes to the Marrakech hotel, which features a "thirty-story central donjon" (106), so both the natural setting and the manmade one contribute to the sense of foreboding. We have seen before how some writers make the city and its surroundings integral to the mood of the work. In this case, it is malevolent, but it can also be positive, as in Hal Kantor's 1970 *The Vegas Trap*, in which "The bright lights of the hotel-illuminated boulevard seemed to add fuel to the fires of Lora's incandescence" (125).

The technique of using Las Vegas landscapes to reflect or comment upon a character's inner workings is put to good use in Joan Didion's 1970 *Play it as it Lays*, in which she presents an impressionistic view of Las Vegas to mirror the mental state of Maria Wyeth, an emotionally disconnected, aimless actress. Her mental landscape is constructed of scenery and fragments of pop songs:

A child in the harsh light of a crosswalk on the Strip. A sign on Fremont Street. A light blinking. In her half sleep the point was ten, the jackpot was on eighteen, the only man that could ever reach her was the son of a preacher man, someone was down sixty, someone was up, Daddy wants a popper and she rode a painted pony let the spinning wheel spin. (170)

Didion takes it even further when she writes that Wyeth "was beginning to feel color, light intensities, and she imagined that she could be put blindfolded in front of the signs at the Thunderbird and the Flamingo and
know which was which” (171). This synaesthesia helps to convincingly portray a woman whose emotional makeup is hypersensitive and numbed at the same time.

Stephen King’s apocalyptic 1978 novel *The Stand* makes good metaphorical use of the Las Vegas cityscape when it becomes the headquarters of Randall Flagg, the personification of evil, in opposition to the forces of good, which are headquartered in healthy Boulder, Colorado. The city is eventually destroyed in a nuclear holocaust, but before it is King paints an eerie picture of a place devastated by a killer plague. As the mysterious and unstable Trashcan Man enters the city,

He saw a silver Ghost Rolls-Royce halfway through a plate glass window of an adult bookstore. He saw a naked woman hanging upside down from a lamppost. He saw two pages of the Las Vegas *Sun* go riffing by….He saw a gigantic billboard which said NEIL DIAMOND! THE AMERICANA HOTEL JUNE 15-AUGUST 30! Someone had scrawled the words DIE LAS VEGAS FOR YOUR SINS! across the show window of a jewelry store seeming to specialize in nothing but wedding and engagement rings. (580)

In just a few sentences here, King skillfully presents a series of startling images which comment on Las Vegas' preoccupation with symbols of wealth and sexuality, all destroyed in a Biblical tableau of wreckage. The ironic juxtaposition of the Neil Diamond billboard and the fatalistic graffiti underscores not only the transience and superficiality of Las Vegas life, but also brings with it the sense that there must be some kind of reckoning for what Las Vegas symbolizes.

Another skillful and unexpected use of Las Vegas reality appears in Jeff Rice’s 1973 novel *The Night Stalker*. The novel, the basis for a popular TV
movie, involves the search for a vampire at large in Las Vegas. This is an obvious idea for a story, given the city's twenty-four-hour lifestyle and the constant influx of tourists in a city with a relatively small population, both of which provide the perfect cover for a creature of the night. The novel would remain a mere curiosity, though, were it not for an added dimension to the plot. The narrator, a newspaper reporter, makes reference to the racial tensions in Las Vegas as an important consideration in the search. The reader is told that

Police in Las Vegas are ever vigilant for three things--narcotics; youths; and blacks. Preferably black youths involved with narcotics... A shooting in a residence near Huntridge is an assault with a deadly weapon while the same thing at a home near D and Monroe streets is a 'family disturbance.' The unofficial policy is that 'black people just act that way—you know, like animals.' It's changing, but very slowly. (28)

This is all by way of explaining why the suspect in a series of grisly murders must be white, since the crimes occurred in white neighborhoods and any blacks in the area would have been easily noticed. In this way, Rice manages not to overwork the vampire-in-Vegas story and grounds it (at least a little bit) in reality.

Sometimes realism can be tiring, however, as in Charles Einstein's 1976 The Blackjack Hijack. This is a boring, overly-detailed story of a gambler with a winning system for blackjack. Again, the flaw of providing the reader with hand-by-hand descriptions is indulged here as a substitute for real drama. The most notable thing about this novel is its description of the complete vulgarity of Vegas culture, as when an elegant table setting at the Sands, "in
fealty to Las Vegas taste,” is completed by “cellophane-wrapped saltines with a red pull-tab” (139). Also, a bizarre lounge act called “Two Nets and a Pet” features “a pair of seven-foot blacks with the New York Nets who had put together a night-club act with a local white girl, since it was out-of-season for basketball. She was four-foot-nine. . . . an act it was easy not to watch” (167). Satiric details like this help to enliven an otherwise-dull plot.

Another novel with the same problem is Ian Anderson’s 1979 The Big Night. The book provides great detail about various casino games, which is explained by the fact that Anderson is a professional blackjack player and author of Turning the Tables on Las Vegas, a “how-to” book on winning in the casinos. In this novel, Byron Kincaid takes five women to Las Vegas to make a big score, and the book would be just another gambling story were it not for the interesting use of a Las Vegas cliché to set the plan in motion. The status of women is used here as a ploy, for “Vegas is a macho society. . . . The way the bosses see it, women are good for one thing—bed. My women are going to go in there and make a killing” (16). Kincaid’s plan unravels, of course, but it is the reference to a woman’s place in Las Vegas that makes it an interesting cultural document.

Male-female relations also provide one of the more intriguing plot twists in Janet Dailey’s 1976 Fire and Ice. In this Harlequin Romance, wealthy Alisa Franklin goes to Las Vegas to hunt for a husband. Her mother’s will stipulated that Alisa could take custody of her beloved half-sister Chris only if Alisa got married and lived with her husband for at least one year. Alisa meets Zachary Stuart at a baccarat table and proposes that he marry her in
exchange for $200,000. The subtle social dynamics of the casino are described as Alisa notes that "There seemed to be only one place where the élite were separated from the average populace. . . . the secluded baccarat table" (13). In addition to this, Alisa here adopts the role normally played by the male character: the predator in search of someone who can be bought. This is a reversal of the usual situation, from Alice Denham's "The Deal" (see chapter two) to Indecent Proposal. Zachary is handsome and well-dressed, so he seems a suitable mate, but when he agrees to the deal and takes her back to his home in Napa Valley, Alisa has second thoughts: "Amid the fantasy world of Las Vegas with its myriad neon lights and dancing fountains, her actions had seemed quite reasonable and practical" (31). That is, the reduction of emotion to a financial transaction seemed all right in Las Vegas, but apart from that materialistic world doubts begin to surface. Of course, since this is a romance, after much conflict, the two actually do fall in love, but the setup in Las Vegas provides added resonance to this drama.

There was no absence of the traditional clichés of Las Vegas fiction in the 1970s; for example, I. G. Broat wrote two Las Vegas novels in the 1970s. The first, The Junketeers (1977), follows the adventures of Harry and Mike, who organize junkets with an eclectic group of high rollers to international hot spots. The book is heavy on dialogue and light on exposition, and when description of Las Vegas is attempted Broat gets the name of the Strip wrong: "I stood before the window and gazed out over Las Vegas. From the twenty-fifth floor, I had a perspective view of Sunset Strip disappearing into the downtown environs" (41). Broat's next novel, The Master Mechanic (1979),
shows a slightly improved sense of absurdity in passages such as the following, in which he describes the Winter Palace hotel-casino:

> It could have been an Eastern European castle, except that it sat incongruously on the edge of the Nevada desert, and no European castle ever had to withstand the heat that bore down from this relentless sun and belted off the coppered domes and soaring spires in translucent waves. (273)

The story concerns a gambler-turned-casino consultant from Ohio who goes to Las Vegas in 1947 after working in New York and Havana, and has nothing much to recommend it except for the die-hard fan of Las Vegas in fiction.

Likewise, Gloria Vitanza Basile’s 1979 novel *The Manipulators* is a moderately interesting tale of Mob and government intrigue. The portrayals of the Italian mobsters approaches caricature at times, with “dese-and-dose” dialogue and names like “Manny Marciano” and “Valentine Erice.” Even the sinister, James Bond-like organization pulling everyone’s strings is called IAGO (InterAllied Gold and Oil). The novel is the usual story of skimming, payoffs, and the like, but Basile does provide an interesting statement of a mobster’s point of view on Las Vegas:

> [Valentine] could never live in this desert oasis, where slot machines became Aladdin lamps to be caressed by a feverishly pitched public, who flocked in droves to the sacrificial altars of the gaming casinos. But, then, when had the public ever demonstrated a sense of sanity when it came to pleasing their senses? He’d made a fortune in the old days gratifying their pleasures, hadn’t he? Who was he to pass judgment? (133-34)

Ironically, here it is the public whose venal appetites are blamed for the Mob’s power in Las Vegas, not any inherently evil aspect of the mob itself. When Valentine complains to Manny that Las Vegas is too superficial to take
seriously, with "'too much frosting,'" Manny replies that "'The meat and potatoes come here now. This is the Fort Knox of our world'" (136). Basile thus portrays the Mob as coming to grips with the reality of Las Vegas, rather than the other way around, as is usually depicted.

Parody is not usually an aspect of Las Vegas fiction—the city usually seems to parody itself—but we may conclude this chapter with an interesting example of it. Harry Brown's 1973 novel The Wild Hunt tells of a cross-country chase of the narrator by a husband who found him in bed with his wife, and a stopover in Las Vegas produces an amusing parody of both To Have and Have Not and A Farewell to Arms:

You know how it is there early in Las Vegas with the broads still awake against the headboards of the beds; before even the waitresses come by with drinks on he house? Well, in the spring of that year we stayed at a hotel in Las Vegas that looked across the desert and the crud to the mountains. (82)

This appears to be the only example of a conscious parody of Hemingway's style in a Las Vegas setting; some of the laconic hard-boiled crime novels may unconsciously ape the style, but this is a notable divergence from the usual stuff. The stay in Las Vegas is brief, seemingly only put in the novel to produce this section. Unfortunately, Brown seems pretty taken with himself as a stylist, and if this passage is amusing, the rest of the book is not. The novel is continually in danger of collapsing under the weight of its cutesy style. Nevertheless, the Hemingway parody shows how even the most pedestrian novel involving Las Vegas can produce some surprising reading.
CHAPTER FIVE

1980-89
LAS VEGAS IN THE GO-GO EIGHTIES

In the 1980s, Las Vegas saw its monopoly on casino gambling overrun by the increasing visibility of Atlantic City, which has a much larger customer base within easy reach. However, after an initially worrisome couple of years at the beginning of the decade, Las Vegas recovered from the effects of its competitor and of the recession, and has continued to bounce back with great resilience. The general view among gaming industry analysts now is that Atlantic City may have actually created a bigger market for Las Vegas by familiarizing millions of people with casino gambling. Las Vegas is still seen as a destination resort, whereas Atlantic City caters more to the day tripper crowd, and the booming of Las Vegas as a whole far outshines the economic impact of gaming on (non-Boardwalk) Atlantic City (Moehring 262).

While all of this was going on, Las Vegas embarked on its most ambitious growth era to date, an era which is still going strong as the 1990s draw to a close. The Mirage, completed in 1989, can be seen as the beginning of the new era of mega-resorts appealing to the entire family, while the Rio (also opened in 1989) set a new, flashier standard for off-Strip properties. Despite the recession of the early 1980s, Las Vegas continued to exhibit extraordinary expansion not only in its gambling economy, but also in
a more diversified group of industries as well. In addition to the construction or expansion of many Downtown and Strip casinos, the 1980s saw the establishment of such non-gaming economic forces as Citicorp's 2,000-employee credit card processing plant in The Lakes, GTE-Sylvania's lithium battery plant in Henderson, and the relocation of companies such as Ocean Spray, Ethel M Chocolates, Tungsten Carbide, and other firms. Much of this activity can be attributed to the efforts of the Nevada Development Authority, a privately-funded agency which has accomplished much in the way of promoting the Las Vegas Valley as a desirable economic enterprise zone (Moehring 263).

Nonfiction

Fires

Unfortunately, the decade opened for Las Vegas with a tragedy of epic proportions when the MGM Grand caught fire on November 21, 1980, and killed 84 people, injuring over 700. This event received major attention in the newsweeklies, with Time's headline reading "'It Was Death, Absolute Death,'" and Newsweek's, "Grand Hotel Holocaust." Time provided the more dramatic pictures, of anguished survivors being rescued from the balconies, while Newsweek focused on poignant details such as the "asphyxiated couple [who] was found lying arm in arm in a room on an upper floor--and a waiter, who had been serving breakfast in bed, [who] lay dead on the floor beside them" (Morganthau and Contreras 42). Both reports,
published on December 1, indicated that most of the dead suffered from
smoke inhalation and toxic fumes rather than from the flames themselves,
and that there were no smoke alarms or sprinklers on the guest floors, since
the law requiring these safety devices was passed after the hotel was built and
there was no requirement for retrofitting. The following week, both
magazines carried articles on the aftermath of the fire, describing the
destruction that it caused as well as the legal battles facing the MGM Grand.
Time's "Sifting the Ashes in Las Vegas" reported that the first lawsuit was to
be "a $250 million claim from a group of Mexican tourists who lost 15 of their
number" (Kelly and Scott 33), and Newsweek's "MGM's Dicey Future" took a
look at Wall Street, where "skittish traders last week bid MGM Grand stock
down 31 per cent, saddling the company's controlling shareholder, Kirk
Kerkorian, with a $64 million paper loss" (Anderson and Contreras 73).

Financial questions were thus emerging immediately following the
MGM Grand tragedy; meanwhile, just three months later, another fire struck
the Las Vegas Hilton, killing eight and injuring over 200. In their February
23, 1981, issues, Time and Newsweek both reported that the fire was a
suspected arson, in contrast to the MGM fire, which was started when an
electrical problem developed in the kitchen. The Hilton suspect was a 23-
year-old busboy, who told police that the fire started when "he had been
engaged in a homosexual act on a sofa in the eighth-floor elevator lobby
when his marijuana cigarette accidentally ignited window draperies" ("City of
Towering Infernos" 23). The police did not believe this account when they
learned that "three other fires had broken out while fire fighters battled the
first,” one of these in “a ninth-floor fire hose that had been stuffed with combustible material” (Beck and Contreras 24). The busboy was charged with arson after his strange cover story failed to pan out.

There were several follow-up articles on the MGM Grand fire which explored issues related to litigation; on April 6, Business Week reported on “The Law MGM Grand Fears,” which refers to Nevada’s “unusual and exceedingly liberal provisions for wrongful-death recovery—a fact not lost on MGM Grand Hotels Inc., which is trying to line up $170 million more in liability insurance” (Blyskal 115). The article details various ways in which survivors of the fire can sue for grief, disfigurement, or punitive damages, but concludes that a Las Vegas jury might be “hard-pressed to pass judgment on a company that employs several thousand of the city’s working population” (116). The result of the litigation was summed up two years later in a Forbes article, “Slicing the Damage Pie,” which cited the MGM case as “an example of how sophisticated lawyers, slick financial types and high-tech computer programs can milk catastrophe for all it’s worth” (140). Since the MGM case was not treated as a class action, the individual lawyers involved could set their own fees and make their own deals for their clients, but “fact-finding and the establishment of liability could be resolved collectively, as in a class action” (140). Thus, the case was a kind of mixture of individual and class-action suits, which allowed for higher judgments and fees for the lawyers, a fact which the article condemns as profiteering on tragedy.

