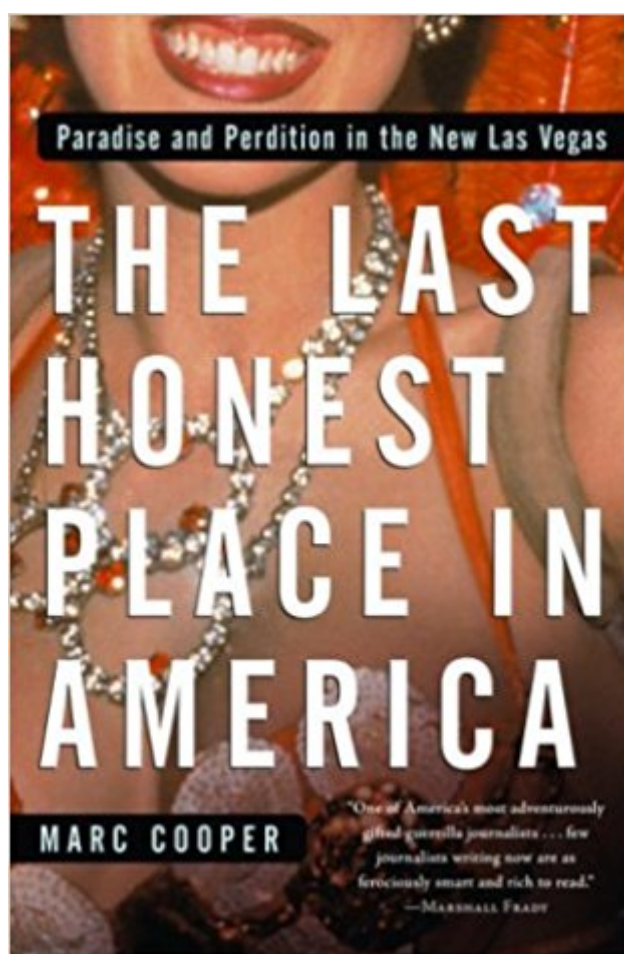


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The Last Honest Place In America: Paradise And Perdition In The New Las Vegas (Nation Books)



Synopsis

Las Vegas America begins with the dynamiting of the Desert Inn in October 2001, the moment when old Vegas "cool" died and the new corporate model claimed definitive victory. From this moment, Cooper takes us on a journey from the top of the Luxor Hotel's glass pyramid, down "the Strip," past the golden glow of the Mirage into the town's black ghetto. Along the way, the best-selling author introduces us to a cast of characters including casino king Steve Wynn and Tim Thuller, leader of the Vagabound Motorcycle Club. He explores life among Vegas's 75,000 union families and considers how outlaws and iconoclasts are adapting to life in the new corporate city. Finally Cooper strays beyond the Strip into a desolate landscape characterized by pawnshops, destitution, crime, and impending environmental crisis. "For me," writes Cooper, "Las Vegas is the last, most honest place in America. Vegas is often described as a city of dreams and fantasy, of tinselish make-believe. But this is getting backwards. Vegas is the American market ethic stripped completely bare, a mini-world totally free of the pretenses and protocols of modern consumer capitalism. Watching it operate with barely any mediation generates nothing short of an intellectual frisson."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As Britney Spears recently discovered, Las Vegas has a curiously powerful hold on people. And it has taken hold of Cooper, too; his book practically teems with his own fascination with Sin City. It

started when he was a kid, when his parents took him along on their gambling jaunts, and it's that enthrallment that Cooper seeks to explore and explain here. And he does it immediately post-September 11, which is on one hand crass, but on the other appropriate: is there a place for such unabashed superficiality in a more fearful and serious world? The answer, Cooper finds, is yes. Vegas has become a fixture of the American landscape, its "symbolic capital" in many ways. Indeed, Vegas presents a special allure to cultural theorists like Neil Postman, to whom this volume is dedicated. The city embraces its kitschy supremacy with its drive-thru chapels and casinos. But it's also undergoing an evolution, about which Cooper is somewhat wistful, away from its early, campy seediness and toward a more fully realized, corporate-run money machine. The book's pace has the feel of travelling along the Vegas strip, with dazzling, glorious details whizzing past that readers don't have much time to ponder. Cooper, a *Nation* contributing editor, writes well and has an eye for bizarre situations. But by book's end, much like after a Vegas weekend, readers may feel somewhat empty. They've seen a lot of bright, shiny things that don't have much substance, and while overwhelmed by the imagery they may not be quite sure what the point was. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Cooper, the veteran journalist (and radio-show host), begins with the destruction of the last vestige of the old Las Vegas: the Desert Inn, where the Rat Pack frolicked, demolished in 2001. Now the hotels are operated by corporations, not mobsters; the casinos are as much about entertainment as gambling; and the town is decidedly family friendly. But, as Cooper discovered, some things about the city never change. The casinos are still their own little worlds, cut off from the outside and designed to make the gambler forget that anything exists other than the table at which he is sitting. What makes this profile of Las Vegas fascinating is the way it works on two levels. As Cooper goes about showing us the remade city, he also falls prey to the allure of the old Vegas, the writer sinking so deeply into his story that he becomes a part of it, just another gambler pulled into the seductive world of the city that never sleeps. *New Journalism meets the New Vegas.* David Pitt Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

This is a fairly good hit and miss book on modern day Las Vegas. If you like Vegas, and want some snapshots of the modern incarnation thereof, this is a good book to read. There are some very interesting chapters (e.g. chapters on Oscar Goodman, and Binions) but there are also some so-so ones (e.g. homeless problem and transvestite stripper). The writing is average but the book moves along at a good pace. It is a good airplane read but there are more interesting books on Vegas out

there.

