



Ship It Holla Ballas!: How a Bunch of 19-Year-Old College Dropouts Used the Internet to Become Poker's Loudest, Craziest, and Richest Crew

Jonathan Grotenstein , Storms Reback

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Who were the Ship It Holla Ballas?

Arguably the most successful poker crew of all time, they took advantage of the online poker boom to win tens of millions of dollars before most of them were old enough to set foot inside a casino. Then they did what any red-blooded teenagers with mountains of cash and no responsibilities would do: They partied like rock stars, transforming themselves from Internet nerds with zero life skills into legends, at least in their own minds.

In *Ship It Holla Ballas!*, Jonathan Grotenstein and Storms Reback trace the rise and fall of Internet poker through the eyes of its most unlikely stars: A group of teenage college dropouts, united by social media, who bluffed their way to the top of the game.

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From Reader Review Ship It Holla Ballas!: How a Bunch of 19-Year-Old College Dropouts Used the Internet to Become Poker's Loudest, Craziest, and Richest Crew for online ebook

Mike says

They lived the life everyone wants to lead. Some are still living it.

In Ben Mezrich fashion, co-authors Jonathan Grotenstein and Storms Reback chronicle the mid-2000s lives of a bunch of young online poker players who share info through an online poker forum called Two Plus Two (of which I'm a member but missed out on these stories) and storm the poker world, making millions. They live it up like a bunch of young, rich dudes will -- dumping the winnings into strippers, cars, Dom Perignon, and anything else that smells like the toys of the rich and famous. Some of them burn out, some of them continue to burn brightly. The book maintains a narrative but reads more like a series of vignettes spread out over the years. If you don't believe their exploits, well, the main person chronicled won a \$1 million prize in a poker tournament in Australia just yesterday.

Oh, and as for the title? Whenever these youngsters won something, they yelled, "Ship it," cementing their standing as a bunch of jackasses to their older peers. They also like to yell "Holla!" as a greeting, so they became the Ship It Holla Ballas. And many of them became rich. I guess there's worse ways to go through life.

Lynn says

Ship It Holla Ballas is a group of young men around 2006 - 2008 who dominated the world of poker through the internet. They were computer geeks from the US and Canada among other places who figured out algorithms and had strength in probability to figure out how to win online. The men forsook their families, college and other parts of their life to play poker, often to move to Las Vegas to play in the big games. At the time, three large companies ran most the online poker games and from overseas where they couldn't be touched by US federal authorities. ESPN and NBC as well as other networks began to show poker games on the air and poker became huge business for awhile until the FBI finally shut down the poker sites sending the companies scurrying and with it the online games and the TV shows that were financed by them. This is a story of the group of young men and I think the authors admire them for their expertise and for a short time, their money earning power. I couldn't share in the admiration and I have not gambling infatuation so I really didn't identify with the story. I've heard stories from others, even those who win small amounts but can't get the feeling they get from it. Thus the book to me wasn't as interesting as it might be to another reader.

Bryan says

I haven't read anything by Tucker Max, but I can imagine that there's a little thematic overlap between this book and the Tucker Max oeuvre. I enjoyed the hell out of this book, though, because however much Tucker Max there is in this story about young, wealthy poker players indulging alcohol, pot, strippers, and various acts of obnoxiousness, there's also a lot of Michael Lewis.

Like the baseball nerds of Lewis' *Moneyball*, or the finance professionals of his *The Big Short*, the (very) young protagonists of *Ship It Holla Ballas* look at the same phenomenon as everyone else (in this case, online poker) and see how they can use math to cut through superstition and conventional wisdom to make money. The parts of the book that describe this process have the thrill of watching a good caper or heist film. These kids aren't stealing anything, though; they're just playing a smarter, better-informed game than everyone else.

They make a lot of money doing it, and here is where I suspect there is less Tucker Max than it might seem. The guys are all in their late teens and early twenties, and living for the first time without adult supervision, when they become hundred-thousand- and millionaires; they spend a lot of money on drinking, smoking weed, and visiting strip clubs. In spite of the excess, they're still, for the most part, a surprisingly chaste and decent group of people. They long for hookups with cute girls and act obnoxious in public, but what they really seem to be after is the community, not the debauchery. They learn early on to be courteous to the "lap artists," they make amends for their destruction of other people's property, tip generously, and never seem malicious or hurtful.