In addition to describing their tragic consequences, the coverage of the two fires is notable for its attempt to find a moral in what happened. The
MGM Grand case is held up as an example of greedy lawyers taking advantage of a catastrophe, and the Hilton fire initially carried with it the false stigma of a drug-using homosexual as the cause. Despite this, however, absent from all fire coverage is the notion, expressed in various forms in other circumstances, that Las Vegas itself somehow deserves this kind of wrath-of-God treatment in punishment for its sins. As we have seen, virtually every article since the 1950s which describes an economic downturn or an increase in social problems in Las Vegas is characterized by a tone suggesting that the city is getting its just rewards. However, when real human tragedy is involved, this perspective is abandoned and peripheral concerns are instead outlined, perhaps out of respect for the victims. After all, it would be an outrage to suggest that the victims of the fire should have known better when choosing Las Vegas as a place to stay. An examination of the fire coverage, though, supports the thesis that Las Vegas is a convenient symbol for whatever negative forces are at work in our culture, but when something inescapably real and horrific happens there, the symbolism drops away and we are left with the human impact of the event. It is only in fiction that we are allowed to exult in the wide-scale destruction of Las Vegas.

**Labor Issues**

Another Las Vegas event which figured prominently in the media was the strike of over 17,000 culinary workers, bartenders, stagehands, and musicians in the spring of 1984. The strike was characterized by violence; in one incident, a striking waiter was crushed underneath the wheels of a car.
driven by a temporary security guard at Caesars Palace. *Time* reported that the man "was hospitalized with a broken pelvis and collarbone and is listed in stable condition" ("Violence in Vegas" 25). The driver, who apparently did not realize what was happening, was not charged; the following week, *Newsweek* reported on other violence, writing that the "worst clash came early in the strike at the Las Vegas Hilton, where pickets fought with private security guards" and 26 strikers were arrested and charged with inciting to riot (Nicholson 54). The issues under question in the strike included a proposal by the hotels to eliminate the 40-hour week currently guaranteed to workers, and demands by the unions for increased wages and fringe benefits. The same *Newsweek* article illustrated how far the hotels were willing to go to maintain normal operations during the strike when it described the MGM Grand's president's secretary serving a lobster dinner to tourists in the restaurant. *Business Week* emphasized the effect of the strike on the local economy, as it "reduced business at the biggest hotels by up to 70% ("Labor Looks Like a Winner in Las Vegas" 33), and pointed to a possible settlement with the Hilton. As this was the first strike of its magnitude in Las Vegas, both the economic effect and the violence that it spawned garnered major media attention; it seemed as if the early 1980s packed a one-two punch for Las Vegas as the fires and the strikes produced some major urban problems heretofore unseen.
Mobsters

Of course, that old story of Mob-run casinos in Las Vegas continued to make itself known in the 1980s, which saw the downfall of most of the Mobsters who had been around since the city’s inception. A 1980 Forbes article reported that “The Mob hasn’t really gone away. The old owners have become invisible, fading like the Cheshire Cat into a smile. But of course when even that disappeared, the cat was still there, invisible, waiting to reappear” (Cook and Carmichael 89). The article presents the stories of alleged Mob frontman Allen Glick at the Stardust, Kansas City Mobster Nick Civella, who “called the shots at the Tropicana” (90), and the Mob’s attempt to find a suitable frontman for the Aladdin. The article follows the basic Green Felt Jungle approach, looking for hidden Mob interests in Las Vegas casinos. It finds them in most cases, and reports that “Obfuscation is so basic to the Las Vegas approach that it’s difficult to determine who owns what under any circumstances” (91). The conclusion is ominous, as we are told that “casino gambling embodies the latest phase in the evolution of organized crime: Convert an illegitimate business into a legitimate one, and exchange the risks of an illegal class market for the rewards of a legal mass one. Pornography yesterday, casino gambling today, marijuana tomorrow” (104). Thus, casinos are included with other immoral enterprises which are run by criminals, and the not-so-subtle implication is that organized crime will soon control the economy to the point at which it will be impossible to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate businesses.
This dire prediction seemed to be negated in the mid-1980s by a series of sensational arrests of figures such as the above mentioned ones, in addition to Tony Spilotro and other figures from Milwaukee and Kansas City. These crackdowns were reported on with less enthusiasm than were the allegations of Mob control; in October 1983, *Time* opened its report on the arrests of Spilotro and others by adopting a blasé tone:

> So the Mob control several Las Vegas casinos. So the gangsters bought the gambling palaces with huge loans from Teamster pension funds, using front men to disguise the Mafia connection. So the crooks reaped vast untaxed profits by skimming millions in cash off the top of the gambling take. So? Hasn’t all that been widely known for at least 20 years? It has. But proving it is something else. (“Shaking the Mob’s Grip” 31)

Likewise, *Newsweek* reported the same week that, although the arrests caused a big stir in the Midwest, “they caused little stir in Las Vegas. Local boosters pointed out that Vegas has gone corporate; entertainment companies like MGM and Hilton now own most of the pleasure domes along the famous Vegas Strip, a section that got its start with Mob money” (Press and Reese 93). For a subject such as Mob infiltration of Las Vegas, which had been luridly described in the popular press for nearly four decades, the description of the end of the Mob era in Las Vegas in the mid-1980s seems unusually muted. Perhaps, as with most other aspects of Las Vegas, allegations and accusations are more compelling than facts; whatever the case, most major media outlets reported the news with equanimity.

Business: Personalities and Market Strategies

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If the Mob’s influence was waning, both in historical reality and in media coverage, the 1980s produced an explosion of interest in the new ways in which Las Vegas was seizing money and power. One of the defining characteristics of the 1980s was a tendency to make icons out of successful businessmen, and the popular press made no exception in Las Vegas. Steve Wynn, the personality behind the Mirage and the revitalized Golden Nugget, began to attract attention in this era, as a 1989 *Business Week* profile demonstrates. As in all classic heroic biographies the hero needs an obstacle to overcome, and this article reports that “Dabbling in [Las Vegas] real estate made him wealthy, but at age 29 he received a crushing blow: He was diagnosed as having retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease” (Grover, “Tigers” 71). “Chutzpah,” however, is “one commodity Wynn doesn’t lack,” and his financial acumen is duly praised in the remainder of the article. In this way, not only is Wynn’s business sense praised, but also his personal heroism and his persistence. Likewise, a 1987 *Business Week* article speaks admiringly of Donald Trump (owner of two Atlantic City casinos) and Martin Sosnoff (maker of a $725 million bid for Caesars World, Inc.) as examples of how “the strong are getting stronger as the weak disappear” (Baum 36).

These men are also profiled in a lengthy *Newsweek* article in 1988 which asserts that “Trump and Wynn can’t stand each other” (Powell and McKillop 46). Like the 1960s rivalry of Howard Hughes and Kirk Kerkorian, this 1980s version plays upon the public’s fascination with the machinations of the very rich. Indeed, the two men are living symbols of the new corporate
Las Vegas: “Trump and Wynn, both extremely competitive businessmen with degrees from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, personify the new ethos of gambling. Only their war of words evokes an earlier age when raconteurs, not conservative number crunchers, financed and ran casinos” (47). Two of these throwbacks, Benny Binion and Bob Stupak, are briefly mentioned, but the clear heroes of this piece are Wynn and Trump. The article concludes on an almost-satirical note when a retired couple is described as driving their RV to Las Vegas and saying, “I can’t find a better place to eat” (48); this is the demographic to which Trump and Wynn are appealing. Middle-class gamblers with no sense of taste or history (the couple “doesn’t give a damn about Bugsy Siegel”) are the ones fueling the gambling boom which makes men like Trump and Wynn multimillionaires.

This marketing strategy is described in a 1989 Business Week article, “Circus Circus Rakes in the Bread Bread,” in which the success of “the K mart of casinos” is detailed. Circus Circus Enterprises “has become the industry’s fastest-growing company by luring the blue-jean and recreational-vehicle crowd,” and is now building, at comparatively low cost, “the city’s largest hotel and casino complex” (Grover 80), the Excalibur. Chairman William Bennett is described as “an aggressive cost-cutter who won’t give gamblers credit and once ordered executives to turn in their company cars when insurance rates went up” (82), thus seemingly in tune with middle-class (and middle-brow) America. Likewise, the Showboat is praised in a 1983 Forbes article, for operating “well down-market from its competitors” (Curtis 40). In the midst of a recession, the off-Strip and out-of-downtown Showboat is
“booming when its rivals are busting,” due in large part to “the country’s biggest around-the-clock bingo parlor,” its “cash-only policy, not the Strip’s easy credit for high rollers,” and the fact that it “sells more beer than any establishment in Nevada” (40). Also, a 106-lane bowling complex attracts locals and such organizations as the 70,000-member Women’s International Bowling Congress, and the preponderance of slot machines rather than table games attracts a loyal, low-rolling crowd as well. The Showboat would also become the first major hotel venue for the “sport” of professional wrestling, further proof of the management’s canny sense of the hotel’s market segment. Even skimming is not a problem, “since it would mean dragging huge bags of quarters out back. ‘It’s clean’ [says one analyst], because the revenues are too heavy to steal’” (41). The Showboat, then, is a sort of prototype of the marketing strategies pursued by many of the casinos today, and as far back as 1983 was showing great profits because of this. In fact, if one were to point to one article which signals the change from Old to New Vegas, this would be it.

Las Vegas Personalities

As we have seen, there is often a tendency on the part of commentators to identify a personality which is seen as unique to, or representative of, Las Vegas; Howard Hughes, Kirk Kerkorian, Elvis Presley, and Steve Wynn have all been profiled in this manner. In the 1980s, Wayne Newton began to be enshrined as the embodiment of Vegas style. One reason for this was his increasing visibility as a businessman as well as an entertainer; at one time he
became owner of the Aladdin, and a 1980 *Newsweek* article, "Newton's Law in Las Vegas," details his "mini-empire that includes extensive real-estate holdings, car-rental agencies and a farm for breeding Arabian horses" (Friendly and Kasindorf 71). But for a more complete explication of just what it is that makes Newton "Mr. Las Vegas," a 1982 *Esquire* profile provides a fascinating example of both Newton's mystique and of how seemingly irresistible it is to make a Las Vegas personality into an icon. The article, by Ron Rosenbaum, is entitled "Do You Know Vegas?" The question is answered early on when Rosenbaum asserts that "It's something anyone who knows Las Vegas knows by now...Wayne Newton is not a Wayne Newton joke anymore" (62). Rosenbaum explains Newton's power in Las Vegas business and politics, much like the *Newsweek* article does, but the article gets much more interesting when he examines Newton's public image and how it has transformed from that of a "chubby, pubescent kid with [a] pre-pubescent baby-fat soprano voice" to that of an "impeccably macho" man with a "husky, laid-back, low-key, good-ol'-boy, southern-frat-rat, beer-brawl drawl" (62, 64). Rosenbaum meticulously examines Newton's stage show, which he claims to have seen over a dozen times in preparation for his article, and he concludes that "at the heart of Wayne's mesmeric mastery over his audience is the notion of Suspending the Rules and his invocation of the Summit Meeting myth" (66). What this means is that Newton, by constantly assuring each audience that he is inspired by them to do a Very Special Number and that he could go on all night, is playing to the audience's sense that "they've been present at one of those rare moments when the rules went by the board;
how Wayne drove himself past his own limits, knocking himself out just for them." Yet, Rosenbaum observes, "each of the twelve shows I saw started and ended at the exact same time on the dot" (68), thus pointing to Newton's shrewd sense of how to give the audience what they think they want. As far as Newton's being an exclusively Vegas icon, Rosenbaum explains that his upcoming national tour is "part of a grand strategy he has devised to transcend what he sees as a misperception of Wayne Newton as a creature of Vegasness, whose success is an aberration peculiar to the Nevada desert" (71).

Finally, Rosenbaum reaches a point made by several other commentators when he points out that Las Vegas is more like Middle America than it may appear; he writes that "the world has come round to Wayne. The growing popularity of 'Vegas soul,' his kind of music... is serving to make what Wayne does musically seem less a deviation than the mainstream... Vegas is not the tough gangster town, not the sin city, the seductive illusion used to lure conventioneers. It's syrup city, soppy city, woozy, sentimental city" (73).

In this way, Newton and his style are taken to represent the true spirit of Las Vegas, in a way strikingly similar to profiles that we have seen of Hughes, Presley, and Wynn.

Another Las Vegas personality, Hank Greenspun, was the subject of a prominent article in the June 1982 Harper's magazine. Joseph Dalton's "The Legend of Hank Greenspun" describes the editor and publisher of the Las Vegas Sun as "a footnote to history, but he is a footnote to an astonishing number and variety of chapters" (32). His experience working with Bugsy Siegel as a publicity man for the Flamingo, his running of guns to Israel in
the early days of that nation, and his bold stand against Joseph McCarthy are some of the notable events described in the article. In the conclusion, Greenspun, like Wayne Newton, is taken as a living embodiment of his surroundings, although an older frame of reference is used: Dalton asserts that "his style is ideally suited to Nevada, which remains the way Mark Twain described it in *Roughing It* (1872): a place where 'the lawyer, the editor, the banker, the chief desperado, the chief gambler, and the saloon keeper occupied the same level of society, and it was the highest'" (43). The straight-shooting Hank Greenspun is thus placed in the proper historical and cultural perspective, as his Old-West-Style independence is praised.

**General Description and Commentary**

As always, writers in the 1980s gave full rein to their musings on the significance of Las Vegas. Although the kind of subjective, in-depth approach taken by Hunter Thompson, John Gregory Dunne, and Mario Puzo was not as evident in this decade, still there were a few notable attempts to explicate the city. One of the best, if also one of the most depressing, examples of this is found in Michael Rogers' 1980 article, "The Electronic Gambler," which appeared in *Rocky Mountain Magazine*. After a lengthy but interesting discussion of how new technology is helping the casinos to weed out cheaters, Rogers turns to the city itself, writing that

"About two o'clock one morning, walking down the Strip, I abruptly had the feeling that I could see through the skin of the town... And what I saw within was a skeleton of microprocessors... Comptrollers and executives and engineers and technicians appeared as solid-fleshed, sober,
gray entities, surrounded by flitting, transparent gamblers and showgirls, tourists and dealers. And these colorful, ephemeral creatures were caught in a powerful whirling updraft around the gray eminences, whose origin was altogether beyond their understanding, and which they assumed to be some natural force. (30)

Seldom outside of fiction is found such an evocative description of the metaphysics of Las Vegas. Rogers concludes that “Machine begets machine. And on every level the romance of Las Vegas seems destined to become increasingly preprogrammed—with demographic cogs playing microprocessor-based games under the control of central computers overseen by technological eyes that usually don’t even bother to watch” (30). Such a bleak, soulless view of Las Vegas in the modern age indicates the lengths to which commentators will go to transform the city into a symbol; here, the technology used by the casinos is transferred to the humans in the casino, the result being that Las Vegas produces dehumanized people while relentlessly increasing its monetary profit.

