

book review

Mike Matusow: Check-Raising the Devil

By Mike Matusow, Amy Calistri, and Tim Lavalli. (2009). Cardoza Publishing: Las Vegas, NV. 288 pp., ISBN: 9781580422611. \$24.95 USD (hardcover).

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The world of professional poker is filled with colourful characters. There are the grizzled veterans who learned their chops as road gamblers and have been staples in Las Vegas cardrooms since the early days of the Strip. Then there are the fresh-faced Internet poker phenoms, often barely old enough to play in brick-and-mortar casinos. Yet another generation of poker professionals rose through the ranks long after the veterans had established themselves and well before the Internet poker boom of the early 2000s — players like Phil Hellmuth, Daniel Negreanu, and Phil Ivey. Mike Matusow, nicknamed “The Mouth” for his loud and boorish personality, belongs to this latter pedigree and is perhaps the most colourful character of all. While there are numerous other players who have enjoyed more success in terms of poker accomplishments, certainly few, if any, have life stories that warrant a full-length autobiography. Matusow’s story certainly does. His publicly erratic behaviours, often documented in radio interviews and television broadcasts, have made him an intriguing figure, and his story has been long awaited by those interested in the world of poker.

Check-Raising the Devil chronicles Matusow’s gambling career up to present day, covering approximately 15 years. The book begins in his early adulthood when Matusow found himself living in a trailer and feeding a video poker addiction with weekly paychecks from a job at his parents’ furniture store in Las Vegas. It describes his rapid introduction and immersion into poker, a game which seems to have served as a life preserver that prevented him from sinking into a seemingly inevitable gambling problem. From this point, we then follow his volatile journey as a professional player, including a foray as a poker dealer and being backed by other poker players so that he could afford to play in some of the highest stakes games in the world.

The book is candid, and Matusow is more than willing to point out his faults. His mental health problems are a focal point of his life story as he documents his ongoing struggles with bipolar disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). A large portion of his story chronicles his involvement in the Las Vegas drug scene and 6-month incarceration in 2005 for participating in a drug deal. Matusow, completely drug-free until adulthood, describes his introduction to street drugs and the chaotic results that followed. Initially, he uses the street drug ecstasy (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, or MDMA) to overcome his social anxiety and to escape depressive episodes that came along with his undiagnosed bipolar disorder. Eventually, he abuses crystal meth

(methamphetamine) to augment his poker game, claiming it helps him concentrate and counteract symptoms of ADHD. He suspects his ADHD was in a prodromal state before being exacerbated by brain damage caused by ecstasy abuse. It is an often sad and disturbing journey towards the harsh realization that he did a great deal of damage to himself. His eventual road to recovery comes with the help of mental health professionals – a positive message for those who may be able to identify with some of Matusow's struggles.

Matusow's autobiography was originally slated to be co-authored by Michael Craig, author of *The Professor, the Banker, and the Suicide King*, a well-written and absorbing retelling of a series of ultra-high stakes poker games. I suspect that Matusow's autobiography would have taken on a completely different tone under Craig's pen. Being written by Matusow and his co-authors, Amy Calistri and Tim Lavalli, the book's first-person narrative is riddled with colloquialisms and crude language. Based on my familiarity with Matusow's conversational style from radio shows, sound clips, and television appearances, the prose captures his voice well. Although it is authentic, it is also distracting at times; it seems that the book compromises good writing for the genuine portrayal of Matusow's propensity to insert curse words unnecessarily into every other sentence.

Co-authors Amy Calistri and Tim Lavalli are both well-respected authors in the poker industry, having contributed to a wide variety of print and online poker publications. Dubbed "The Poker Shrink" in the poker industry, Lavalli holds a PhD in East-West psychology. His expertise is an asset, as large portions of the book are devoted to discussing Matusow's complicated mental health issues. Clearly, Lavalli developed a good understanding of Matusow's psychological difficulties and was able to communicate them to a general audience in a concise yet reasonably sophisticated manner.

While his mental health issues are adequately addressed in the book, it is disappointing that the issue of gambling addiction is not discussed in any detail. If you were to ask Matusow about it, I am sure he would argue that this issue was not broached because poker is not gambling to him and that therefore the point is moot. Clearly, his results show him to be a successful player, but the issue could have been explored further. Matusow himself admits that he had a gambling problem before being introduced to poker but does not explicitly address poker as a potentially addictive form of gambling. Throughout the book, he tends to attribute his losses to bad luck or a dip in his mental and emotional state, while his wins are invariably attributed to elevations in his focus and determination. If only it was that easy! To be fair, these are likely accurate representations of Matusow's perceptions. He also demonstrates some insight near the end of the book about the importance of maintaining balance by growing as a person outside of poker.

Overall, *Check-Raising the Devil* is a fascinating read for those interested in seeing professional poker through the eyes of one of poker's larger-than-life figures. Matusow's story is certainly not typical to poker professionals, but that is what makes this book so compelling. Based on his account, Matusow should consider himself exceptionally lucky to still be breathing, let alone enjoying the success he has experienced in a profession that is quick to chew up and spit out everyone aside from the most talented and fortunate.