ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Pocket Kings
Ted Heller
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Frank W. Dixon, the narrator of Ted Heller's satirical novel *Pocket Kings*, is not someone you want to play a lot of poker with. He's really good at it. He is also not related to the author of *The Hardy Boys* detective series, though that's a frequent assumption in his life.

With two failed novels and silent responses to his third, Frank comes to Poker Galaxy (an online poker world) innocently enough. Within his first week he's made $1,000. For odd reasons, poker comes easily to him: "Other than poker I've never excelled at anything. And it's not for lack of trying. I wanted to be a professional athlete. That was Plan A … But I was never good at sports." Frank, it soon becomes clear, balances more than a few delusions.

Winning is addictive. So are the relationships Frank—as Chip Zero—develops in this online world. His best friend, Second Gunman, works at the Four Swans in Blackpool, England, and his poker mistress, Artsy Painter Girl, is a sassy former painter. In this realm he is always winning something—money, affection, respect—he lacks in his real life.

But there is no softening Frank's fall, from the demise of his marriage to his own loss of dignity. He has no shame in obsessively checking his old novel's quickly declining Amazon rankings, bullying editors into reading his new one, or heckling authors reading at the local Barnes and Noble—all the while continuing to rack in loads of poker winnings.

Of course, it can't last. He eventually wonders if "all the people I'd been spending so much time with lately online were sad, unfulfilled, lonely, and more than just a bit strange and if it was this and not just cards, good luck, bad luck, and winning and losing that bound us so closely together." But it takes a cross-country taxi ride to Vegas, a humiliating trip to England, and, finally, a threat from a butcher in Sweden before Frank really starts to wake up. Waking up and making changes is not as easy as he always assumed it would be: "It's a cold and harrowing morning in the life of a man the day he wakes up, looks at himself in the mirror, and finally realizes that he is not, has never been, nor will he ever be George Clooney." Realization is only the beginning.

Also the author of *Slab Rat* and *Funnymen*, Ted Heller lives in New York.

Hope Mills