

Cold Deck

H. Lee Barnes

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For a guy who deals out luck in the high-stakes blackjack pits of Las Vegas casinos, most of Jude Helms's personal fortune is bad. Lately he has lost two jobs, the first after seventeen years at the Monaco, and the next after only four weeks at the New Laredo. He also totaled his prize Mustang, suffering a dislocated thumb and seven stitches in his brow, among other injuries. Just weeks ago he was arrested for dumping dog poop on a negligent neighbor's shoes. Jude doesn't like his life all that much, but he is stuck, and he has been spinning his wheels ever since the MGM casino fire of 1980, an ordeal in which he saw people die, and from which he barely escaped, and for which he was awarded only \$2,000 in damages for burns to his ankle. Perhaps his New Age ex-wife is correct—though Jude would never admit it—that the universe is sending him a message.

While readers' sympathies begin to wear thin at Jude's litany of headaches, they might also begin to root for him. The man is a good blackjack dealer: He shows up, and he knows how to keep the cards flying. But more than that, his "consistent joy" is his two kids, and his consistent dream is to get away from the betting tables and launch a career as a masonry contractor. When he meets Audie, the mother of his daughter's schoolpal, his luck seems to change. Audie is attractive and finds Jude so; Audie knows people "in the business," and she can get him work.

From this point forward in H. Lee Barnes's third novel, the stakes are raised and the payoffs for patient readers are plentiful. Not only has Jude found himself a lover, but he has become entangled in a "cold deck" plot that could make him rich or send him to prison—or get him killed.

Barnes takes readers on a tour of the betting rooms as well as the break rooms where dealers swap barbs and life stories. He shows the boiling asphalt of Vegas streets, the burned out pit bosses, and the gamblers—from the average players to the gentleman gamblers to the always tanned, bejeweled hustlers and high rollers and con artists. Through Jude, Barnes investigates the struggle of a man to survive the temptations of working life in the bowels of Sin City. And Barnes shows here he is just the man for the job. A resident of Las Vegas who has worked in a casino, he has published fiction and nonfiction about the city and the gaming industry.

JOE TAYLOR (February 6, 2013)

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