

Hats & Eyeglasses

by Martha Frankel



About the Book

A gloriously written memoir of growing up in a family of hard-core gamblers-Martha Frankel thought the gambling gene had passed her by, until she found herself addicted to online poker and knee-deep in debt.

Most weekends when Martha Frankel was a kid, her mother had a mah-jongg game going in the kitchen with her girlfriends while their husbands were in the living room playing poker. Once Frankel reached adulthood, however, while her cousins were making their way in the world as bookies and drug dealers, gambling didn't much factor into her life.

In the tradition of **Five-Finger Discount** by Helene Stapinski and **Dry** by Augusten Burroughs, **Hats & Eyeglasses** traces Frankel's love affair with poker. It was a passion that bit her in her mid-forties and remained harmless enough when she stuck to real cards. But everything changed one evening in 1998 in Atlantic City, when Frankel overheard one dealer bemoan the fact that his tips that evening were going to be small what with the meager crowd assembled. Another dealer mentioned that everyone must be playing online-"Why leave the house when you can play in your pajamas?" the dealer said. *Why indeed?* thought Frankel, who couldn't wait to get back to her computer. The next morning she took a deep breath, typed in her credit card number, and entered the world of online gambling. It was the beginning of what one of her uncles called "hats and eyeglasses," a term used to describe those times when you're losing so bad you're drowning (so all one can see is the poker player's hat and eyeglasses floating on the surface of the water). By turns hilarious and heartbreaking, **Hats & Eyeglasses** is a tale of passion, addiction-and those times in life when we almost lose our shirt.

Discussion Guide

1. In the Frankel house, groups of family and friends were often gathered together playing cards in the living room or cooking potato latkes in the kitchen. Talk about what it was in your house that brought people together.

2. From an early age, Martha sought out the company of her father, uncles, and her boy cousins --- she played cards with them, she leaned to read the Racing Form so she could impress them at the track, she learned sports rules so she could watch with the men. And yet she was also very close with her mother and aunts. Discuss how she straddled those two different worlds, and how you've done it in your own life, with your career and your children, or your husband and your mother, etc.

3. What did the expression 'hats and eyeglasses' mean in the Frankel family? Does your family have any family sayings or expressions? What are they?

4. When her father dies, Martha and her mother don't really know how to bridge the gap that his death leaves. Talk about how hats and eyeglasses start to float up around them, and how they deal with it. Talk about if you have felt similarly adrift at different times in your life.

5. When Martha learns poker, she becomes obsessed with the game. Has that ever happened to you, and with what? How do you keep your obsessions from becoming addictions?

6. When Lefty is caught cheating, it leads to lots of pain for everyone in the weekly poker game. Talk about how someone else's misdeeds or betrayal have affected you and your friends or family. Consider how you might have responded if you had been the one to catch Lefty cheating.

7. Have you ever had to tell a loved one something so terrible that you were sure you would lose their love and respect? Were you ever so ashamed you wouldn't dare tell anyone something about your life? How did that affect you?

8. What did you think of the relationship between Martha and her mother? Was your mother anything like Sylvia? And would you have wanted her to be?

9. What did you think about how Martha finally told Steve and her family about what she had done by giving them the manuscript for this book?

10. If you were faced with a loved one's addiction or deception, how would you react? Would you have been as accepting as Martha's husband, Steve or would it have been harder for you to forgive?

Author Bio

Martha Frankel grew up in a warm and loving family of die-hard gamblers, where her father's poker games and her mother's mah jongg mingled with big pots of delicious food and endless gossip and storytelling. The kids did their own gambling: Martha, her sister Helene, and their cousins bet on which of their ever-dieting mothers would lose the most every week, which cousin could hold their breath longest underwater or who could eat the most matzo. She went with her father and uncles to the track most Tuesdays, carrying the daily *Racing Form* in her bookbag.

When she was eighteen, Martha left for the University of Miami, looking to find a life that didn't include detailed daily study of the sports section. She thought the gambling gene had passed her by. She studied English in hopes of becoming a writer, dropping out when her ill-advised advisor told her that English majors become English teachers, not

writers.

Then Martha met editor Annie Flanders, who was just starting the original *Details* magazine. Annie gave Martha her start as *Details*' book reviewer. Martha also wrote the magazine's first "Knifestyles of the Rich and Famous," a first-person column about plastic surgery, where she described her own breast reduction (this was in the 1980s, when such procedures were far less commonplace).

Her first celebrity interview was Aidan Quinn, and she started doing more entertainment pieces. She interviewed Elizabeth Taylor and director Nicholas Roeg, and toured the newly opened Tribeca Film Center with Robert De Niro. In 1990, she started writing for other magazines and traveled around the world to interview international entertainment personalities such as Roman Polanski, Juliette Binoche, Anthony Hopkins, Susan Sarandon, a 19-year-old Leonardo DiCaprio, and then-heavyweight champ Mike Tyson.

Her work has appeared in magazines as diverse as *The New Yorker*, *Fashions of the New York Times*, Japanese and German *Men's Vogue*, *Redbook*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Movieline's Hollywood Life*. She has been an on-air contributor to VH1's *Sexiest Movie Moments*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and *Inside Edition*.

For the past fifteen years, she has co-hosted of the *Woodstock Roundtable*, a Sunday morning radio talk-show on WDSY in Woodstock, NY. And since the inception of the Woodstock Film Festival in 2000, she has been the moderator of the Actor's Dialogue, a live interview which has featured, over the years, such noted actors as Lili Taylor, Stanley Tucci, Steve Buscemi, Liev Schreiber, Olympia Dukakis, David Strathairn, Marcia Gaye Hardin, and Peter Reigert.

She won a NYFFA Award in creative nonfiction, was the 1997 Philip Morris Fellow at The MacDowell Colony, and the 2003 Artist-in-Residence at SUNY Ulster, where she taught a class in memoir writing.

Martha Frankel lives near Woodstock, New York with her husband, woodworker and sculptor Steve Heller. **Hats & Eyeglasses** is her first book.

Critical Praise

"Sparse and honest writing."

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Publication Date: February 11, 2009

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Tarcher

ISBN-10: 1585426970

ISBN-13: 9781585426973