A similar point is made by the comedian Jackie Mason in a short 1988 Rolling Stone article, “Hail, Caesars!” Actually more an extended caption for photographs of casino workers and tourists, the article refers to the bottom-line-oriented management of the city when Mason writes that

Today big corporations own all the hotels, and it’s more impersonal. But the corporations are not totally stupid. They figured out that from 50 millionaires you can make a certain amount of money but from 300,000 paupers you can make ten times more. So they made the town less exclusive, and cheaper. They took out ads in Iowa, and now business is booming. (87)
Mason’s feelings about the new Vegas clientele are typically caustic: “Most of the people who go to Vegas today are twenty-five-cent-slot-machine players from Nebraska and Utah. . . . They’ve got a polyester shirt, a ripped jacket, and they’re 750 pounds overweight” (83-84). Thus, Mason, like Rogers, sees a certain dehumanization at work in Vegas, but expresses it by describing the vulgarity it produces rather than the emotional or intellectual aridity.

Book-Length Treatments

Of the books published about Las Vegas in the 1980s, three stand out among the rest: one is a history, one is a memoir, and one is a pictorial. The history is Eugene P. Moehring’s Resort City in the Sunbelt, an excellent account of the city from its beginnings through 1970, with an epilogue covering the 1970s and 1980s, and the primary historical source for this work. Moehring, a UNLV history professor, meticulously outlines the story of Las Vegas, from the glamour of the casinos to the grit of sewage-treatment facilities. Contrary to many discussions of Las Vegas, which treat the city as an anomaly, Moehring places it in the context of other sunbelt cities which exhibit similar trends:

Reclamation projects, New Deal programs, defense spending, air conditioning, interstate highways, jet travel, right-to-work laws, low taxes—all of the factors that promoted Atlanta, Houston, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and other sunbelt cities, helped Las Vegas, too. (13)

Of course, the unique contribution of gambling is examined in detail, but Moehring is also careful to show how the growth of Las Vegas is parallel in many ways to other sunbelt cities when it comes to issues such as city
services, infrastructure, civil rights, and the "movement outward from the
city to low-density automobile suburbs scattered around the valley" (109), all
of which are crucial to understanding Las Vegas as a city rather than as a
playground.

The memoir is Susan Berman's *Easy Street*, an account of her
childhood in 1940s and 1950s Las Vegas. Berman's father was Davie Berman,
a Mob figure who was intimately involved with the city's growth during
these crucial years by running the Flamingo and the Riviera. Rather than
being a sensationalized account of Mob activity, Berman's book is quite
touching in places as she reminisces about such things as watching the
dancers rehearse their floor shows, dressing up in their costumes, ordering
room service and charging it to her father, and riding on floats in the
Helldorado parades. Her father, who died when she was twelve, was a loving
figure who gave his daughter all of the advantages that came with running a
major hotel, as Berman writes:

> On my twelfth birthday, my father gave me a party at the
> Riviera Hotel. He had invited ten of my girlfriends from
> owners' families and Liberace sang "Happy Birthday." My
> father had a special cake made up, all chocolate, and bought
> out the hotel gift shop for me. He sat in a booth behind our
> table to watch the whole extravaganza with pride. One
> month later he was dead. (53)

Berman, who went on to become a journalist, is able to give her and her
father's story several levels of significance: first, there is the memoir of family
life; second, there is the singular experience of being in a Mob family; and
third, the atmosphere of 1950s Las Vegas is evoked with skill and sensitivity.
However, Berman avoids sentimentality as well when she returns to the city
after 23 years and concludes that “Las Vegas was only them [her parents] and without them it is nothing” (204). Like Moehring’s history, this is a refreshing view of the city as a place where authentic lives are lived, rather than as some fantastical mirage in the desert.

The pictorial, however, is as breathtakingly glittering as the history and the memoir are down-to-earth. Don Knepp’s 1987 Las Vegas: The Entertainment Capital is a fascinating history in photographs of big-name entertainment in Las Vegas. The book, published by Sunset magazine, includes hundreds of pictures, from the Andrews Sisters to Pia Zadora, and as such it is a 40-year scrapbook of American popular culture. Included are rarely-seen photos such as a shot of the Beatles’ 1964 performance at the Las Vegas Convention Center (with Pat Boone in the front row), and of a very young Clint Eastwood participating in the “third annual Fast Draw National Championship sponsored by the Sahara in November, 1961” (174). Important historical events are chronicled as well, such as the burning of El Rancho Vegas in 1960 and a darkened casino on November 25, 1963, the date of John F. Kennedy’s burial. This book is a must-see for anyone interested in Las Vegas or in entertainment history.

Fiction

The 1980s saw an interesting development in Las Vegas fiction. The romance novel, a genre generally dismissed by all but its own devoted readers, embraced Las Vegas as a key setting and symbol for many of its stories. Whether this is simply a result of the ever-increasing importance of
the city to American popular culture, or whether it reflects a growing recognition by romance writers and readers of the symbolic possibilities which had been exploited by writers in other genres, the fact is that in the 1980s romance writers provided some of the best and most intriguing uses of Las Vegas in fiction. The physical layout of the city is used to good effect in Betty Henrich’s 1987 Candlelight Ecstasy novel, *Casanova’s Downfall*. Here, the flashy gambler Gareth Stone pursues the no-nonsense single mother Georgiana Woodruff, a woman who expresses nothing but distaste for the hollow glamour of Las Vegas. As Stone and Las Vegas both symbolize Georgiana’s antithesis, her growing affection for him in spite of his flash is reflected in a helicopter ride which depicts a corresponding appreciation for the city’s desert scenery:

She’d never seen Las Vegas from above, and it was a lovely sight. Rolling green golf courses and flowering oleanders contrasted with the stark barren beauty of the surrounding mountains. Swaying palm trees guarded thousands of backyard swimming pools, which from the air looked like strings of aquamarines. Even the Strip softened, with the flashing lights of Caesars Palace and the Dunes looking more like piles of glittering diamonds than simply garish invitations to a bacchanal. (91)

One striking thing about this passage is its mixture of natural and man-made objects of beauty, showing how Georgiana is becoming more receptive to both the city and Stone. Of course, Stone must make the extra effort, helping out when her son is involved in a car accident and donating his gambling winnings to the burn unit at the hospital where she volunteers.

Another exploration of what lies beneath Las Vegas’ glitter is Stephanie James’ 1984 Silhouette Desire novel, *Gambler’s Woman*. Here, mathematics
and probability expert Alyssa Chandler takes periodic trips to Las Vegas to use her knowledge and win some money. On one of these visits, she meets professional gambler Jordan Kyle, and what attracts Alyssa to Kyle is his appreciation of her talents in a generally chauvinistic world: in Las Vegas, “The attitude toward women... was as traditional and conservative as that of mythical small-town America. Women fit either into the category of showgirl-hustler or wife-mother” (71). Kyle, though, “had admired her ability... Together they were like a pair of mathematical magicians sharing secrets no one else knew” (71). This shared excitement is in contrast to Alyssa’s unfulfilling life in Las Angeles, where she works among colleagues who turn out to be blackmailers and backbiters; ironically, Las Vegas is seen as an escape from this kind of intrigue, being a place that is “purely mathematical” and therefore “cleaner.” The conflict here involves Alyssa’s recognition that the “fantasy world” of Las Vegas is actually more authentic for her than her safe world in California (115).

The concept of Las Vegas as an exotic getaway from normal life is nothing new, of course; the above-mentioned novels simply put a unique spin on it. More in keeping with the traditional view of Las Vegas is Annette Broadrick’s 1988 Silhouette Romance With All My Heart, in which beautiful but reserved Emily Hartman from Little Rock wins a radio station promotion to fly to Las Vegas for a date with pop singer Jeremy Jones. Emily arrives in town with “an image of noise and confusion, flashy, good-looking show girls, and men with money to throw around. How could she possibly fit into that scenario?” (25) The story follows the basic Cinderella-in-Vegas pattern, as
eventually Emily feels that “the ambiance of Las Vegas was beginning to affect her,” and she begins to “gain a new sense of freedom since arriving in Las Vegas, a feeling she’d never experienced quite so strongly before” (41). When she gets a makeover for the first date, she reflects that “she would never consider dressing like this in real life, but here in Las Vegas, the clothes were part of the fantasy” (49). The specific references to Las Vegas in these quotations indicates how important the city is in establishing Emily’s sense of adventure, which leads to the obvious conclusion of Emily being romantically swept away by her Prince Charming.

One of the strangest setups for a Las Vegas romance, but one which still uses the same motif of the city as a symbol for, and embodiment of, exoticism, is found in Joan Elliott Pickart’s 1985 All the Tomorrows. This novel begins with Dr. Sheridan Todd, a psychologist who fills in for her friend Janet one night by sitting and swinging on the trapeze at the Big Top casino. The author explains away this bizarre decision by having the good doctor be drunk when she agrees to this arrangement. A bolt breaks on the seat of the trapeze, leaving Dr. Todd hanging onto the rope high above the floor (no net, of course), and she jumps into the arms of a handsome stranger, thus beginning their romance. What follows is nothing special, but this novel deserves an honorable mention for taking the setting about as far as it can go.

All of these romances depict Las Vegas as a kind of wonderland in which romance can blossom, but a 1983 Candlelight Romance by Emily Elliott, Midnight Memories, is more in keeping with some of the bleaker views of the city that we have seen. Here, Cassandra Howard, a blackjack
dealer at the Tropical Paradise, enjoys the opportunities available to her in a big city, but in Las Vegas she feels a kind of existential emptiness. At one point, she thinks to herself about the void that she feels: "The life-style and pace are wearing thin. . . . You're as worn out as a glitter-gulch poker chip. You don't want to admit that you're tired of all the fun and the empty pleasure, that last night was the first date you've had in months because you're tired of the men around here" (38). The commodification of women is also an important element of Cassandra's story; her friend overdoses on drugs that she takes to get her through life as a prostitute, which causes Cassandra to decide to leave Las Vegas because of "the kind of garbage that this place does to people" (97). She is able to do this when she meets a handsome Texas rancher, who will take her away from Las Vegas, but will buy a ranch within reach of a big city to satisfy Cassandra's need for controlled excitement. Thus, it seems to be Las Vegas itself which induces despair, as Cassandra's growing need to get out indicates.

An even stronger expression of the soul-killing aspect of Las Vegas is found in Amanda York's 1985 Silhouette Romance, Stardust and Sand. In this novel, the heroine is Ginny, a cocktail waitress in a casino who finds love with a handsome stranger. Ginny is sick of Las Vegas, too:

Ginny hated slot machines almost as much as she hated serving drinks to glazed-eyed men and hyperactive women, their brittle facades transparent as the plastic on the decks of blackjack cards. . . . In the early hours of the morning, the people and paraphernalia became interchangeable, the gamblers turning into automated robots, while the machines acquired a deadly intelligence of their own. (11)
We have seen this kind of symbolic dehumanization of gamblers in other works, but in the romance genre this is about as bleak as it gets. That this passage occurs in the opening pages of the novel is even more indicative of the strength of its anti-Vegas sentiment. The book provides an interesting conclusion to this study of the sub-genre of Las Vegas romance novels, a group of works notable for its surprising diversity of viewpoints.

Returning to more familiar ground, the detective novel, one of the best published in the 1980s is Karen Kijewski's *Katwalk*. In one of the first portrayals of a woman detective in Las Vegas fiction, private eye Kat Colorado goes to Las Vegas to track down the estranged husband of a friend. This is a nice reversal of the usual detective setup, which would involve a male gumshoe seeking out a female who has gotten away from her man. Kijewski, though, is no femme when it comes to hardboiled prose; most of the women in this novel are described by Colorado in extremely unflattering terms, such as a couple of waitresses who were “cast perfectly—middle-aged, unsmiling and hard” (103), and a gum-chewing, pimply courthouse clerk who “was a size seven on top and a thirty-eight below, a teacup riding on a tanker” (13). Las Vegas itself also comes under the caustic gaze of Colorado, who sees the beautiful nighttime spectacle transformed by day into “another story and the harsh sunlight is pitiless and uncaring. The promise is as squalid and tawdry then as a twelve-dollar whore. . . . Going to Vegas always makes me want to go home again” (12). The book ends, however, with a bit of cross-cultural sisterhood, as Colorado enlists the help of Carmelita, a Mexican housekeeper, to help overpower the sinister rich villain Blackford. In a clear evocation of
the naming of slaves, Blackford calls Carmelita “Phoebe,” but she asserts her identity when she rebukes him: “‘My name is Carmelita. I am Mexican. I am not stupid and dirty’” (222). This speech, delivered as she is kicking him in the face and the gut, packs some emotional power into the story, and completes the novel’s overall theme of powerful, no-nonsense women taking charge of things in the degrading world of Las Vegas.

This world can be as psychically damaging to men as it is to women; a good evocation of this can be found in William Goldman’s 1985 novel Heat. While this is mainly a graphically violent crime novel featuring a murderous “Mex,” several passages stand out in describing the feelings of Nick Escalante, a private eye who is trying to save money to escape to Hawaii. First, Nick’s opinions of, and his weariness with, Las Vegas are referred to indirectly: “The way W.C. Fields felt about Philadelphia was legendary, but Philly was Valhalla when compared to Nick Escalante’s thoughts about Las Vegas, a city in which he was about to open his eyes for the five thousandth time” (47). Then, when things get too much for Nick to handle,

There was but a single place that provided salvation. . . . in the most symbolically perfect building ever conceived of by the mind of man [the Liberace Museum]. . . . God, the abundance of it all. . . . Where else in the world can you buy. . . . three bars of Liberace sandalwood-scented soap in the shape of a piano for just fifteen dollars? Was there a better bargain in any bazaar in Asia? Not just soap. Not just scented soap. But soap shaped like a fucking piano. Empires fell for less. (163-64)

Here, the absurdity of not only Las Vegas, but of all of its mindless celebration of consumerism, is skillfully outlined; unfortunately, the rest of the novel does not sustain this level of critical insight.
A novel which does maintain a fairly consistent view of Las Vegas, though, is Morton Beckner's 1980 *Money Plays*. In this novel, Beckner describes the adventures of Roxy, a woman with ESP who goes to casinos in Europe and Las Vegas with a team of professors and scientists. The plot itself is not too remarkable, but Beckner is good at evoking the mood of a casino, perhaps because he is a philosophy professor as well as a creative writer:

> The casino was an area of brightness floating in nothingness. . . . that was half of its appeal. But it was a shadowed brightness, a transparency marked from within like a flawed crystal. The areas inside the pits were subtly charged with the taboo children feel at the doors of authority, or the religious feel in the sanctuaries of the gods. (104)

Beckner also anticipates the Luxor by a decade when he describes the Pyramid Club as having a “replica of the sphinx of Cheops reflecting the play of moving colored spotlights” (224); his facility with description is well-suited to such a multifaceted setting as Las Vegas.

