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# The Noble Hustle: Poker, Beef Jerky, And Death



## Synopsis

"I have a good poker face because I am half dead inside." So begins the hilarious and unexpectedly moving adventures of an amateur player who lucked into a seat at the biggest card game in town - the World Series of Poker. In 2011 Grantland magazine sent award-winning novelist Colson Whitehead to brave the harrowing, seven-day gauntlet of the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas. It was the assignment of a lifetime, except for one hitch - he'd never played in a casino tournament before. With just six weeks to train, our humble narrator plunged into the gritty subculture of high-stakes Texas Hold'em. There's poker here, sure, which means joy and heartbreak, grizzled cowboys from the game's golden age, and teenage hotshots weaned on internet gambling. Not to mention the overlooked problem of coordinating Atlantic City bus schedules with your kid's drop-off and pick-up at school. And then there's Vegas. In a world full of long shots and short odds, *The Noble Hustle* is a sure bet, a raucously funny social satire whose main target is the author himself. Whether you've been playing cards your whole life or have never picked up a hand, you're sure to agree that this book contains some of the best writing about beef jerky ever put to paper.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

REVIEWED BY LAURA First of all, you should know that I am a total sucker for a good "stunt memoir" (or "participatory journalism," if you want to get fancy). You cooked a Julia Child recipe every day for a year? I want to read about it. Read the entire Encyclopedia Britannica? I'll preorder your book. Played in the World Series of Poker (WSOP) as a reporter for a magazine? I'm all-in, if

you will. My fascination with getting a peek into different subcultures is definitely satisfied by authors doing crazy things and then writing about them. This, however, is not your typical stunt memoir. So for a while I was a little confused--I wanted more of a plot, more of an inside scoop on the scene at the WSOP. Then it finally hit me--he's doing a satire of all of those other stunt memoirs! Gosh, that's clever! Because while I do love those stunt memoirs, they usually are pretty predictable--person decides to do something crazy/unique/ill-advised, does it, writes about it, learns a valuable life lesson and then finds love/a job/a new passion for living. This book is like the anti-that. And Colson Whitehead flat-out won me over with his satirical sense of humor, witty observations, and terrific writing. Whitehead is an AMAZING writer! His writing is so slick sometimes I almost couldn't stand it. At the beginning, he takes some time to explain the game of poker to those readers who aren't familiar with it: "To start, when judging a five-card hand of random crap, the highest card determines its value...Whoever has the better stuff wins. Sound familiar, American lackeys of late-stage capitalism?" Come on, that's pretty funny, right? Well, the whole book is basically like that. I'm not kidding.

You know what would be a great story? A novelist and casual home-game poker player gets sent to Las Vegas by a magazine. Using his expense money to enter a satellite tournament, he'd win to buy into the main event at the World Series of Poker. He'd get to the final table, and hobnob with top pros and old-style outlaw Vegas royalty, while thinking of life and friends and wife and kids. Between hands he'd get involved in a murder trial of a stripper accused of using a horror-movie technique to dispatch a casino owner. The whole tangled tale would climax in a double lap-dance session. That, of course, was Jim McManus' great *Positively Fifth Street*. Take away the murder, stripper, great title, lap dance, celebrities, constructive thinking and journey from lowly satellite seat to the final table and you have Colson Whitehead's interesting slacker version. It's much shorter without all the collateral stuff, and is intensely negative both in the sense accentuating unpleasant aspects of everything and showing more interest in what is missing than what is happening. *The Noble Hustle* belongs to an older poker tradition, the gritty decay of *The Man with the Golden Arm* and

I'm new to Colson Whitehead's writing, but I'm always on the lookout for a good book about gambling and Las Vegas. *The Noble Hustle* filled the bill on both scores, and does it without any scams or cheating of any kind, which must be a first for this kind of book. Whitehead emphasizes the fact that he lives in a state of anhedonia (or *The State of Anhedonia*, as he puts it) which means he is unable to experience pleasure. Perhaps he really does have a degree of anhedonia, but he

seems to like playing poker, he certainly enjoys eating beef jerky, and he must get a kick out of writing, because he's pretty good at it. The narrative follows Whitehead, a New York novelist, practicing to compete in the World Series of Poker. He is a casual player but is ramping up his game in preparation to write a magazine article about the World Series experience. He plays in tournaments in Atlantic City to get toughened up. Then it's on to the Series in Las Vegas. Along the way he meets some characters, such as The Coach, a poker tournament pro who looks like an upper middle class housewife. She gives him pointers and strategies and cheers him on. As something of a fish out of water, she can relate to Whitehead, who is also not the typical Las Vegas pro poker player, with his dreadlocks and lack of a killer instinct. But in his favor, he has an unbeatable poker face, due of course, to his anhedonia. Whitehead has a light way of writing, even as he maintains his gloomy demeanor. He tells of a player at the World Series who encourages him to check out the "hooker bar," which throws Whitehead, since that seems a bit forward even for Las Vegas. He pretends not to realize that the enthusiastic patron was probably talking about a "hookah" lounge.

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