



Poker Face: A Girlhood Among Gamblers

Katy Lederer

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“The intricacies of family and the complexities of the games they play mingle wonderfully here in a memoir quite unlike any other.”—George Plimpton, author of **Truman Capote**

Katy Lederer grew up on the bucolic campus of an exclusive East Coast boarding school where her father taught English, her mother retreated into crosswords and scotch, and her much older siblings played “grown-up” games like gin rummy and chess. But Katy faced much more than the typical trials of childhood. Within the confines of the Lederer household an unlikely transformation was brewing, one that would turn this darkly intellectual and game-happy group into a family of professional gamblers.

Poker Face is Katy Lederer’s perceptive account of her family’s lively history. From the long kitchen table where her mother played what seemed an endless game of solitaire, to the seedy New York bars where her brother first learned to play poker, to the glamorous Bellagio casino in Las Vegas, where her sister and brother wager hundreds of thousands of dollars a night at the tables, Lederer takes us on a tragicomic journey through a world where intelligence and deceit are used equally as currency. Not since Mary McCarthy’s **Memories of a Catholic Girlhood** has a writer cast such a witty and astringently analytic eye on the demands of growing up.

An unflinching exploration of trust and betrayal, competition, suspicion, and unconventional familial love, **Poker Face** is a testament to the human spirit’s inventiveness when faced with unusually difficult odds.

Poker Face: A Girlhood Among Gamblers Details

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Don Edgar says

I had played poker against Katy a few times although I had never really spoken to her. She always seemed out-of-place (In a stylish New England finishing-school sort of way) in the various casinos which she frequented for a time. ... So when I saw the book, and figured out who she was, I pounced.

It turned out that my personal experiences were very closely aligned with hers ... same gambling venues ... same universities (in inverted order) ... same cities and so on.

I loved the book. She does a great job of relating how growing up in an educated (but poor) family situation ruled the course of her life for a time ... but in the end she seemed to find her compass and headed off into the real world of New York City.

(I later saw it classified as a "Feminist memoir" book ... but I must have missed that part.)

Joanie says

This book was interesting to me largely because of the author's views of her older brother and sister, professional poker players Howard Lederer and Annie Duke. I am familiar with her siblings' careers and so found this book interesting. Outside of that, it was kind of a generic memoir, and a little patchy.

Guy Choate says

I bought this book years ago, when still followed professional poker enough to know who they were. I knew who Lederer's siblings were from TV. This book feels like it's trying to be about them, but it's masked as a memoir about the author. She's using her siblings as a tool to build intrigue, but there's no payoff because we're always on the outside of what's actually being presented.

Danny Raz says

Thoroughly enjoyable memoir from the younger sister of poker stars Howard Lederer and Annie Duke. Howard Lederer's story--which started with hotly contested chess matches against his father, and ended with him being one of the most feared sports and poker gamblers in the world--fascinated me the most. Katy Lederer's struggle to find her place in an ultra-competitive family gave the book a satisfying arc. Interesting read, especially if you're into high-stakes gaming.

Linnea says

More of a memoir than a poker memoir (see her sister, Annie Duke's *_How I Raised, Folded, Bluffed, Flirted, Cursed and Won Millions at the World Series of Poker_* for a more focused poker memoir), this is a compelling look at a highly intelligent, but odd and dysfunctional family. It has some interesting ideas about what draws people to certain kinds of games and professions.

Lindz-o says

I read the whole book, which is something. Some of the writing was beautiful and poetic (I was not surprised to learn that the author is also a poet), but many of the scenes and chapters felt disjointed and out of place. I often felt like the author lost her train of thought and forgot why she was including certain scenes. Overall, the story wasn't as riveting or interesting as I hoped it would be.

Jason Koivu says

These are the books that get written and read just after a wave has crested. In this case, that wave was the Texas Hold 'Em poker craze.

Everybody was doing it! It was 2004 and an absolute unknown player, Chris Moneymaker, had just won the most highly coveted World Series of Poker championship. This caused an incredible stir of interest in poker, almost a rebirth. It brought instant world-wide recognition to the game of Texas Hold 'Em, a variant on the five card stud standard known and played by every Tom, Dick and Harry since the day when guys were actually named Tom, Dick and Harry. It seemed like overnight everyone was playing it. Poker pros and so-called experts came out with how-to books. Movies were being made. ESPN was flogging the hell out of recorded tournaments and soon even the Travel Channel would be showing their own show on poker.

Inevitably everyone remotely related to poker would attempt to cash in on the craze. Enter *Poker Face: A Girlhood Among Gamblers*.

Its author, Katy Lederer, is the sister of poker great Howard "The Professor" Lederer, a sort of old man whizz-kid who takes a scientific approach to playing the game, as well as Annie Duke, widely considered the best female player of all time. As one would imagine, lil' sis Katy grew up surrounded by game. Perhaps inundated is the word I'm looking for.