Another description of the Las Vegas cityscape which transforms the setting into a symbol is found in Paul Bishop's 1987 novel *Citadel Run*, in which some on-the-edge Los Angeles policemen stage a race from L.A. to Las Vegas and back. While in Las Vegas, they happen upon a robbery, but the most important passage in this novel relating to Las Vegas is a description of the Citadel, a casino which is the landmark around which the race revolves. The participants must have their picture taken in front of the casino in order to prove that they made the complete run, and the casino’s exterior reflects both the macho attitudes of the cops as well as the over-the-top vulgarity of Las Vegas: “The Citadel glittered like a giant phallic symbol standing hard and
erect over its domain on the Strip. From its domed roof three single-beam spotlights spurted their golden streams into the night sky" (256). This description indicates the tone with which the city is depicted, as does an earlier view of Las Vegas looking like "a multicolored bug light in the middle of the desert" (241), suggesting that people flock to the city like mindless insects, only to be zapped into oblivion by its toxic intensity.

This oblivion is depicted in yet another apocalyptic Las Vegas novel, Larry Bonar's 1981 *Temples in the Sand*. The story here is that the bubonic plague hits the city, leaving it a wasteland. However, for once, in this novel the author does not overdo the usual Biblical metaphor, nor does he exult in the demise of the city, as do so many others of its type. Instead, Bonar focuses on the people who struggle to survive, coming together in spite of the terrible destruction wrought by the plague and by the numerous fires set by looters. Casino executives, gamblers, doctors, and others all try to cope with what has happened, as they see "The remains of the once proud, elegant temples of pleasures [which] lay smoldering in the scorched sand" (392). Las Vegas is actually depicted as a place of hope, however misplaced, rather than as a Gomorrah which deserves to be destroyed. For one character, "Las Vegas had represented an ironic paradox," for she and her husband had experienced an "emotional high" when they won a substantial amount of money to get their lives back on track. However, the next day "The emotional low of her life had followed... when she was informed that her husband had contracted bubonic plague" (356). Although this abrupt shift in tone may come off as
unintentionally comic, Bonar must be credited for avoiding the usual clichés of apocalyptic Las Vegas fiction.

Another genre which easily becomes clichéd is the children's book, but E.L. Konigsburg's Journey to an 800 Number is unique in being one of the only ones with an important Las Vegas connection. The theme of the book is about the differences between appearance and pretense, and Las Vegas is just one stop along the way of this journey. The narrator is a boy who travels around the country with his father and their performing camel, and the boy's observations of Las Vegas are notable for their mixture of innocence and sophistication. When describing the chips used for gambling, the boy concludes that "There is something unreal about everything in Vegas, but nothing seems more unreal than the money" (112). Showgirls, too, are slightly unreal, as they come in two colors: "rose ones and gray ones... their color has nothing to do with their behavior. It has to do with their color. The gray ones are hard" (117-18). The best passage, however, comes when the boy turns his attention to the city itself; we have seen dozens of examples of writers creatively describing the look of Las Vegas, but this children's book contains one of the most perceptive:

what [the Strip] is most like is a comic strip. One section follows another, and all are more or less the same things drawn differently. Everything has stronger outlines and brighter colors than what is real. And within the Strip there are no real conversations, just words in balloons. And the guys who use the Strip do not have to think, but the people who invent it do. (104-5)
This is a brilliant yet elementary metaphor to express both the physical layout and the psychological impact of the Strip, expressed in a child’s-eye-view yet encompassing some strongly insightful ideas.

A more adult version of the same kind of commentary can be found in David Kranes’ 1989 *Keno Runner*, in which the New York City writer Benjamin Kohlman goes to Las Vegas to meet Janice Stewart, who has been acquitted of a high-profile crime back East. Kohlman hopes to write her life story, and his experiences in Las Vegas are described in a surrealistic, hallucinatory manner, a kind of *Inferno* voyage through the bizarre city. Kohlman has encounters with prostitutes, begging amputees, a boxer, and even one of Sigfried and Roy’s white tigers, who runs out onto the Strip and is brought down with tranquilizer darts. An oppressive, claustrophobic tone is maintained throughout, as when Kohlman goes into the El Cortez and thinks that it “smelled like abuse, abuse crowded in on itself. The ventilation was too cold. The surfaces baffled none of the sound. There were noticeable numbers of Orientals and Hispanics” (31). The alienation which Kohlman feels is in part expressed by this mention of nonwhites, as if he is in another culture which he does not understand. In addition to this jarring displacement, the numbing homogeneity of the downtown casinos is also used to express Kohlman’s detachment: “places with ‘Silver’ and ‘Gold’ and ‘Lucky’ in their names: the Lucky Silver Gold. They all looked and smelled and sounded alike. It was like lower Broadway. In New York, such places would have wiry black men outside saying: ‘Check it out!’” (39) Thus,
Kohlman is the typical stranger in a strange land, and the cityscape as well as the people of Las Vegas both contribute to his sense of bewilderment.

The malaise prevalent in Las Vegas is also expressed in strong terms in Ron Abell's 1985 *Tap City*, which is the story of a poker tournament in Reno. One of the participants is tough cookie Shayna Levinson, who has come to Las Vegas by way of Seattle and Los Angeles. For Shayna, Las Vegas is a place where "such things as rain forests or log trucks were as unthinkably alien as a kind word or a decent act" (27). It gets worse, though:

Las Vegas was a city without heart or soul, a city with no reason for its existence but lust and avarice, a city where dreamers were losers and losers were swept out with the garbage. Shayna Levinson quit college in her sophomore year and moved to Vegas. It was predestined. She was a piranha; she could swim with the rest. (27-28)

This is an example of the city and the character complementing each other, for the predatory nature of Shayna (which helps her to succeed at poker) finds its home in Las Vegas, while Las Vegas nurtures that very quality in all who come by. Therefore, Shayna and Las Vegas exist in a kind of symbiosis, a reversal of the usual situation in which an innocent is corrupted by Las Vegas or, its converse, a slick hustler receives his comeuppance.

A character who comes to terms with life in Las Vegas in a different way is Harmony, the ex-showgirl heroine of Larry McMurtry's *The Desert Rose*. As Harmony deals with her aging body, the men in her life, and her daughter Pepper, she maintains a cheerful and forgiving attitude, characteristics which for the most part are notably absent in characters of her type. The compassion with which McMurtry portrays Harmony elevates her
above what could easily become a cliché, and even the depiction of Las Vegas is infused with genuine affection:

Harmony looked back at the Strip, eight miles away. It looked so miniature, like a wonderful toy place, with all the lights still on. . . . It was one of her favorite things, to turn onto her own road with the air smelling so good and be able to see the Strip, with the Trop up at one end and the Sahara at the other, and besides that have the sun coming up just as could complain? (15)

When Harmony goes to Reno at the end of the novel to rejoin the father of her child, it is also with a sense of resigned happiness, as she observes that “It had its share of lights—nothing to equal the Strip, but quite a few” (253). McMurtry here displays one of his greatest skills as a writer: to be able to turn a well-worn subject and setting into a work of warmth and good will, qualities all too often lacking in Las Vegas fiction.
CHAPTER SIX

1990-97
VEGAS AT THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM

As Las Vegas approaches the twenty-first century, the city's growth seems unstoppable. The early-to-mid 1990s saw the completion of such landmarks as the Excalibur, Luxor, Treasure Island, MGM Grand (the new one, on Tropicana and the Strip), Stratosphere, Hard Rock Hotel, and New York-New York. As of this writing, Steve Wynn's Bellagio is well under way on the site where the Dunes used to stand, the Sands and the Hacienda have both been imploded to make way for bigger and better properties, and the proliferation of casinos geared towards locals continues, with the 1997 opening of Sunset Station in Henderson the latest addition to this market. Perhaps the most startling change in the cityscape is the transformation of Fremont Street, or "Glitter Gulch," to a pedestrian mall with a huge canopy upon which an electronic light and sound show appears to the delight of the tourists and low-rollers assembled underneath. Even Vegas Vic, the neon cowboy which has stood for years as an icon of Las Vegas, is trapped under a roof now instead of waving at the surrounding desert night.

The entire city is under a perpetual state of construction, particularly in the northwest area, where a new freeway is being constructed and the old ones expanded in an attempt to cope with the explosive rise in commuter
traffic. Some five thousand people move to Las Vegas each month, which has resulted in massive traffic jams, increased air pollution, strained water resources, and other problems associated with urbanization so dense it would have seemed impossible thirty years ago. As the city spreads out to the foothills, many observers wonder whether Las Vegas will ever reach a limit to its growth. But, as we have seen, each time someone has pronounced an end to the boom, a new wave of economic expansion occurs.

Nonfiction

The Economy

Possibly the most-analyzed aspect of contemporary Las Vegas is its appeal to the family market. Despite the fact that virtually every casino executive who is interviewed about this trend denies that the casinos are targeting children as a market segment, it is undeniable that Las Vegas now looks more like Disneyland than ever before. A 1990 Newsweek article by Charles Leerhsen asks “Why would anyone do such a thing to a town that gave the world drive-thru wedding chapels, Wayne Newton, and a college basketball team that annually makes either the Final Four or the 10-most-wanted list?” The pragmatic answer follows: “Because it was time for Vegas to reinvent itself, and because it’s working” (82). Leerhsen points to the problems besetting Atlantic City as reasons why Las Vegas is reaching out to families: Donald Trump’s Taj Mahal is in financial trouble, and the Atlantis has already gone bankrupt. Atlantic City’s downslide is its failure to make
itself into a “total resort,” as right off the boardwalk major urban decay is all too apparent, but in Las Vegas “for those places that have been able to position themselves as part theme park and part gambling hall, business has never been better” (83). Interestingly, the only hotel mentioned in this article is the Mirage, with its dolphin habitat, shark tank, white tigers, and Sigfried and Roy show as evidence that Las Vegas is appealing to children. Treasure Island’s pirate show, MGM Grand’s theme park, and Luxor’s indoor mega-arcade were still in the future at this point, but Leerhsen is sharp in his observation of a burgeoning trend.

Three years later, Lisa Gubernick’s Forbes article, “The Pied Pipers of Las Vegas,” attributes the family-friendly atmosphere to a tighter market for Las Vegas: “Las Vegas has no choice these days but to go after the family trade” (235). Gubernick writes that the addition of over 11,000 new hotel rooms in 1993, coupled with the increased availability of casino gambling on Indian reservations and riverboats, has forced Las Vegas to appeal to families in order to hold on to its profit margins. The use of television as a marketing tool is seen as important, as Gubernick reports that the Las Vegas Convention Center & Visitors Authority has produced a commercial to be shown in California “featuring a couple of rambunctious kids splashing in a pool, and a family chowing down at a wholesome-looking buffet” (236). Gubernick also notes that Steve Wynn’s hour-long NBC-TV movie, “Treasure Island: The Adventure Begins,” features a 13-year-old as its star. The article concludes on a negative note, with several quotes from parents who declare that they would never bring their children to Las Vegas, and Gubernick ends with a
peek into Treasure Island's Mutiny Bay arcade, writing that the crowd "looked old enough to be hitting the crap tables—legally" (236). The skepticism of the reporter, though, has proved to be unfounded, as anyone who has spent five minutes dodging children on the Strip will attest to.

Gubernick's dim view of Las Vegas' latest marketing strategy fits into a negative pattern of reporting by Forbes in the early 1990s that rivals that of Time and Life in the 1950s and 1960s. The business magazine even editorializes against the city in its "Money & Investments" column on October 15, 1990. The author, Frederick E. Rowe Jr., advises against investing in casino stocks because of "serious supply and demand miscalculations on the part of various casino managements and from changing American mores" (233). The former assertion has been conclusively proved wrong by subsequent events, but it is the latter one that seems out of place in a column on investing. Rowe reports that when he watched "low rollers feverishly smoking, drinking and playing the slots at 8 a.m.," he was "struck by how miserably unhappy most of them looked," and he goes on to assert that the "economic and moral pendulums in this country are moving to the right. . . . Addictive lifestyles—drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, gambling—are no longer socially acceptable" (233). How this supposed trend accounts for a crowded casino at 8 a.m. is not explained, but based upon this observation, Rowe advises against buying stock in Circus Circus, Golden Nugget, Caesars World, Bally's, and MGM Grand, all of which subsequently boomed along with the rest of Las Vegas as did, probably, drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes as well. A month later, Forbes cast doubt upon the wisdom of Kirk Kerkorian's new
MGM Grand venture, contending that “chances are slim that Kerkorian will find a way to finance it” because “margins are eroding” and he would be “building for a public that had far higher expectations than it did when he opened the original MGM Grand” (King 98), implying that the plans for the world’s largest hotel are insufficient to attract the public’s interest. A year later, in its September 30, 1991 issue, Howard Rudnitsky writes that “Las Vegas is showing signs that it is becoming overbuilt” (“Who’s Got the Royal White Tigers?” 124). This prediction has been made so many times in the past that one wonders whether these writers have memories beyond the previous couple of years. Perhaps it is unfair to judge these articles with the benefit of hindsight, but it seems odd that Forbes so blatantly dropped the ball when it came to predicting the economic growth of Las Vegas.

Even Time, the city’s former media antagonist, was positive in a July 2, 1990 article entitled “When You’re Hot, You’re Hot,” detailing the city’s 12% rise in revenues in 1989 and its 16% increase in hotel rooms in 1990. The article even cites “many Wall Street analysts” who believe that “Las Vegas will easily absorb the new hotels” and it points to the large increase in gamblers from Asia as a sign of the city’s healthy economy (Greenwald 47). The strength of the city’s economy extends to its opportunities for retirees as well, according to a 1991 article in New Choices for the Best Years, “Retiring in Las Vegas.” This magazine, geared expressly towards present or future retirees, predicts that “by 1995 one out of every three county residents will be 55 or older,” and the article contains a number of quotes from retirees who enjoy inexpensive casino dinners and the favorable climate. One woman
enthuses that "Everyone's very helpful and friendly," and that the busy airport is a plus, since "I have family and friends in Minneapolis, Denver, Chicago and Los Angeles, and it's easy for me to get from here to see them" (Anthony 33). Thus, for positive news regarding Las Vegas' economic opportunities in the early 1990s, one had to look elsewhere than the respected mainstream business magazine Forbes.

Not all aspects of Las Vegas' economy in the 1990s were good, however. Labor issues continued to be contentious in some quarters. Business Week in 1992 reported on the bitter strike by the Culinary Workers Union against the Frontier, in an article by Ronald Grover entitled "No Honeymoon in Vegas." Grover writes that the Elardi family, which owns the hotel, "wasted little time in slashing their employees' wages and benefits" upon taking control in 1988: "A pension fund was abolished, health benefits cut, and workplace rules changed to make it more difficult to win seniority or even vacations," and "there's still no settlement in sight" (38). The article also details a bit of gamesmanship among the casino owners when it is reported that the rival Circus Circus provides free hot meals for the picketers in an attempt to show solidarity with them and with the "mostly blue-collar patrons" of Circus Circus.

