

City of Cards

Joel Sacks

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With tension running high throughout, City of Cards is a satisfying, nerdy thriller.

City of Cards, Joel Sacks's modern, tech-flavored thriller is fast paced and detailed, incorporating realistic elements that make the threat at its core seem even more real.

Sayid, Mia, and Jake begin as classmates in an economics class at MIT. However, they quickly bond and become more than that, despite their very different experiences and backgrounds. Sayid is Muslim, Mia is a nominal Buddhist, and Jake is Jewish. But they have a few important things in common: they're smart, on the cutting edge of the tech bubble, and they all like to win.

Jake, in particular, has a head for odds and makes money splitting bets. Poker, however, isn't his strong suit. Where he lacks in intuition, Mia and Sayid fill in the gaps; the three complement one another and quickly become a tight-knit group. One smartly played hand of bridge changes everything, and their intelligence and intellectual curiosity take them far beyond MIT's classrooms.

Cards and games are key to this thriller's plot points, adding a nice, timeless element to the story. (After all, the rules of Hearts are a lot easier to follow than income tax law reforms.) The novel integrates game theory, programming, and current events in a way that feels natural and realistic.

City of Cards loops through the friends' points of view. Each chapter visits a different character's perspective, skipping through the years to the meat of their stories. The prose is liberally sprinkled with enough historical references and vivid descriptions to make it easy to follow these time hops.

Sayid joins a radical Islamic sect that's affiliated with Al Qaeda; Mia flies to Beijing for a 12-hour visit with a government official who knows everything about her. And Jake walks away from a finance career in Manhattan, hoping to find some meaning instead. These plot moments string together, kept tight and engaging.

Less engaging are familiar tropes, with character presentations of race and gender prove to be the weak points in this otherwise excellent thriller.

However, when it sticks to tech and gaming, Sacks's writing is tight, dense, and smart. Although some scenes lean heavily on dialogue, tension runs high throughout the novel. *City of Cards* is a satisfying, nerdy thriller.

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