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Book Review

Double Down: Reflections on Gambling and Loss

*By Frederick and Steven Barthelme (1999).
New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 198 pages. Cloth cover.
Price: US\$24.00. ISBN: 039-595-429-0.*

*Reviewed by Nigel E. Turner, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
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Barry Fritz, Quinnipiac University, Hamden, Connecticut, USA

Double Down by Frederick and Steven Barthelme is an autobiographical account of two brothers' descent into gambling addiction. The twist is that it is not the gambling losses, but a bizarre legal hassle that form the conflict and (partial) resolution of the plot.

In the book, the Barthelme brothers describe how they started gambling casually, often going to the casino with friends for a good night out. After their mother's death, their gambling escalated and it increased to problematic levels following their father's death.

Double Down introduces gambling counsellors and researchers to the world of gamblers in action; gamblers that don't really want to quit. The book nicely illustrates to the reader that social class, education and intelligence do not necessarily immunize people against becoming problem gamblers. These brothers are not stereotypes of degenerate gamblers but rather more akin to the professor-gambler portrayed by James Caan in the film *The Gambler*.

The brothers do not gamble because they hate themselves or as a way to punish themselves. Difficulty coping with the deaths of their parents may play a role in their problem, but their main motivation appears to be the thrill of the experience rather than escape. The brothers want to win but can tolerate losing. In fact, they claim that losing is nearly as good as winning. About halfway through the book, they challenge the reader to experience a big loss in order to understand it. But perhaps the brothers' losses were little different from their wins because the losses have no real consequences for them. Through their jobs as English professors and their inheritances, the brothers have no shortage of money to gamble with. Even by the end of the story, after losing in excess of \$250,000, they still appear to have enough money left to pay for a good lawyer.

The book also shows how gambling as a social activity does not necessarily protect people from developing gambling problems. Not only do the brothers encourage one another to go to the casino, but they also prevent each other from leaving. There are instances in the book where one of them is ready to leave the casino, but the other wants to stay to win back his losses, so the first one stays, and thus, continues to gamble. Sometimes, the brothers played all night since they were never ready to leave at the same time.

Another insight is the apparent awareness of the addiction and the nearly complete lack of motivation to do anything about it. The brothers appear to be "happily" addicted to gambling.

The weakest parts of the story are the stories of their childhood and their relationships with their parents. The family history is pretty ordinary—lacking any history of abuse, poverty, drug use, gambling problems or trauma that would make their family a plausible source of the problem. Perhaps their emotionally complex family history is a factor, but nothing leads the reader to say "There's the problem; there's the cause." This suggests that they were not

trying to escape from anything in particular, but instead, acting like spoiled middle-class kids that just want to have fun.

The one strong family connection is the deaths of three family members in rapid succession: their eldest brother, Don, followed by their mother, and then, their father. These deaths contributed to an acceleration of their gambling problems, but their problems appear to have started before the deaths. The main effect of the deaths and the substantial inheritance they received was to lessen the threat of any real financial consequences of gambling.

While too much space is taken up regarding their rather ordinary relationship with their parents, hardly any space is given to discussing the role of their wives and girlfriends. For instance, exactly how did Stephen's wife feel while he was throwing away his inheritance? The only hint we get from the book is a brief mention of a credit card ritual. Before heading off to a casino, Stephen would take out his credit cards and leave them on the table, which was an empty gesture since the brothers would obtain casino credit.

Also unexplained is the death of their brother Don and its effect on them. When did it occur relative to the beginning of their gambling problems? The authors hardly mention Don's death, except to say that it caused them both to quit smoking.

The main conflict that drives the plot of the story is that the brothers are accused and arrested for colluding with a dealer to try and cheat the casino. The casino had no real evidence other than a few sloppy plays by the dealer. It's a cautionary tale that suggests that you should not expect a casino to appreciate you after you gamble away your money. It is also a warning about the political power of the gambling industry in the United States.

At the end of the book, the reader is left dangling without any real resolution of the story or the gambling problems; although the flap on the book cover informs you that the case was dismissed. It is particularly interesting how the casino seemed to have so much difficulty understanding these brothers, and assumed that after gambling away so much money, the brothers must want to cheat.

We recommend this book for its insights into the motivations for problem gambling. The reasons offered for their gambling passion are varied. They include grieving, early wins and an emotionally complicated family of origin. But the brothers are most convincing when they discuss the thrill of risk and the excitement of entering a social world separated from their ordinary lives. The price the authors pay for this spice in their life, however, is excessive:

\$250,000.