A more detailed picture of the human impact of the Frontier strike is given in a 1996 New Yorker article by Sara Mosle, "How the Maids Fought Back." Mosle profiles Hattie Canty, the president of Culinary Workers Local 226, the first woman to hold this position and, at sixty-two, "an inspirational figure within the union" (150). Canty had very little work experience until
her husband died in 1975, leaving her to support eight children. Mosle emphasizes the beneficial role that the union played in Canty’s life when she writes that Canty’s story “might [then] have taken a predictable turn: at best, a series of menial minimum-wage jobs that would have put her further in debt; at worst, dependence on welfare” (151). Instead of this, though, Canty was able to get a good salary as a maid at the Maxim, as well as receiving health benefits and a pension as she worked her way to better positions. Mosle reports that Canty’s oldest daughter Rhonda now holds one of her mother’s former, well-paid positions, as an attendant in the Maxim’s uniform room. This information underlines the article’s main theme, that the union provides a measure of stability for its members akin to that provided by a family. The article gains power from its full-page photograph of Canty on the picket line outside the Frontier; the picture, taken by renowned photographer Annie Leibovitz, captures the dignity, solidarity, and determination of Canty and her fellow picketers as they hold their signs and chant their slogans.

Mosle’s article contrasts the benefits of unionization in Las Vegas with the threatening environment many non-unionized casino workers face in Laughlin, where the culinary union is embarking on an organizing drive at the Pioneer. The resistance to this on the part of management is illustrated best in a chilling anecdote of a female bartender active in the unionization drive being called by security as she was counting out her cash register drawer. The atmosphere of intimidation is captured as the bartender recalls that “'My back was to the camera, and I was thinking, O.K., be calm. Because I know he’s sitting in that surveillance booth, and he’s got that camera zeroed in on
me. Surveillance holds my job in its sweet little hands'" (155). The casino's power to monitor its employees in an Orwellian way is here expressed in the human terms of an honest cashier fearing for her job even though she has done nothing wrong. Thus, Mosle's article effectively conveys the way that unions have helped the work force of Las Vegas, while also showing how the lack of a union can result in abuses by casino managements who seek total control over their workers. As such, the article is the best discussion to be found in the mass media of the issues of Las Vegas unions and the Frontier strike, giving both solid historical background and vivid personal stories.

Racial and Environmental Problems

The Frontier strike was not the only problem confronting Las Vegas in the 1990s. Racial issues in Las Vegas came to the forefront in the aftermath of the 1992 riots following the infamous Rodney King verdicts. The tensions which led up to the disturbances in Las Vegas are traced in an excellent article by Mike Davis in The Nation, "Racial Cauldron in Las Vegas." Davis notes that "Although token integration is the rule, the majority of blacks are locked out of Las Vegas's boom economy" (9), as black employment in higher-paying hotel and construction jobs lags far behind that of whites. The social climate is no better, writes Davis, quoting the head of the Nevada A.C.L.U. as saying that "Police abuse here is worse than anywhere in the contemporary urban South" (10). Several egregious examples of police violations of civil rights are set forth in the piece, such as a 1989 military-style invasion of a woman's home in search of drugs when none were to be found, and the 1990 killing by
police of a man when they broke into his apartment without a warrant and surprised him in his sleep. Davis reports that the killing was ruled "justifiable," and that this was "the forty-forth time in a row since 1976 that the police had been exonerated in the death of a suspect" (10). All of this is presented as background to the 1992 riots, in which angry crowds "burned down a nearby office of the Pardon and Parole Board, while other groups attacked stores and gas stations with Molotov cocktails" (8). The perspectives of the police and of participants in the disturbances differ considerably, as Davis contrasts the official story (that the rioters were threatening to burn Glitter Gulch) with that of a black man who contends that the groups were only trying to "demonstrate against the Rodney King verdict and apartheid right here in Las Vegas" (8). Davis presents a compelling case that the police overreacted when he reports that he was unable to confirm the police version of stories such as snipers using human shields, "which the city's two daily papers disseminated uncritically to a horrified white public" (8). His article stands as one of the few testaments to the 1992 Las Vegas riots, which remain unknown to the vast majority of the American public.

Mike Davis also examines another major problem for Las Vegas in a 1995 Sierra article, "House of Cards." Here, the issue of water use comes under close and often caustic discussion, with Davis declaring that present trends demonstrate "the fanatical persistence of an environmentally and socially bankrupt system of human settlement" (38). Davis begins by taking the long view, pointing out that it has been nearly a century since Frederick Jackson Turner's address on the closing of the American frontier, in which he
questioned the survival of frontier democracy in the coming age of giant cities and monopoly capital. . . . Steve Wynn has the depressing answer: Las Vegas is the terminus of western history, the end of the trail" (37). Calling Las Vegas a "strange amalgam of boomtown, world's fair, and highway robbery" (37), Davis gives a detailed analysis of why the city is an environmental nightmare. He rails against the huge per capita consumption of water, the refusal of most citizens to carpool or use mass transit, and the great popularity of pollution-causing and desert-habitat-destroying motorized recreational vehicles such as dirt bikes, dune buggies, and jet-skis. However, Davis saves the most scorn for what he calls a "political geography designed to separate tax resources from regional needs," as the huge county electoral district takes power away from minorities and working-class voters, while unincorporation of much of the land "centralizes land-use power in the hands of an invisible government of gaming corporations and giant residential and commercial-strip developers" (39). Davis thus shows how social and economic inequities can lead to environmental crises, with Las Vegas as the perfect test case. He concludes by acknowledging the "extraordinary challenge" which confronts those who may try to change the situation, but contends that "this may be the last generation even given the opportunity to try" (76).

Another environmentally-oriented magazine, Audobon, turned its attention to Las Vegas' water-related problems in its July/August 1992 issue. Frank Graham Jr.'s article, "Gambling on Water," is accompanied by a series of photographs showing the contrast between the natural, parched landscape
outside the city and the water-intensive culture within it. Huge fountains on
the Strip, lush green lawns outside houses, and developments such as The
Lakes are pictured in ironic juxtaposition to dry lakebeds and desert flora, and
the article likewise chronicles how "Signs of environmental degradation are
everywhere around Las Vegas" (66). Graham's article differs from Davis' in
that he does not trace the problem to endemic social, political, or economic
structures, but rather to the "human weakness" of "local politicians and
boosters" who are too short-sighted to realize the effects of their actions on
this ecosystem (66). One anecdote, almost frightening in its revelation of the
ignorance of developers, recounts how some of them have forced residents to
replace low-impact desert landscaping with grass lawns and other wasteful
greenery (66). The final word is given to Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, who
condemns the city's plan to extract water from the vast underlying aquifer in
central Nevada as "'the most environmentally destructive project in the
history of the West'" (69).

Even the non-environmental media recognized the problems relating
to Las Vegas' water policies; *Time*, *Forbes*, and the *New Yorker* all ran articles
in the early 1990s calling attention to the issue. Jeanne McDowell, in *Time*'s
April 15, 1991 issue, calls Clark County's proposal to tap the aquifer "one of
the biggest attempted water grabs in Western history," citing experts who
contend that "excessive pumping will dry up springs and wetlands,
threatening numerous endangered species, plants and wildlife from
southeastern California to Utah" (37). Likewise, in "Water War" the *New
Yorker*'s John McPhee contends that "Mountain sheep, antelope, deer,
coyotes, eagles, badgers, bobcats will forever disappear as permanent springs
go permanently dry” (120). McPhee points to the situation’s similarities with
Los Angeles’ removal of water from the now-arid Owens Valley, and he
vividly illustrates what is at stake when he writes that what the county has
applied for is “the equivalent of a one-acre pond eight hundred and sixty
thousand feet deep” (120). Yet another angle on the issue is explored by Leslie
Spencer of Forbes, who criticizes the Las Vegas Valley Water District in her
Spencer describes four proposed projects, some of which “have a Soviet
industrial cast”: first, the aquifer plan; second, a scheme to desalinate the
Virgin River; third, a similar plan to desalinate ocean water; and fourth, and
most outlandish, “a rainmaking technology called ‘cloud seeding’” (68-70).
Spencer contends that none of these plans is as good as using market forces to
control water use. Privatizing water rights (giving them to the users rather
than to the Bureau of Reclamation) will result in “an economic value that
can best be determined by willing buyers and sellers. . . . That way local people
could vote with their pocketbooks on whether water should be used to grow
cabbages or fairways, and what local gardens should look like” (74). While
environmentalists would probably take issue with this proposal, as it seems
to give the power over water rights to the wealthiest entities (casinos and
developers, who have a dismal record of managing water), it is notable that
the problem has gained widespread attention in the mass media and that an
informed debate seems to be emerging. Any public discussion has to be an
improvement on the historical trend of developing with no consideration that the desert’s most precious resource may be in danger of running out.

Las Vegas Personalities

In the 1990s, the media examined personality-based issues as well as broad social, economic, and environmental ones. This decade saw a continuation of the media’s approach of looking for individual personalities who represent in some way the characteristics of Las Vegas. Steve Wynn continues to be the personality most closely associated with Las Vegas in the 1990s; he has become an icon surpassing every other casino executive in visibility and influence. A 1992 Business Week article by Ronald Grover entitled “Wynn’s World” proclaims him to be even more of a visionary than the mythical founding father of the city, Bugsy Siegel, who “once came to Las Vegas and got overextended in a hurry,” but “Wynn has shown time and again that he’s a lot smarter than that” (75). His remarkable success with the Mirage is detailed in Grover’s article, with the casino’s cash flow in its second year of operations being sufficiently large to “retire nearly a third of the company’s debt” (75). Wynn’s success in staging boxing matches at his properties is also noted, as his 1990 fight between Evander Holyfield and Buster Douglas is reported to have lost $2 million, but the take at the casino from high rollers attending the event made up for this loss several times over. “The Mirage,” writes Grover, “is a cash machine” (74), and Wynn is portrayed here as the embodiment of the new Las Vegas.
This characterization of Wynn is even more explicit in a 1993 *Time* article written by Priscilla Painton, "The Great Casino Salesman." She writes that "Wynn represents the new face of gambling in America... a hybrid of the old and new Las Vegas" (52, 54). This hybridization is shown as Wynn came to Las Vegas at a time when banks... relied for some of their deposits on the Mob-controlled Teamsters Central States Pension Fund. But Wynn was also one of the first Las Vegas entrepreneurs to turn to [Michael] Milken's junk bonds when it came time to build Atlantic City's Golden Nugget. He still refers to a casino as "the joint." But he was also the first in the business to decide to turn up the lights on the casino floor and the only one ever to write a ballet about the history of Las Vegas. (54)

The *Time* profile also refers to Wynn's hot temper and reports accusations by a disgruntled former Golden Nugget executive that Wynn regularly harassed female employees, ordered "executives to obtain the phone numbers of cocktail waitresses," and referred to "blacks, and employees in general, as 'niggers'" (54). As it might be expected, these charges are dismissed by Wynn as false, but he does admit to having a temper, saying "I'm a self-made brat. I'm like everybody else: I want to get away with it if I can. I've been indulged" (55). This is a telling quote, for it seems to validate the impression held by many that men like Wynn make their own rules, but it also shows that Wynn has the ability to laugh at himself, at least on the record. He thus emerges as both a regular guy and an exceptional financial genius, a mixture guaranteed to make him appealing to the American public. The article concludes with a brief discussion of Wynn's eye disease, providing the author with a convenient metaphor as she writes that "Ironically, the lack of clarity in his physical vision has kept sharp his animal-like intuition about
gambling parlors” (55), further making Wynn out to be in the mold of the hero who makes up for his inadequacies by developing his other talents. In this way, the article could have come straight from the desk of Wynn’s own publicity department.

The illusionists Sigfried and Roy, employees of Steve Wynn, are perhaps the only figures who could come close to him as representatives of Las Vegas in the 1990s. A 1991 House and Garden article, “The Ultimate Illusion,” explores their living arrangement in their shared “eight-acre mission-meets Aztec-style complex that bemused locals dubbed the Jungle Palace” (Maclean 156), accompanied by numerous photos of the exotic trappings of their home. The two live with their animals, and the descriptions of this arrangement at times strain the limits of the imagination; the two swim and sleep with their white tigers in a strange blending of innocence and decadence. While all of this over-the-top information is often comic, the article concludes with a surprisingly subtle meditation on the meaning of it all:

If our nostalgia for a lost sense of wonder about the world has made them masters of the impossible, it has also helped a couple of former cruise ship attendants to realize the American Dream: to build a glittering ark, and conjure a plan to save the royal white tiger by breeding animals for release into the wild— the magicians’ way of reversing the disappointment of lost illusions. (194)

Like many profiles of Steve Wynn, then, this one of Sigfried and Roy attempts to explain why they are the embodiments of the values of Las Vegas and, by extension, of our culture.
A third person associated in a different way with Las Vegas made some news in the 1990s; Leonard Tose, former owner of the Philadelphia Eagles and "all-time worst blackjack player this side of Vegas" (Kaplan 68), sued the Sands for allowing him to gamble while plying him with free drinks. Tose argued that the casino took advantage of him when he was drunk and that he should not have to pay the $1.2 million he lost in the casino. He got a court to agree with him in principle, and as Time reported in its March 15, 1993 issue, he planned to pursue the same issue with Merv Griffin's Resorts and Casino. Tose did not win his case, though, as the jury found that he was not obviously drunk when he lost his money, but Time reports that "Verdicts for bettors in the kind of lawsuit brought by Tose could force casinos to eliminate serving liquor or at least make them closely regulate patrons' alcoholic intake" (68). Ironically, then, a loser threatened to upset a longtime Vegas tradition and thus could have had as big an effect on the way casinos do business as the Las Vegas titans Steve Wynn and Siegfried and Roy. Of course, this never came to pass, but the fact that it seemed possible was tantalizing enough for Time to devote a full page to the idea.

Cultural Commentary

As Las Vegas claimed its title as America's fastest growing metropolitan area, many of the nation's leading media outlets devoted considerable space to examining the significance of the city in relation to larger cultural issues. In other words, commentators sought to explain how Las Vegas represented trends in our society which, because of the city's astonishing growth, seemed
to be magnified there. William Hamilton stated the issue nicely in a 1992

*Gourmet* article, “A Weekend in Las Vegas”:

> All cities are ever more the synthetic creatures of artificial and transported resources, so one with no other history—sitting in the tabula rasa of the desert, fueled and driven by chance, and originally quite unintentionally created by the Hoover Dam’s construction to serve the boom-driven needs of an earlier synthetic metropolis, Los Angeles—may be a lesson in what’s to come. (184)

That this passage appears in an article whose main purpose is to review the Palace Court Restaurant at Caesars Palace only highlights the irony of Las Vegas as seen by many observers: the city which may define contemporary American values is one which has been dismissed for years as a fantasy land of no real consequence.

*Time* ran a major cover story on Las Vegas in its January 10, 1994 issue entitled “Las Vegas, U.S.A.” This story, written by Kurt Andersen, can be seen as the first in a series of mass-culture examinations of the city in an attempt to place it in its proper context. Andersen’s thesis is that the reason Las Vegas has become such a success is that “Las Vegas has become Americanized, and, even more, America has become Las Vegasized” (44). It is a measure of the truth of this notion that, just three years after it was proposed, it now seems self-evident. Andersen does a brilliant job of tracing both the evolution of the new, family-friendly Las Vegas and the corresponding changes in the rest of American society. The sanitized sexuality of the few remaining topless Vegas shows is compared to the nationwide proliferation of Hooters restaurants, and Nevada’s formerly loose divorce law requirements are now virtually universal. That Las Vegas is hardly even considered racy anymore
is "mainly because Americans' collective tolerance for vulgarity has gone way, way up. . . . Deviancy really has been defined down" (44, 51).

