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The Starlight Hotel Casino by William A. Douglass (review)

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William A. Douglass, *The Starlight Hotel Casino*. Hamilton, ON: Guernica Editions, 2023. 317 pp. Paper, \$21.95; Kindle, \$9.99.

In his long, fruitful career, William A. Douglass has climbed several high mountains of achievement. First and most important, he is the leading global authority on the Basques of the Old and New Worlds. He also established—and then led for thirty years—the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. In addition, Douglass is a prolific writer on the Basques, Italians, and a rich variety of other subjects. Plus, he has become a recognized leader of the gaming industry in Nevada. Now Douglass has jumped onto the literary scene with this first-rate novel on casino life and culture in Nevada and the United States.

Douglass's novel provides parallel and overlapping stories of the Starlight Casino in Reno and the unfolding life stories of several key characters. These attractive narratives are linked, providing strength and continuity in this intriguing novel. The most important of these stories is the relationship between James Fitzsimmons, the owner and leader of the Starlight, and his son Jim, who becomes the owner and leader when his father, now ninety and crumbling, steps aside from the casino leadership. In the father-son connections and in their several conversations, sometimes at odds and occasionally smoothly linked, we learn much about the casino business.

The next revealing relationship is that between Jerry Clinton, a manager at the Starlight, and Sue Johnson, a cocktail waitress at the casino. Both are coming off failed marriages (in fact, four terminated marriages for Jerry) but soon cling to one another. After a few months of romance and solidity, however, the relationship collapses. But, after a few second thoughts, Jerry and Sue are back together as the novel moves to a close.

Jim Fitzsimmons had similar problems in his marriage—almost non-marriage—to Dot (Dorothy). Their varying interests, their unwillingness to blend with one another, and Jim's crushing load as the Starlight is failing all lead to separation. Yet they too, after months of nearly irrational behavior, find new connections and are back together at the end.

For many readers the most attention-catching parts of the novel deal with the decline and fall of the Starlight casino. In these sections

we learn much about gambling in Nevada, the casino business in Reno, and the rising gambling competitors in Las Vegas, New Jersey, and among American Indian groups. These scenes, especially in Fitzsimmons and Jim–Jerry conversations, reveal large, valuable lessons about the essence and challenges of gambling in Reno and Nevada.

Another contribution of the novel meriting comment is the several conversations about books and ideas. Jerry, maybe a mouthpiece for the novel's author, speaks often about books and ideas that have attracted him. These conversations cover books and authors from the ancient classics to recent European and American literary works. Conversations involving especially Jerry and Jim—but others as well—deal with leadership, generally; but particularly about the Starlight, relationships with women, and attitudes about the nature of gambling. These chats are inviting gems for thoughtful readers.

The novel showcases several experiences key to understanding William Douglass and his eminent career, particularly the long-time work with casinos, first with Douglass's father and then on his own. Douglass has been part owner and administrator in several casinos. Also, we see here, in novelistic form, inklings of Douglass's nonstop travels as a researcher, in this case coverage of an insightful, revealing trip to several sites in Italy. Nor should one overlook Douglass's lifetime interests in and global travels to fish around the world. Also, some of Douglass's experiences as husband and father likely play out in these pages.

Altogether this novel is a jewel of a literary work. The book reveals that William Douglass, the noted Basque specialist, the experienced leader in the gambling industry, and prolific author of monographs, histories, and essays, is also a talented novelist. Onward to the next inviting work of fiction.

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