

Bringing Down the House by Ben Mezrich

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Leading a Double Life and Knowing When to Quit

Review by Adam H. 2014

“He hadn’t invented the System. He was just one of the lucky few smart enough (to) pull it off.”

The MIT students in Ben Mezrich’s book *Bringing Down the House* are not just academically superior, but use their intelligence to beat Vegas at its own game by counting cards. In the book, MIT student Kevin Lewis gets roped into a blackjack team by his two friends, Martinez and Fisher, who dropped out of MIT to pursue the Vegas life. Leading a double life, Kevin struggles to maintain the balance between reality in Boston, and the fake identities in Vegas. Overtime, Kevin decides that the “labs and test tubes” back home do not suit his desire for pleasure, and becomes more attached to his life as a Big Player in the casinos.

As the story progresses, the threats in Vegas develop when the team has pictures sent to casinos all around, keeping them banned from every casino. Kevin decides that he needs a real job in addition to gambling, arising tension between the group. Later, Kevin decides that it is too dangerous to count cards anymore as every casino knows who he is and backs out of one trip. This incident caused the team to divide into two, Kevin’s team, and Fisher and Martinez’s team. After the team splits up, Kevin receives a letter for an IRS audit, and understands that “The most important decision a card counter ever has to make is the decision to walk away.” At this point in the book, Kevin realizes which life he is going to lead, the one in Vegas, or back in Boston.

One weakness of *Bringing Down the House* is that the perspective of the narrator changes. In the book, the story goes from first person limited from Kevin Lewis's perspective to first person limited from the perspective of Ben Mezrich himself. The book can get a boring at some points, but the story's constant twist helps the reader overlook that.

One strength of the book is that the author allows the reader to understand the motives behind each character's decision. He does this through his detailed characterization of each member of the blackjack team. The author displays the emotion of fear in Kevin as he encounters his first real dangerous situation, and explains how "Kevin stepped around him and started for the door. He was trying hard not to panic. It was his first brush with the real possibility of being back-roomed. He didn't see any security personnel nearby, but he wasn't going to wait around for them to show up." In addition, he shows how Kevin's friend, Fisher, is desperate for the blackjack team when Fisher says, "Come on, Kev. This is a hobby to you. This is our livelihood. You've never been willing to commit to this one hundred percent. And now we've learned that anything less is dangerous." Overall, Mezrich's change of perspective is far inferior to his precise characterization.

High school students should go out and read this book because the characters in the book are college age. This makes it easier for students to make connection between their life and the lives of the card-counters in the story. Second, the book revolves around the idea of hitting the jackpot and becoming rich with minimal effort, which could attract the attention of the many teen readers who feel discontent to the thought of having to work long tedious hours behind a desk just to provide for themselves in the future. The book would appeal to readers because most students are interested in how the mathematical concepts of probability can apply in the real-

world to count-cards. Finally, the book might interest high school students because the story is always leaving the reader wanting more as danger lurks closely behind.

Mezrich not only achieved success through his book *Bringing Down the House*, but wrote another hit story called *The Accidental Billionaire* about the founding of Facebook. Later, both books would be produced into Golden Globe winning films titled *21* and *The Social Network*. While researching for *Bringing Down the House*, Mezrich attempted to better understand the perspective of Kevin when he experienced the lifestyle of a Vegas card-counter by smuggling \$250,000 dollars through airport security just as Kevin Lewis had. Another interesting point about Mezrich is that he differs from other non-fiction writer in that he implements a narrative style of writing in his books. This is different from other authors in that most non-fiction works are written in a form where the authors tell the story, whereas in *Bringing Down the House*, Mezrich told the story as if he were the narrator and experienced many of the events himself. This has brought much criticism to him as an author from purist writers, however, I feel that Mezrich's narrative style for non-fiction improves the story as it is unique to his books.