Pornography on demand is now available via the internet or through cable and satellite television and entertainers such as Madonna and Michael Jackson have perfected the Vegas style of titillation flavored by vulgar flashiness on a grand scale. Just about every city now has twenty-four-hour supermarkets and restaurants, and gambling is available in some form all across the nation. As the cover proclaims, Las Vegas is indeed "The new all-American city," and Andersen concludes that the culture's embrace of the city "is either a sign that Americans have liberated themselves from troublesome old repressions and moralist hypocrisies, or else one more symptom of the decline of Western civilization. Or maybe both" (51). This is one of the most important and perceptive essays ever published about Las Vegas, and its appearance in Time signals a shift in that magazine's long history of antagonism towards the city; after all this time, it seems that America is getting what it wants and deserves in Las Vegas, rather than Las Vegas forcing itself on the country.

Another important discussion of Las Vegas appears in the August/September 1996 issue of Civilization, the highly respected yet accessibly mainstream magazine of the Library of Congress. The author, Mark Edmunson, makes the same point as Andersen when he writes that "Las Vegas is becoming an ever more pressing metaphor for American life overall. . . . In the midst of the Mojave Desert, it grows strong and stronger, a flaming bright heart of all-American darkness" (43). Edmunson has another startling
thesis, though, reached from observing the people who are in the casinos. He begins by tracing the depictions of Las Vegas in the 1960s and 1970s by Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe, which were themselves full of life and energy, and then refers to the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who "claimed that the epitome of all human amusement comes when a human begins acting like a machine" (40). Edmunson sees this in the gamblers, who "look as though they're down about two pints of blood," and who produce a "general aura of misery, the purgatorial cloud, that hangs over every gambling room" (40, 41). When Edmunson asks why these people are doing this to themselves, he proposes that "people come to Las Vegas to pay for their sins. . . . they [have] made their pilgrimages into the desert to suffer and to sacrifice, maybe to pay for some ill-gotten gains by getting rid of them" (41). This is the flip side of Andersen's thesis; while Andersen believes that Americans enjoy the culture represented by Las Vegas, Edmunson contends that they are guilty about their association in a morally bankrupt culture and that they go to its spiritual capital city to expiate their guilt. This is a fascinating, if somewhat contrived, notion, and Edmunson does a good job of justifying it, as when he points out that "the superficial ambiance of Las Vegas is pagan. Everywhere you look there are attempts to create a pre-Christian (preguilt) scene" (41), as the city encourages a kind of imperial letting go of guilty feelings in casinos which evoke ancient Rome, Egypt, piracy, South Seas luxury, and the like.

This article, like Andersen's, is of great importance in the continuing attempts of commentators to uncover the meaning of Las Vegas in our culture, and though the psychology that Edmunson proposes as the heart of
the city may be dubious and impossible to prove, he does provide an interesting perspective on why Las Vegas retains its attraction.

A less-philosophical discussion of Las Vegas appears in the December 1996 issue of *National Geographic*, an article written by William R. Newcott entitled “Believing Las Vegas.” The closest Newcott gets to a thesis is when he writes that “the quest for the Next Big Thing is shared by virtually everyone here, from the casino owners to the politicians and small businessmen, even to the churches” (58). This is no new idea, but the fact that *National Geographic* deemed Las Vegas to be a suitable subject for inclusion in a twenty-odd page article, accompanied by numerous full-page photographs, indicates that this respected periodical which explores different cultures sees the city as important enough, or different enough a culture, to examine. The most interesting aspect of this article comes when the manager of the Desert Inn, J.R. Rose, is revealed to be an usher at Liberty Baptist Church; Rose explains his dual positions by saying that “You’ve always got Satan pulling your chain someplace, but Vegas seems to have a lot more chains for him to get ahold of” (66). The rest of the article is a standard mix of guidebook-type material, history, and anecdotes, and the only hint of what may come is in the last paragraph, when Newcott refers to theories about “The fate of the universe: expansion to the point of oblivion, eventual collapse under its own weight, or a delicate balance resulting in permanent equilibrium. Las Vegas faces a similar set of possibilities” (81). Unlike Andersen and Edmunson, however, Newcott does not speculate on the future, nor does he explore deeper meanings. Nevertheless, this remains an
important article, if only due to its appearance in one of the best-loved and most-respected magazines in the nation.

**Book-Length Treatments**

So far, the 1990s have seen the publication of five notable nonfiction books about Las Vegas. The first, Deke Castleman's 1991 *Las Vegas*, is part of the Compass American Guide series of Discover America Books. What sets this apart from other guidebooks is its engaging style and its good research. Castleman entertainingly outlines the history of the city and of all its major casinos, and along the way includes excerpts from important literary works involving the city by authors such as Mario Puzo, Hunter S. Thompson, and Ed Reid. Accompanied by many fine photographs by Michael Yamashita, the book is the best guidebook yet published on Las Vegas. Of course, it also includes practical suggestions on what to do and see while in town, but it can be read by those already familiar with the city as a well-written discussion worthy of consultation.

Another book which is a mixture of guidebook, history, and commentary is David Spanier's 1992 *Welcome to the Pleasuredome*. Spanier, a British writer, seeks to "explain Las Vegas' unique success" (14), but his book is a curiously downbeat production. The book is divided into two sections; the first, "Men and Casinos," includes chapters on Steve Wynn, the city's history, the casinos, and their signs, but does not say anything new about any of these subjects. The second section, "Sex and Money," has a promising title, but its chapters on brothels, strip clubs, boxing, and the Mafia all fall flat. For
example, Spanier visits a brothel over the county line, but all he does is engage in a sociological conversation with one of the prostitutes. He does the same with an escort service employee in Las Vegas and a stripper; the problem with these interviews and most like them is that the subjects rarely have anything interesting to say about their work. It is all exactly what one would expect: encounters with some strange characters, but an overall air of boredom and resignation. There are not many different ways to describe having sex for money, and Spanier does not even tell us what it is like for the customer since all he pays for is time and talk. His idea of irony is to describe the Cherry Patch brothel as “a low, squat bungalow, surrounded by a trench and a high wire stockade” (144) to show its unglamorous nature. Spanier ends with a description of his alienation on New Year’s Eve 1991 as he walks the Strip:

People literally had to battle their way to the tables to blow their money. When I got back to my car, a guy was urinating against the door. “No offence, man,” he said. . . . On the Strip, it was bitterly cold. A desert wind ripped through my jacket like a flail. . . . An aroma of beer wafted over the freezing night air like after-shave. . . . I could have killed for a cup of coffee. (256-57)

While this kind of ennui can be effective in fiction, in Spanier’s book it produces as much boredom in the reader as it seems to in the writer. In almost all of the other accounts of Las Vegas, the author at least maintains a spirited antagonism if he dislikes the city, but Spanier seems to be sleepwalking through his entire book.

A vastly different attitude is found in Alan Hess’ 1993 Viva Las Vegas: After-Hours Architecture, a study of the evolution of Downtown and Strip
casinos since the turn of the century. Hess is an exuberant guide to the ever-changing look of Las Vegas, mixing serious architectural criticism with down-to-earth language and humor. For example, in discussing the Excalibur, Hess proclaims it “the worst nightmare of Howard Hughes... the granddaddy of all miniature golf castles” (104), then goes on to explain how it and Sleeping Beauty’s Castle at Disneyland were both inspired by Neuschwanstein, the castle built by Ludwig II, the “Mad King” of Bavaria. Hess writes that “This castle may be as seminal an influence in twentieth-century architecture as were the grain elevators that inspired early twentieth-century Modernism” (104). Thus, Hess is able to combine architectural history with absurdity, pulling it all together by showing how it makes sense in Las Vegas. *Viva Las Vegas* is a much more accessible book than its predecessor, *Learning from Las Vegas*, and it both complements and updates the earlier book.

In a similar vein, Charles F. Barnard’s 1993 *The Magic Sign: The Electric Art/Architecture of Las Vegas* is a fascinating, profusely illustrated chronicle of various signs, marquees, and facades from the early days of Las Vegas to the present. Every step in the evolution of the great signs is captured in photographs, and architectural sketches of never-used designs are even included to show the different directions they might have taken. Barnard begins as far back as he could go, with “ancient petroglyphs found on rock formations in the vicinity of Las Vegas [which] represent the earliest form of symbol art in the region” (23). Barnard thus takes the long view, also meticulously tracing the history of individual designers and influential companies such as Young Electric Sign Company (YESCO), which made “the
most significant impact on the desert community” (65) from the 1930s to the 1960s. This is a technically detailed yet fascinating study of the processes by which signs are designed, made, and put into place, and is an excellent companion to Viva Las Vegas.

Finally, in 1995 Mike Tronnes edited a collection entitled Literary Las Vegas, an anthology of fiction and non-fiction pieces about Las Vegas including many of the selections discussed in the present work. Tom Wolfe, John Gregory Dunne, Susan Berman, Joan Didion, and Hunter S. Thompson are a few of the writers whose works are represented here. The publication of this anthology is significant not only because it is the first such collection concerning Las Vegas, but also because it shows how the city has gained an important enough place in our culture to merit such treatment. Las Vegas now joins Boston, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles as a city which has both a historical and a literary past, and Tronnes has done a great service to those who are interested in exploring the many ways in which Las Vegas has been depicted in its brief but exciting history.

Fiction

One of the standouts in 1990s Las Vegas fiction is Edward Allen’s Mustang Sally, a comic novel about Packard Schmidt, an English professor at Amherst College in Indiana who goes to Las Vegas after every semester to escape the boredom of his academic life. Schmidt, called “Professor Pack-of-Shit” by his students (99), decides on this trip to meet Sally Iverson, a former student and a friend of a colleague, who has transferred to UNLV and,
Schmidt soon learns, is working in a brothel. The novel depends for its effect on the conflict that Schmidt finds between the freewheeling life in Las Vegas, where “you can just walk into it and get lost and nobody will come chasing you with papers to grade,” and the stultifying environment of his campus, which he returns to after each trip to Las Vegas “perked up and cleaned out, like a man who has just had a session of kidney dialysis” (15). This conflict is symbolized towards the end, when Schmidt brings Sally and two of her fellow prostitutes to the MLA Convention in New York to participate on a panel absurdly entitled “The Leukemic Muse of Literary Eroticism: Is Sex Dead or Just Immune-Suppressed?” (232) Allen captures perfectly every detail of Las Vegas, from the smell of casino air to the layout of the UNLV campus, and he is equally skilled at evoking the attitude of the city which Schmidt so loves, as in this passage:

You can walk up and down the Strip for hours without ever noticing anybody’s face. It’s a good town to be ugly in, which you will notice if you ever look closely into the crowds. People don’t worry about how they look . . . A man could step up to a table with shit on his hat and nobody would complain. (71)

Schmidt is unable to find this kind of freeing anonymity elsewhere in his life, and when he indulges in the perfectly acceptable activity (in Las Vegas) of sleeping with Sally, he is made to suffer for it (in Indiana) when the department finds out about it and fires him for having sex with a former student. He goes to the MLA to find a job, and participates in the panel as a favor for a colleague who may be able to get him one. When the prostitutes begin to relate their experiences, though, the academics in the audience
become enraged and start a riot; in this way, Allen pokes fun at the ivory
tower mentality of academics and celebrates the looser atmosphere of Las
Vegas. This book is consistently witty and entertaining, and it stands as one
of the finest Las Vegas novels.

Considerably darker in tone, John O'Brien's 1990 novel *Leaving Las
Vegas* was later made into the successful film starring Nicolas Cage; the film
version is more effective than the novel at evoking a uniquely Las Vegas
atmosphere since it can use visuals to convey its setting. The novel uses Las
Vegas as a setting mainly to give Ben, the suicidal alcoholic from Los Angeles,
a place to go where the bars never close. O'Brien is skilled at depicting a
psychological landscape, as aspects of the setting are filtered through Ben's
perceptions, and the lonely prostitute Sera also plays an important role in the
story as Ben's only human contact. There is one section in particular where
O'Brien describes the different connotations of casino games and gamblers,
such as the craps players who "consider themselves to be the elite gambling
force of the casino, the professionals," who with their yelling and frenzied
activity will intimidate the "lower orders" of gamblers, such as the "blackjack
player looking for a change of pace," and will drive them away with their
smoking and jostling around the table (38). When describing roulette,
O'Brien refers to the ball in human terms: "the little sphere rides its race
indecisively, eventually dropping to the slower, lower track of imminent
commitment" (39). Usually, the high-stakes game of baccarat is the only one
which gets this kind of treatment, but here O'Brien invests the whole casino
with different zones of significance. The depression and alienation of both Ben and Sera is revealed in scenes such as the following:

> smoke fills the room [a casino] and diminishes Ben's depth perception so that he sees compressed montages of green felt littered with mottled chips, of ice filled glasses on glass filled trays, of ass-filled panties and tit-filled and more cleavage than would seem probable in a species at this advanced stage of its evolution. (164)

This kind of description approaches the film's use of Las Vegas as an ironic juxtaposition to Ben's decline, but the novel, well-written as it is, does not achieve the specificity of place that the film does.

A novella which does use Las Vegas to good effect is Jim Lewis' *Real Gone*, published in 1993 with a series of photographs of sterile cityscapes, blurred closeups, and flashes of light to accentuate the narrator's alienation. The story is addressed to "K," presumably a woman who has left her former lover, the narrator; the narrator goes to Las Vegas, apparently to search for her. His dismay and emptiness are perfectly matched by the city, as he remarks that "This is no place to be. There isn't anything here; it's a knot in the highway, tangled up and lit to nothing, and when you come out the other end all you've got is empty pockets" (38). Gamblers are seen as being in a "trance of someone for whom a world is missing, the world of real, common exchange" (38), and a visit to the famous old sign graveyard provokes this observation:

> In a way, the Strip takes itself very seriously—like a drag queen or a television evangelist, its exaggerations and extravagant gestures are meant to mask the fragility of its illusion—but there in the lot the signs seemed less straight-faced; they were elbowing and teasing each other, and laughing at how much they'd gotten away with. (27)
Lewis here makes a familiar point about the city’s use of facades to hide its true emptiness, but the image he uses to convey this point is a unique one, with the broken signs standing for broken human illusions which, once they come down, are shown for the hollow jocularity behind which they often hide.

Another, much stranger, novel which uses Las Vegas as a series of symbols in Tim Powers’ 1992 *Last Call*, a complex story involving ancient mythology, tarot cards, and a mysterious game called “assumption.” One of the main threads of this novel concerns the son of the killer of Bugsy Siegel, who has visions that Bugsy was in fact an incarnation of the Fisher King. As improbable as this sounds, Powers does make some interesting connections for the mystically-minded, as when he compares the mythology to the history of Bugsy and the Flamingo:

[as proof of] his status as the modern avatar of Dionysus and Tammuz and Attis and Osiris and the Fisher King and every other god and king who died in the winter and was reborn in the spring, Siegel had opened the hotel on the day after Christmas. It closed—“died”—two weeks later and then reopened on March 27. Close enough to Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter. (25-26)

Even Bugsy’s death on June 20 is linked to this mythological structure, as Powers writes that this is the date which in ancient times began the month-long celebration of the death of the Babylonian fertility god Tammuz, who “reigned in a desert region” (30). This long novel often requires more attention than it deserves, as it becomes bogged down in the usual exploitation of Las Vegas as a place where the “spiritual water table is as
exhausted as the literal one" (290). However, there is one interesting passage where Powers remarks upon "the multitude of statues around Las Vegas, from the stone Arabs in front of the Sahara on the Strip to the towering figure of Vegas Vic," writing that these constitute "offerings" to the "chaos gods" which rule the city (397). As a kind of New Age/Mystical meditation on Las Vegas, this novel has its own niche, but as a novel it becomes tiresomely convoluted and increasingly unbelievable.