Poker Face is the sort of book one reads because they are not only interested in poker, but also the people behind the game. The Lederers rub elbows on a personal level with all the big names, so a book like this should give the reader at least a little insight to what these people are like away from the table. Book's like this can shed light on the human side, or perhaps in-human side, of those who are fully wrapped up within this multi-million dollar industry. But don't get too excited. *Poker Face* does do a *little* of that, but much of it is about Katy's experiences growing up with poker as the main backdrop. This is about Katy...Katy! Katy! Katy!

Ann Diab says

I am left mostly with this as an impression: " ... ". Some of the stories in the book were interesting. Many of them feel rushed and oddly inserted. Even though all of the depictions are expertly crafted, mostly you are left wondering why this story was told at all.

Odd timing that I picked up this book right around the time the Justice Department brought allegations against the book's impetus, Howard Lederer. I had been meaning to read it ever since it was published, which was only a couple of years after my son shared a kindergarten class with Lederer's firstborn.

Bibi Rose says

Parts of this book were excellent, but I wanted to read more about the gambling. The really good stuff about that was mostly dumped in via hurried dialogue.

For a family saga with a gambling theme I much prefer DOUBLE DOWN by the Barthelme brothers.

Tyler Jones says

The first half of the book focuses on the author's childhood. The youngest of three kids in a dysfunctional home, Lederer tries to recreate how such turbulent times had seemed to her as a very young and innocent girl. Somehow, to me, this part did not seem completely authentic. It is only when she gets into her twenties and follows her brother and sister to Las Vegas that her insights, to me, seem genuine and interesting. Lederer, while not a poker force like her siblings, does a great job in explaining the spirit and psychology of the game, the lure of Vegas, and the dark side of gambling. I like books that take a step back and try to explain the allure of games like poker, and the role chance plays in our lives.

Russell says

I started this book years ago, thought it sucked and put it down. Then recently I saw it sitting there taunting me and decided to try again. God only knows why I would do that to myself.

Pretend that you're reading a Ben Mezrich book. It's all about smart young people, doing shady shit and getting rich. Only, instead of Mezrich gleefully guiding you through a sordid life of excess, Lederer is appalled by the things around her (even her own participation in the shadiness) and desperately wants you to be appalled too. There's no fun behind the writing. It's just bitterness and judgement. 'Wah, my brother and sister were mean to me when I was young (sort of) and now they make gobs of money playing games instead of having normal jobs. Wah wah wah.' Shut up, Katy Lederer. To make matters worse she sprinkles in flowery observations about her surroundings as though she can barely contain her desire to write unbearably sappy poetry. Just stop it already. (By the way, she DOES actually write sappy poetry and has had some of it published.)

If you're a curmudgeonly, judgemental old hag who begrudges the people around you their successes and happinesses this book is for you. If you aren't an awful person who sucks at life, skip it.

David Long says

Poet Katy Lederer re-counts a childhood and young adulthood growing up, literally in a House of Games. Youngest daughter of word maven Richard Lederer and kid sister to poker pros Howard Lederer and Annie Duke, she tells a compelling story of an unusually accomplished though frequently difficult and dysfunctional family.

Tim says

Sister to Howard (I hate to say it, but he's probably a crook) Lederer and Annie Duke, the semi-famous poker player; it's really a memoir of her life as a Lederer (Richard Lederer the word guy is their father). A really rewarding book by a talented writer (and probably not just for poker players).

Paula says

Katy Lederer's trajectory in becoming a poet was perhaps more unusual than most, and it is that "growing up" that she tells the tale of in her memoir *Poker Face*. The story/bio has all the elements of a great read considering that her mother (a purported "genius") and older brother and sister all become professional gamblers, first in NY and subsequently in Las Vegas, that saddest and most glittery of American cities. Her father teaches for many years at an elite high school for the very rich in New England, and then becomes an author of books about words and word games. It is in such an environment (where else could a comfortable middle class family feel impoverished?) that the family gets its start and where it falls apart. The materials are so promising, but somehow it doesn't all add up to more than a mildly engaging book.

Ensiform says

The author, a poet and daughter of author Richard Lederer, tells of his quietly dysfunctional family: her neurotic father, alcoholic mother, and siblings who left home to become heavy hitter poker players in Vegas. Lederer writes well, with an engaging style that is polished yet simple.

But her memoir is overall too light, a mosaic of only slightly related anecdotes --- her mother trying out for "Who Wants To Be a Millionaire," housesitting for her brother, adjusting to a wealthy boarding school. It's billed as, and needs, a more cohesive theme; the bits and pieces here about her siblings' rise for competitive kids in an intelligence-oriented family to Vegas players skirting the edges of licit employment are great, and there should be more here.