Why do people gamble? There is no single reason. Part of this book's value for counsellors and researchers is that it paints a picture of interconnecting dots, which journals in the field have difficulty capturing. It also left these reviewers with a desire to visit this changing part of the Mississippi landscape. We'd like to taste that Gulf seafood and see the bright lights on the beaches

This book review was not peer-reviewed.

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Barry Fritz is professor of Psychology at Quinnipiac University, Hamden, Connecticut. He is a member of the board of the Connecticut Council on Problem Gambling. He graduated with a BA from the University of Vermont, an MA from Connecticut College, and a PhD from Yeshiva University.

"My current research interests are focused on understanding the motivation to gamble and those factors which differentiate between problem gamblers and recreational gamblers. I enjoy the game of poker and hope that my research will keep

me on the recreational side of the table."

Video Review

Winning Strategies: Slots with Video Poker (1997)

Running time: 30 minutes

Producer: Winning Strategies

Available at Amazon.com for US \$17.99

Reviewed by Nigel E. Turner, PhD

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Late one Saturday night, I saw an advertisement on TV for a video about how to win at slots. My first reaction was "How can they legally sell such crap?" The advertisement promised legal "casino-busting strategies ... designed to make you a better, smarter slots player." "Not possible," I said to myself, but being curious, I ordered a copy.

The big surprise was that it was actually quite good. The video is part of Frank Scoblete's Winning Strategies series and is narrated by Frank Scoblete. James Coburn briefly introduces the video and narrates a few bridging sequences. Far from being filled with misinformation, the video contains a lot of good information about slots. It includes a brief history of slots, a discussion of how slots actually work, a comparison of payouts in various cities around North America, money management strategies and popular myths about slots and why they aren't true. There is a brief section near the end on video poker, but it's mostly just a plug for yet another video devoted entirely to video poker.

My aim in writing this review is to describe the extent to which the information in the video is accurate or misleading and to evaluate the video for potential educational or counselling uses.

Overall, the video gives a number of good tips. It provides information about the nature of slot play and the different types of games available. It recommends using the spin button rather than the lever since less work is

involved. It recommends playing in your "comfort zone," only betting with money you feel comfortable about losing. It also suggests avoiding "progressive machines." A progressive machine is one in which the top prize increases each time a person plays the machine until the jackpot is won. These machines tend to have a lower payout to compensate for the large jackpot prize. The video also advises avoiding the oversized machines called "Big Berthas" that have a lower payout percentage than other slots because they take up more room.

But this video won't escape criticism completely—a few of the points were not adequately explained. In addition, the video encourages betting with "maximum coins" (i.e. the maximum bet allowed—often three or five quarters on a quarter machine) because the best payout comes with larger denominations. This is true. Typically, a slot may pay out 88 per cent for one quarter, but 92 per cent with three quarters. So, max coin does produce a higher payout, but most often the minimum bet will still ultimately lead to lower losses in spite of the lower payback. The video does state that losing 10 per cent of \$10 is still less than losing two per cent of \$100, but I don't feel that the point is made strongly enough. I also didn't like the way the video implies that money management strategies can help you win. They can't. They can only help you avoid losing too much money. The video may influence viewers and give them undue confidence in the strategies recommended in the video. As a result, they may gamble thinking that money management can help them win.

Many problem gamblers might benefit from watching parts of this video. However, be very selective about which parts of the video to show them because some sections promote the idea that slots are fun and exciting. The sections on how slots work and gambling myths are particularly good and would be appropriate for clients. The section about money management strategies may not be helpful because it sounds like keeping to the system will help you win. However, keeping to the system will only limit how much you lose. For a non-problem population (i.e. primary prevention and education), the entire video may be appropriate if followed by a brief discussion of the limits of money management.

This video is actually quite good and sections of it might be useful in a clinical setting, but only under supervision and with appropriate debriefing. Although it comes with criticism, it does provide better information than many other "how to gamble" books and videos. I have only two objections. First, the promised video poker section was little more than a plug for another video. (Advertising gambling in books and videos is very common.) Second, the advertisement of this video promises strategies that will help you win. Such a promise would be impossible since slot wins are purely a matter of chance; however, people will

buy the product expecting to learn how to win.

They've marketed it quite cleverly —it doesn't say you will win, but only that you "might" win since careful playing strategies —specifically money management —can stretch your playing time without stretching your risk. I suspect that the people who will buy this video after watching the advertisement will be annoyed when they realize that it doesn't tell them how to win. However, it would be interesting to survey people who purchased the video to see if the video influenced how they play.

This video review was not peer-reviewed.

Submitted: August 1, 2000

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