A more down-to-earth treatment of Las Vegas can be found in Michael Ventura’s 1996 The Death of Frank Sinatra, which uses the Dunes implosion and the then-incomplete Stratosphere Tower as dual symbols of Las Vegas in the modern age. As private eye Mike Rose, a man whose family was involved in Mob activities, tools around town trying to solve a mystery, he often reflects on the half-finished tower and wonders whether the tower will someday stand as a mysterious monument: “there’ll be just this colorless, pointless concrete pillar as if to say, ‘Something urgent and perhaps terrible happened here’” (204). Towards the end of the novel, Rose gets shot on the night of the Dunes implosion and sees it not as

the New Vegas demolishing the Old, the victory of Disneyland over Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky, as though it made a difference who pulled the strings, as though there were strings, because the gangsters hadn’t built the town and Steve Wynn wasn’t building the town, longing built this town, hunger and longing. (235-36)

The implication at this concluding point in the novel is that hunger and longing are eternal forces which will manifest themselves in whatever way they see fit, and it will take some sort of cataclysm to stop it all and produce a
symbol like the stump of the Stratosphere surrounded by ruins and bare desert. In this way, Ventura’s novel is similar to Powers’ in that both transform the cityscape into quasi-mystical icons, but Ventura is much less involved in metaphysical speculations than Powers.

In a rare example of an author who does not take mysticism far enough, E.J. McGill’s 1991 mystery Immaculate in Black presents a feminist religious cult centered in Las Vegas called Mothers of the Moon (MOM). The cult starts when chorus girl Sylvia Devereaux falls off of a rope during a rehearsal at one of the Strip hotels. Upon awakening from a coma, she claims that she has died and returned to life, and after winning a multimillion-dollar judgment against the casino she starts “Sylvia’s Tabernacle.” She claims to communicate with the dead and teaches that “life is merely a classroom for women to prepare themselves for the eventual resurrection she’d experienced,” and MOM is reported to put on “a great show, one of Vegas’ best, with lasers and hocus-pocus” (30). Unfortunately, this show is never described, and MOM is relegated to an episode in the life of a murdered girl who briefly became associated with the group. What’s more, most of the story takes place in Tucson, so not even the Las Vegas connection gets much play. The only other notable reference to MOM is tantalizing in its lost opportunity for further development; a tabloid reports that the “show biz pop cult, Vegas’s own MOM, admittedly has been hooker haven since word go. . . . Sylvia’s oversize Ouija board tells critics to take a gander at the Big Book and check out pals of a chick named Mary Magdalene” (110). That is all, though, as McGill declines to explore the fascinating implications of a Las Vegas-based
feminist religious cult which reaches out to prostitutes in the name of Mary Magdalene.

In the 1990s the romance genre continued to produce interesting works with a Las Vegas connection. In Carole Nelson Douglas' *Crystal Days*, two intertwined stories have as a common focus the Crystal Phoenix hotel-casino. In the first, untitled story, sophisticated lady Van von Rhine is hired to decorate the soon-to-open casino. Van, a European outsider, has read *Learning from Las Vegas* and Tom Wolfe's writing, and she intends to make the Crystal Phoenix the rebirth of class in Las Vegas. As the owner, Nicky Fontana, escorts Van around the city, she reacts with disdain when she sees the statuary outside Caesars Palace, informing him that "The whole point of classical statuary, Mr. Fontana, is its uniqueness. You can't simply copy them wholesale and line them up... like hookers waiting for a pickup" (24). She is equally appalled at the reproduction of Michelangelo's "David" inside the casino, and all of this leads up to her reaction to the Goliath hotel: "The several-story-high figure of a man straddling the hotel entrance at least wore a kilt, knee-high leather-strapped sandals... and neon bulbs that twinkled as ribaldly as his lofty expression;" passing underneath, Van "fought an irresistible urge to look up" (43). Thus, Douglas presents the Goliath as a perfect analogue to "David," and it underscores Van's appraisal of Las Vegas as Philistine. Of course, this being a romance, Van and Nicky fall in love and link the classy and the flashy aspects of Las Vegas.

The second story in *Crystal Days* is entitled "The Show Girl and the Prof," and it involves Professor Stevenson Eliot Austen (a wonderful name
for a stick-in-the-mud English professor), a creative writing teacher at UNLV who thinks that Las Vegas-related stories such as those involving showgirls are insufficient material for good literature. His student Darcy McGill thinks otherwise, though, and she invents a twin showgirl sister, “Sirene,” because she doesn’t want him to know that her stories are actually drawn from her own reality. Douglas makes good use of the Las Vegas cliché in this story, parodying the sentimental view shown by so many writers when Darcy writes of “hard-working hoofers with hearts as soft as the cherished pink satin tutus they wore at nine” (168). When Austen visits “Sirene” backstage (not recognizing her as Darcy), his intention is to tell her to stop filling Darcy’s head with fanciful showbiz notions, but of course he falls for her and finds himself involved in the very kind of story that he had criticized as unreal when Darcy wrote about it. Both of these stories, while displaying the sentimentality and the contrived plots of the romance, yet have as merits a knowing, ironic attitude towards the genre and towards Las Vegas itself, and as such they are interesting cultural documents.

Finally, in a change of pace, Jackie Merritt wrote two Silhouette Romance novels in the 1990s which are distinguished for their realism; instead of having her characters involved in the gambling industry, the Mafia, or show business, Merritt, a Las Vegas resident, sets her characters in construction and real estate. The expansion of the city has made these industries an essential part of the economy, but they are rarely considered as even existing in most Las Vegas fiction. In her 1992 Boss Lady, Merritt brings together T.J. Reese, a pregnant widow who runs a construction firm, and Zach
Torelli, one of her hunky employees. Realistic touches, such as the difficulty of East-West traffic, show that Merritt knows about real life in Las Vegas as opposed to the glitzy facade most often portrayed in fiction. Her characters share this pragmatism:

- the glitz and glamour of the big shows didn’t entice T.J. in the least. The crowds were horrendous and the prices skyrocketing. As for gambling, forget it. She wouldn’t put a coin in a machine or sit at a blackjack table for anything. After years of living in Nevada, she had seen so many people lose so much of their hard-earned money, she wasn’t even tempted to try her luck. So had Zach. (93)

Merritt used the same technique in her 1994 *Mystery Lady*, which described the romance between developer Rush Saxon and dancer/real estate broker Valentine LeClair. Valentine’s career as a broker is given more attention than her job as a dancer, as Merritt again shows how reality in Las Vegas consists of more than just flashy surroundings. In this way, we have come to a point where a setting and a genre most often characterized by fantasy have been transformed by a skillful author into a more realistic and down-to-earth work of art. It is fitting, then, to end with Douglas, for her stories can be seen as an analogy to Las Vegas: the city has been seen by many as a joke or an anomaly, but its continuing growth requires a closer look into the reasons for its success. The 1990s have been an important decade in this search, as commentators have sought to explain why Las Vegas is becoming, as Kurt Andersen’s *Time* article proclaimed, “the new all-American city.”
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

An examination of the depictions of Las Vegas in popular culture reveals two major strains of interpretation. First, it is readily apparent that certain aspects of the city continually reassert themselves over time. These aspects include the metaphorical uses of gambling and of the frontier, the description of real and imagined structures (such as Caesars Palace or “Dante’s Inferno”) which reflect the values of Las Vegas, and the sense that the city’s success will be short-lived because of its origins in dubious endeavors. For example, in almost every decade writers express their concern (or hope) that the city’s success will come to an end at some time, but in every case these predictions have failed to come true. Interpretations which utilize these motifs range from nonfiction accounts of the city’s economy to fictional representations of Las Vegas as an outpost on the edge of oblivion. The cyclical nature of the discussion of these types of topics can be seen as evidence either of the culture’s continuing fascination with these elements of Las Vegas, or of the fact that popular culture lacks a true sense of its own history, reflected in the city’s constant obliteration of its past.

A second strain of interpretation is more organic, growing along with the city, and is shown in the way that each succeeding decade in Las Vegas
history brings with it a new set of concerns expressed in popular culture. In this way, popular culture is especially instructive when exploring attitudes towards Las Vegas, for the magazine articles, novels, and short stories which discuss the city can be seen as snapshots of particular moments in the culture’s view of Las Vegas.

The frontier motif was the dominant theme in pre-1950 discussions of Las Vegas. Early accounts of the city, such as those by Paul Ralli and Ralph Kelly, depicted Las Vegas as the last of the Wild West boomtowns. The city is seen as barely civilized in some of these accounts, as the new gambling center of America was often viewed as dangerous in both a physical and a moral sense. The town’s rough edges were described in magazine articles like “The Boom Came Back” as hundreds moved to Las Vegas to participate in the new economy. Likewise, in the fiction of the period, the crossroads motif predominated, as the city was still emerging from its desert origins to join twentieth-century America. Fiction such as “Apache Bar” and The French Key played upon the public’s perception of Las Vegas as an outpost far from civilized America.

Soon enough, though, Las Vegas became civilized itself, at least compared to what it had been earlier in the century. This progress was not without its price, however, as nonfiction discussions in the 1950s focused on the twin dangers of gangsters and atomic bombs as well as on the city’s emerging resort economy. The decade’s fiction also turned from frontier associations to examinations of the dark side of the city. In The Big Brokers and Murder in Las Vegas, characters are caught up in events that they cannot
control, symbolic of the way that chance can turn on those it initially seems to favor.

Of perhaps the greatest historical and sociological interest in 1950s depictions of Las Vegas is the way that marginalized groups of society were treated. As we have seen, there were only two works which presented nonwhite characters in a major role: the Perez family in "Las Vegas Trap," and Conchita in The Rancho of the Little Loves. Andy and Angelina Perez, though, were essentially stock figures, and Conchita was, too, embodying the classic "whore with a heart of gold." The fact that the only two female main characters (Conchita and Linda from "The Deal") had to sell themselves to get by in Las Vegas reflects both the city's commodification of all people and the low status of women in the pre-feminist period (the nuns in Seven Nuns at Las Vegas were also stock figures of womanly virtue, devotion, and naivety). Women were beginning to broaden their roles beyond those of wife and mother in the 1950s, but their contributions to the economy were often undervalued (Chafe 126). In this way, the criticism of Las Vegas was enhanced by the conditions of the larger society. Also, except for Best and Hillyer's book, the discussion of blacks was nonexistent, which fit the city's practice of keeping them away from the tourists. While in the 1950s Holiday's Sean O'Faolain could still get away with pronouncing Las Vegas a "coarse and lovely illusion" (56), the next decade would bring with it a more critical analysis of the illusions upon which the city depended for its livelihood.

This critical analysis often took the form of aggressive, even hostile, commentary on Las Vegas. Magazines reported on racial tensions and on
Mob-related activities in the city, and books such as *The Green Felt Jungle*, *The Grim Reapers*, and *Las Vegas, City of Sin?* portrayed Las Vegas as a dangerous, even wicked, place. Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion practiced a less hysterical form of criticism, but their irony exposed Las Vegas as the center of Philistine culture in America. The fiction, too, expressed anxiety about the cultural values expressed in the city; *Murder Las Vegas Style* and *The Wars of Pardon* were existential depictions of the spiritual desolation of the Las Vegas and, by extension, of America. The literature of the 1960s thus mirrored the tensions prevalent in American society in the era of the Vietnam War and political assassinations. There was hope, though, towards the end of the decade, as Howard Hughes and Kirk Kerkorian appeared on the Las Vegas scene to somewhat legitimize the city and its main industry. These men were hailed in the press, even if they were seen as unusual personalities, and they were largely responsible for the relative stability of Las Vegas in the 1970s.

Although the city continued to grow apace in the 1970s, the consolidation of the economy, led by Hughes and Kerkorian and continued by corporations which replaced Mobsters as casino owners, enabled some commentators to step back and take a good look at what was happening in Las Vegas. This produced some of the most fruitful examinations of how the city operates, as books like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *Vegas: A Memoir of a Dark Season*, *Learning from Las Vegas*, and *Inside Las Vegas* all appeared during these years. These discussions still rank as among the most important in examining and interpreting Las Vegas. Much of the fiction of the period, though, tended towards the sensational, even by Las Vegas standards. Epics
like Casino, Las Vegas, and 60 Hours of Darkness were like the big-budget
disaster movies of the era in their overplotting and numerous characters,
while novels of vengeance like The Penetrator and The Executioner played
upon the same fears that made Death Wish a hit at the movies. This could be
seen as a reflection of the society’s need for reassuringly escapist
entertainment following the harrowing ordeal of the 1960s.

In the 1980s, Las Vegas experienced a major influx of non-gambling
businesses which helped solidify the city’s economic base. Steve Wynn began
to be profiled as the new face of the city, and the prosperity enjoyed by much
of the nation was even more pronounced in Las Vegas. Perhaps because of
this, the most significant trend in the literature of this decade was the arrival
of women as heroes and as writers of Las Vegas fiction. The romance novel
was the best expression of Las Vegas’ position as a thriving American city, as
women were able to become the protagonists of their own stories, and The
Desert Rose’s Harmony is the epitome of a woman who makes it on her own
terms. Also, women writers like Karen Kijewski celebrated strong female
characters in their works, in contrast to the male-dominated women who
populated fiction in the 1950s and 1960s.

The writing of the 1990s seems to be characterized by a realization that
Las Vegas is coming into its own as an American city. The cover stories in
Time, National Geographic, and Civilization all describe how Las Vegas and
the rest of America are looking more and more alike, and the city is
entrenched in its position as the fastest-growing one in the nation. Fiction
writers are responding to this by either taking the long view, as Tim Powers
and Michael Ventura do in their quasi-mythological treatments, or by acknowledging that Las Vegas can finally be viewed as a real city and not as an anomaly, as Jackie Merritt does in her romance novels.

The writing about Las Vegas, then, continues to evolve along with the city. Whether they write fiction or nonfiction, authors always put a distinctive spin on their discussions of the neon city. If nothing else, this proves that Las Vegas has the vitality to sustain interest in itself, as there seems to be no sign that people are getting tired of hearing about it. This alone should ensure that we have not by any means heard the last about the significance of Las Vegas to American popular culture.
APPENDIX

LAS VEGAS ON FILM

Like the fiction and nonfiction writing which concerns Las Vegas, film has been an important medium when it comes to depicting the city in American popular culture. What film provides is a visual depiction of Las Vegas which serves as another type of commentary on the city. Of the one hundred or so films which deal with Las Vegas, only a few are of major importance in expressing aspects of the city through the visual medium; many films use the city merely as a backdrop, as Las Vegas provides a "set" unlike any other place and thus provides a great deal of color, activity, and interest for the filmmaker to capture. However, examining a handful of these films is useful for exploring the added visual dimension that they bring, beyond what is possible in print.

