



Queen of Spades

Michael Shou-Yung Shum

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With quirky yet compelling intelligence, Queen of Spades creates its own small, interconnected universe.

Michael Shou-Yung Shum's entrancing *Queen of Spades* enters the fictional realm of the Royal Casino, located on the outskirts of Seattle amid the "pines and shadows" of the Pacific Northwest.

The year is 1984, and the Royal is one of the last casinos still hosting the venerable card game of Faro, held in the Royal's elegant High Limit salon.

While gambling is the primary theme of *Queen of Spades*, Shum avoids making his characters too slick or worldly, or too hackneyed and streetwise. The novel instead eases into the casino through the employee entrance, focusing on Arturo Chan, a newly hired card dealer, along with another dealer, Sam Chimsky, and Pit Boss Stephen Mannheim.

Chan lives his life and deals his cards with mystical purpose; Chimsky has a serious gambling compulsion, and Mannheim is gravely yet secretly ill. The day-to-day, behind-the-scenes workings of the Royal are well detailed and as integral to the plot as the nightly games of Blackjack, Baccarat, and, of course, Faro.

Pairing smooth and polished writing with keenly detached compassion, *Queen of Spades* explores the power of a simple deck of cards and its ability to control fates. Beyond Chan, Chimsky, and Mannheim, the characters broaden further to Barbara, Chimsky's ex-wife and a recovering gambler, who sits through support-group meetings that manage to be both tiresome and unnerving.

Dr. Eccleston, a spiritual counselor helping Mannheim accept his terminal illness, is assisted by Theo, her preternaturally clairvoyant young nephew. Casino Manager Gabriela keeps a shrewd eye on surveillance videotapes, watching for cheating players or employees. And then there is the elderly Countess—mysterious, foreign, and a tenacious Faro player—always making a grand entrance at the Royal with her chauffeur and silver Rolls Royce.

With quirky yet compelling intelligence, *Queen of Spades* creates its own small, interconnected universe, including those who want to escape the seductive lure of gambling, those who think they can outsmart Lady Luck, or those who simply put on a name tag and uniform and offer casino chips, cards, and drinks.

Though the fates of certain characters remain intriguingly elusive, as Chan reflects, there is indeed a fascinating power to "the unknowability of the world, and its sweetness."

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