I loved this book, this should be required reading by any high school student. I think it played a significant role in my moving to Las Vegas.

The Last Honest Place in America covers a lot of the same ground that other books about Las Vegas have done in the past several years. Author Marc Cooper interviews a cross-section of Las Vegas types (stripper, blackjack dealer, casino owner, homeless advocate), reminisces about the old Las Vegas of the Mob, discusses some of the recent local scandals (the Binion murder, the political fight over lapdancing regulations that local columnists dubbed "G-Sting"), and profiles celebrity Mayor Oscar Goodman. If you haven't already read Hal Rothman's *The Grit Beneath the Glitter* and Pete Early's *Super Casino*, then *The Last Honest Place in America* is a fun introduction to the behind-the-scenes Las Vegas. However, there is something about Cooper's book that does stand out, and that is his interview with stripper Andrea Lee Hackett. Not only is Hackett a bit older than the other strippers at 49, but she is a full-time labor organizer as well. Although Vegas strippers aren't unionized (yet), Hackett works with the ACLU and labor organizations to protect her colleagues' rights. She is extremely articulate on labor issues and admits to being a Socialist and a former machinist at Boeing. Oh, and she used to be a man. It probably won't be long before someone does an in-depth study of unionism in Las Vegas. It is one of the few places in America where, because of unionism (and I am by no means an uncritical fan of unions), a hotel maid or a valet or dishwasher can make a decent living. This phenomenon is worth a book by itself, and *The Last Honest Place in America* is worth reading if only for Andrea Lee Hackett's story.

Marc Cooper's book is a collection of essays about Las Vegas. The first quarter of the book is a history of the city, which will be old material unless this is the first book you've read on the subject. Why does everyone who writes about Las Vegas feel obligated to rehash the city's history? The rest of the book is an assortment of essays about such things as the Ted Binion murder trial, a Franciscan monk who works with the homeless, corruption in local politics, the life story of the author's favorite blackjack dealer, a self-help group for gambling addicts, and a transsexual stripper who is trying to unionize the city's strippers. Cooper loves to gamble and conveys the addictive nature of trying to win at blackjack. What surprised me most is that for only \$250 you can take a 100 hour course on how to be a blackjack dealer - surely a bargain for training that actually leads to a job. I can't help but compare this book to Hal Rothman's *"Neon Metropolis,"* which covers the same

territory. Rothman's book covers a wider variety of topics and focuses more on life away from The Strip than Cooper does. On the other hand, Cooper doesn't seem to have an ideological axe to grind like Rothman, although both writers are politically liberal. Cooper's theme, that Las Vegas is an "honest" place at a time when Americans have lost faith in other institutions, seems like quite a stretch. Cooper's book feels like it was published too hastily: There's an epilogue with updates on his stories - why not simply revise the main part of the book instead? There are a few factual errors, there's no index, and someone should tell Cooper that the possessive form of "it" is not "it's."

Written with energy and style, Marc Cooper's book combines his lifelong passion for Las Vegas with a clear-eyed assessment of its downside. He's a blackjack player who conveys his passion for the game. And he tells some wild and fascinating stories here - from Ziggy, who's been dealing blackjack for 30 years, to Randy at Harrah's, who has made a science out of comping, to Andrea, who's organizing a union of lapdancers. Cooper traces the changes in Las Vegas from the mob days of the 1950s to today's cold corporate rule. Las Vegas, he argues, is the most democratic place in America - anybody with money can play, regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation or anything else. In the end, he argues, it's also "the last honest place in America," because the casinos make no secret of their goal: take your money and send you home. The book is loads of fun and truly smart in what it has to say about the white-hot heart of American popular culture today.

I say surprising because my interest in Las Vegas is usually about zilch. But when I saw this book was by Cooper, a writer whose political work I know very well and usually like, I decided to take a risk. It was worth it. This book is really an interesting mix between straightforward reporting that situates Vegas in the popular culture, and some great first-person riffs from the author. His blackjack playing seems awesome. In fact, I have to admit that reading this book made me want to look Cooper up and have him take me with him on his next raid into Vegas. The writing is really, really exciting. He's not as over the top as Hunter Thompson, but just as much fun. My two favorite parts (without giving anything away): his profile of a transgender nude dancer and his reporting on a summit of gambling corporations. Vegas, Baby!

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