Each decade brings more films set--either in whole or in part--in Las Vegas, or which involve the city in some other important way. Like New York and Los Angeles, Las Vegas is a popular urban setting for films; unlike most films set in those East and West Coast capitals, though, Las Vegas films rarely depict actual residents or longtime inhabitants. The city is usually treated as a tourist destination so that people have to go out of their way in order to get there, and this aspect of Las Vegas as either a destination or a way
station makes the city particularly suitable for whatever kind of symbolic reflection of American society is required for the film. The depiction of Las Vegas in films can be categorized into several different, and often overlapping, modes of interpretation, depending on how the city is used as a metaphor in each work. Using Las Vegas in films conjures up strong associations in the audience, and the city can serve as a kind of visual shorthand for certain themes which the filmmakers wish to explore. These themes include the apocalyptic destruction of the city as punishment for its transgressions; the satirical exposure of Las Vegas (and American) values; the temptation of big money; the desire to escape from reality; the use of gambling as a metaphor for chance; and the portrayal of Las Vegas as the city most representative of the American Dream.

The impulse to destroy Las Vegas is one of the responses that filmmakers have had to this desert city. As we have seen in fiction, Las Vegas holds an attraction for some artists as a place where destruction on a Biblical or apocalyptic scale can take place. At the beginning of the film "Wargames," the teenagers played by Ally Sheedy and Matthew Broderick are trying to think of a city which would be a suitable target to begin their game of global thermonuclear war. "Who should we nuke first?" asks Broderick, and it takes only a second before Sheedy gleefully answers, "How about Las Vegas?" "Las Vegas? Great," replies Broderick, as they both smile and laugh. The implication, of course, is that Las Vegas is a perfect place to attack with nuclear bombs, and that anyone—even a teenager—would recognize that it is only fitting this should be so. What is interesting in this brief exchange is the
unspoken feeling, which the audience is expected to recognize and to share with the characters, that Las Vegas should be wiped off the face of the earth.

"Wargames" is not the only film in which the annihilation of Las Vegas is envisioned. In Tim Burton's "Mars Attacks," the city plays a prominent role in the action when the Martians land in nearby Pahrump and go on to destroy everything in their path. The Landmark hotel-casino, here called the Galaxy, is used for its implosion at the end of the film, with actual footage from the demolition intercut with scenes of the actors. This scene points to another interesting aspect of Las Vegas on film: just as the demolitions of hotels such as the Dunes, Hacienda, and Sands are staged as real-life spectacles for tourists on the Strip, so are they used in films as exciting tableaux of destruction. The 1997 film "Con Air" uses a similar technique when it stages a climactic plane crash into the lobby of the about-to-be-imploded Sands. In a way, these films preserve and commemorate a past Las Vegas which exists otherwise only in peoples' memories. Burton clearly enjoys the destruction of Las Vegas, showing a number of scenes of the entire Strip going up in flames, and cranking up the kitsch factor by having Tom Jones sing "It's Not Unusual" onscreen while the aliens attack his audience. That Burton simultaneously revels in the tackiness of Las Vegas and delights in the leveling of it is characteristic of the ambivalence with which the city is often viewed: on the one hand, it can be a lot of fun, but on the other, it can be seen as a giant cultural sinkhole.

As inhabitants of this sinkhole, Jack Nicholson, as Art, the Galaxy's owner, and Annette Bening, as his wife, personify the cultural and
intellectual aridity of Las Vegas. Nicholson (here looking and sounding remarkably like the professional wrestler Macho Man Randy Savage) captures the extreme tackiness and white-trash qualities of the city, with Art's house a masterpiece of bad taste, and Bening portrays a New Age airhead who welcomes the Martians and rails against people like her husband whose greed, she says, is "destroying the earth." There is a sense, then, that Las Vegas is getting what it deserves when it is attacked. Stephen King's television miniseries "The Stand," for example, establishes Las Vegas as the headquarters of the personification of evil and nukes the city off the map at the end, and the TV-movie "Flight of Black Angel" depicts an Air Force pilot who believes that it is his mission to drop a bomb on the city, since Las Vegas is too sick to be worth saving.

Besides being blown up in various ways, Las Vegas has also come under satirical attack in some films. The satire usually takes the form of treating Las Vegas as the quintessential American city, the one which, more than any other, exemplifies the values and characteristics of our society. This form of representation is followed in "King Ralph," which depends for its humor on the contrast between boorish American behavior and proper English manners. When the entire royal family of England dies in a freak accident, the closest heir to the throne is found to be an American lounge singer in, of course, Las Vegas. Our first look at this unknowing heir consists of John Goodman in an electric blue tuxedo singing "Tiny Bubbles" and watching a football game on television, all of this intended to emphasize the culture shock in store for both Ralph and for the English.
Bankrupt American culture is also satirized in “Beavis and Butt-Head Do America.” Here, the uncouth cartoon protagonists encounter a busload of senior citizens on their way to Vegas, a context which affords opportunities for multileveled humor. First, on the sophomoric level, old people are depicted as out-of-touch and physically decrepit, and second, on a slightly more advanced level, Las Vegas as a favorite destination for the elderly is cleverly lampooned. These two scenarios are entwined when Beavis, mishearing the old woman seated next to him on the bus when she mentions playing the slot machines, remarks that he too is “looking forward to doing some sluts in Vegas.” The woman assures him that there are plenty to go around. Once the boys get to town, they enjoy the visceral pleasures which Vegas offers everyone, but they express their pleasure in their own inimitable ways. When confronted with an Egyptian-type figurehead on a reed boat decorating a Luxor-style casino, the boys gape in amazement at the comically enormous breasts on the statue, and when the obligatory dance sequence occurs, it is in a cheesy lounge dominated by a seventies-type band playing “Love Rollercoaster.” The satire here is actually rather sophisticated, as these Las Vegas clichés are only slightly more exaggerated in the cartoon than they are in real life.

Another potentially (but probably unintentionally) satirical film is “Honey, I Blew Up the Kid,” in which a toddler becomes gigantic when he is exposed to the energy fields surrounding the millions of lights in the city. As the child stomps down Fremont Street, the visual cue points us to films such as “Godzilla” and “The Amazing Colossal Man,” but the scene also suggests
another possibility. It is not the obvious one, that Las Vegas is turning into another Disneyland, but it is the more insidious notion that the availability of instant gratification on which the city was built reduces all of us to big children, demanding that our every need be taken care of regardless of the destruction that this may cause to us or to our surroundings. In this case, the satire exists in the mind of the observer and most likely not as a result of the filmmakers’ intentions.

If Las Vegas is not being physically or satirically attacked in the movies, it is often being plundered. With all of that money circulating, Las Vegas is in many ways the perfect location for a crime movie, especially in the sub-genre of the heist film. One of the best of these, indeed one of the all-time greatest Las Vegas films, is “Ocean’s Eleven.” In this film, the Rat Pack gets together as a former Army unit set on knocking out the power and robbing five Strip casinos on New Year’s Eve. The plot, though, is largely an excuse to showcase the style with which the performers carry it out. This style, including Sammy Davis Jr. as a singing garbageman, is incomparable, and the entire film is a good-spirited laugh, with the added bonus of seeing early 1960s Vegas in all of its swanky, retro glory. Another, less amusing heist film is “They Came to Rob Las Vegas,” in which a gang of thieves attacks an armored car full of money and buries it out in the desert. Martin Scorsese’s “Casino” is, in its own way, a heist film, as it details the mob-run skimming operations of the 1970s. The brazen nature of the skimming, among other things, eventually led to the downfall of the mob’s control of casinos. The film is a relatively accurate, if artistically bloated, depiction of these events, with heavy doses of

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1970s style in its clothes, music, and overall design. Finally, "Diamonds are Forever" brings James Bond to Las Vegas to investigate a diamond-smuggling ring; this film has plenty of location shots so Vegas circa 1970 can be seen to good effect, although the extension of the International Hotel (now the Hilton) is a little startling, looking like a futurist experiment. What these heist films have in common is the audacity of the crimes they depict; as Las Vegas itself is an outrageous entity, so must any attempts to steal some of its luster be outrageous as well.

The city's position as one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world makes it an ideal setting to represent an escape from the reality of everyday life. Films in this genre range in tone from irrepressibly upbeat to incredibly depressing. Examples of the former include the musicals "Meet Me in Las Vegas" and "Viva Las Vegas," and of the latter, "Leaving Las Vegas" and "Aria." "Meet Me in Las Vegas" is a romantic musical comedy featuring cowboy Dan Dailey and dancer Cyd Charisse, who can win jackpots if they simply hold each other's hands while betting. On gorgeous sets, filmed in blazing Technicolor, after much singing and dancing, the two fall in love. Similarly, in "Viva Las Vegas," Elvis Presley plays a race car driver who falls in love with a dancer (Ann-Margret), and the film is one of the happiest and most entertaining looks at Las Vegas as a place largely exempt from the pressures of real life. There is no illness here, and if money is lost it is only temporary; the whole place is drenched in bright colors and warmth.

This same motif of escape is put to good use in some considerably darker films as well; "Leaving Las Vegas" treats the story of a suicidal
alcoholic and his companion, a hooker with a heart of gold, as if it were operatically tragic. In a practical sense, Ben, the character played by Nicolas Cage, is only in Las Vegas because the bars would always close on him in Los Angeles. In a metaphorical sense, though, the city is a perfect place to escape from life as it is lived everywhere else. In reality as well as in film, it can be quite easy for life in Las Vegas to slide imperceptibly into a wash of colored lights, the night fusing into the day in an otherworldly haze. It makes sense, then, that when Ben is asked at the beginning of the film what he is going to do after being fired from his job, he replied that he is headed for Las Vegas. This is an ironic inversion of the “I’m going to Disneyland” line spoken by members of winning sports teams. When the name of Ben’s motel appears to read “The Hole You’re In” rather than “The Whole Year Inn,” the audience gets a sense of the appropriateness of the city as a place in which to spiral into oblivion. The segment of “Aria” directed by Franc Roddam also uses Las Vegas as a tragic last stop for a young man and woman who drive in from the desert, make love in a downtown hotel room with neon lights pouring through the windows, and then slit their wrists in the bathtub, all to the accompaniment of Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde.” In all of these films, then, Las Vegas represents escape, either as an act of happiness or of desperation.

The presence of gambling on a huge scale gives Las Vegas a built-in, all-purpose metaphor, especially when the city is used as a symbol of the vagaries of chance. The most extravagant use of this motif is in “Destiny Turns on the Radio,” in which Quentin Tarantino plays Johnny Destiny, who is described
by a character named Thoreau as a “manitou,” an “animistic spirit” who rises out of the swimming pool of the Marilyn Motel because the “gambling ritual conjured a deity” to represent the forces of chance. Johnny Destiny thus personifies the possibilities inherent in Las Vegas, and his interactions with the other characters reflect the surprising tricks that fortune can play on people.

The complementary films “Honeymoon in Vegas” and “Indecent Proposal” also deal with the effect that fortune can have on ordinary people. In the comedy “Honeymoon in Vegas,” Nicolas Cage loses his fiancee, Sara Jessica Parker, to James Caan as repayment on a $65,000 debt incurred in a high-stakes poker game. In the drama “Indecent Proposal,” after losing all their money gambling, Woody Harrelson then loses his wife, Demi Moore, to Robert Redford in exchange for $1 million. In both films, the male character is consumed by regret and jealousy, the female is dazzled and manipulated by the wealthy older man, and the older man is forced to give up the woman because it is not right that they should be together. Love conquers both the whims of chance and the human frailties of greed and envy, but the endings of the films differ. In “Honeymoon in Vegas,” the complications are resolved in a vast display of Vegas style: Cage is in his Elvis jumpsuit, Parker in her showgirl outfit, and their entire wedding chapel is populated by the Flying Elvises (Utah chapter). “Indecent Proposal,” a moodier, more ponderous film, ends with the couple on a foggy pier in California, worlds away from the influence of chance, symbolized by the two-headed coin that Demi Moore holds in her hand. For the comedy, then, chance as symbolized by Las Vegas
can be embraced for its ability to produce happiness, but for the drama the city
must be abandoned in order to escape fortune's pernicious influence.

Closely related to the notion that chance is the governing force of Las
Vegas is the idea that the city represents a version of the American Dream.
Films in this genre depict Las Vegas as an arena in which, regardless of
history, the individual can make a fresh start, follow his or her dreams, and
become a success in one way or another. One of the strongest expressions of
this notion is "Bugsy," which manages to simultaneously follow the general
thrust of historical events and also to mythologize these events in such a way
that the gangster Bugsy Siegel becomes a new Gatsby, gaining an inspiration
in the midst of the desert which leads to the construction of the first great
luxury resort, the Flamingo. Like Gatsby, Bugsy is martyred for his dream, but
the film's conclusion vindicates him when the camera glides up the present-
day Strip and shows how reality has surpassed Bugsy's vision. The theme of
personal validation is often expressed better in images than in words; the
scene where Bugsy walks into the desert and lifts his arms in an ecstatic
vision of a new Las Vegas evokes both the longing of the dreamer and the
hubris of the gangster. Likewise, the scene in "The Electric Horseman" in
which Robert Redford rides his light-festooned horse out of Caesars Palace, up
the Strip, and out of town, expresses the frustration of Redford's character, a
former rodeo star, at being packaged as a commodity in his capacity as a
spokesman for a cereal company.

Even the otherwise-terrible "Showgirls" comes through when it wants
to express the notion of individual freedom and personal potential. The best
scene in “Showgirls” is, not surprisingly, one entirely without dialogue: Elizabeth Berkley as Nomi Malone sits atop the parking garage of the Barbary Coast eating a hamburger. The camera rises up behind her, showing us the lights of the Flamingo Hilton next door, then it swings around to show Caesars Palace across the street and, in the distance, the sun setting behind the Spring Mountains. This scene symbolizes Nomi’s unquenchable individualism and her refusal to abide by any rules but her own, since she has been ordered by the people who run the show in which she dances to eat only brown rice to keep her figure. Surrounded by the gaudy trappings of Las Vegas, Nomi (whose very name evokes self-knowledge: “know me”) asserts her own unique identity, so that when she is asked at the end of the film, “What did you win?” she can answer “Me.” These films, then, express the American dream of succeeding by bettering one’s self without compromising one’s principles, and Las Vegas is used either as the symbol of the artificiality which must be overcome or of the personal freedom which allows the city to thrive, or as a combination of both. Either way, self-determination triumphs.

Just as in novels and short stories, then, the depiction of Las Vegas in films shows a multiplicity of interpretations. These interpretations make use of the city’s major characteristics of wealth, transience, and chance, and the films are able to add a visual dimension to these characteristics which the written word can only approximate. The ever-increasing number of films which use Las Vegas almost as a character itself indicates the richness of the city as material for the visual medium. If the past is any indication, the film

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depictions of Las Vegas will continue to focus on these attributes in a way that is permitted in no other setting.
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