Aside from the story about the poker players, there's a lot of interesting stuff about how technology and public policy created the poker boom. For instance, there's an especially great observation about how poker was made accessible and dramatic for a television audience. There's a fair amount of poker jargon in the book, but enough context to keep it from ever getting too inside baseball.

By the way, one of this book's authors is a friend of mine. Though I sincerely enjoyed the book, I probably wouldn't be putting a negative review of it online if I hadn't.

Miriam Downey says

Read my full review here: <http://mimi-cyberlibrarian.blogspot.com/2013/07/ship-it-holla-ballas.html>

The obscure title *Ship It Holla Ballas* turns out to be the name of a group of online poker players. The subtitle says it all: "How a bunch of 19-year-old college dropouts used the Internet to become poker's loudest, craziest, and richest crew."

I have to admit at the outset I know nothing about poker, so I was a bit amused when I was sent this book from the publisher. However, I do know something about 19-year-olds, and their party-hard ways, having survived the young adulthood of 3 children and 4 step-children and their significant others. It was always comforting to remind myself that the concept of consequence is that last thing to develop in the human brain, and it develops in the male brain by about age 25.

This quick read is the story of online poker in its heyday and the online poker forum that drew together some young men with too much time and money on their hands. One of the students is from Michigan State (no surprise to me since that is the place where 4 of our children went). The book also discusses The World Series of Poker as it appears on ESPN and how these young adults got drawn into the something for nothing culture. The authors note that at the height of the Internet poker boom (2005-2008) one out of every five college students was playing poker on the Internet.

My favorite line in the book is a description of two of the founders of the online poker forum Two Plus Two: "Both men were enamored of their own intelligence and dismissive of most social graces." I know some guys like that. The rest of the book is as breezy and cynical in tone.

Two movies came to mind as I was reading this book. One was a documentary about a MIT professor who taught probability and took crews of students to play blackjack in Atlantic City and Las Vegas. It was called Breaking Vegas and was based on the book Bringing Down the House by Ben Mezrich. The other is the movie based on the documentary—21 starring Kevin Spacey.

If you are at all interested in Las Vegas, poker, the rise of the Internet and other aspects of young adult stupidity, I can recommend this book. It is quick and fun. It showed up on Amazon's list of best new books in January, but I wouldn't go that far.

The website of the Ship it Holla Ballas poker players. The website says "The Ballas travel the world in search of sweet parties, hot girls and play in some poker tournaments on the side."

<http://www.shipitholla.net/>

Clare Fitzgerald says

I was not 100% sure I was going to like Ship It Holla Ballas.

Quite frankly, I was unsure if I was going to like it for some of the same reasons I was curious it. I was also a teenager during the Bush years, so I'm largely of an age with the people followed. I was unhip and culturally oblivious enough to have no idea that the poker boom was happening, but I do have some memories of that time period: Namely, that it was an awful cultural wasteland full of cargo shorts and McMansions, and that teenage nerds were terrible and teenage boys were especially terrible, also LiveJournal was still a thing. I didn't really want to revisit that time. (Full disclosure: My memories of that period may be influenced by the fact that I was at the time a bored angry Goth with clinical depression.) But I was quite curious about what these other teenage nerds were doing while I was learning to read Tarot cards, a hobby I have never even tried to monetize (although perhaps I should).

I had also heard one anecdote from this book referenced a few times, I think once on the Thinking Poker podcast. It was the one where Tom Dwan dares some one to jump into a pool full of sharks for five thousand dollars. At first a teenage girl whose mother had inexplicably left her with them volunteered; then she chickened out, so one of the other dudes did it. I thought this anecdote was amusing, so I figured there might be other like it. I also did the usual "What would I have done in that situation?" line of thinking one has sometimes, where I had to come to the reluctant conclusion that, as a 16-year-old, it is likely the lizardbrain sense of self-preservation would have won and I would have also chickened out, but now that I am 28 and more mature and know the value of a dollar, I would totally jump into a pool of sharks for \$5k.

Anyway. The book is not about me.

The book starts just before the poker boom really blows up and starts following a few guys who are a little bit older, by online poker standards--guys who had already completed college and were starting their professional lives, guys in their late twenties or early thirties. These guys are not really the focus of most of the book but they provide an entertaining viewpoint to get comfortable with before their scene is roundly crashed by a bunch of high school and early college kids. It's an excellent hook, presenting the dropouts who

would become the Ship It Holla Ballas from an older, outside perspective before getting deeper into their backstories and viewpoints.

Most of the book does a pretty seamless job of putting the Ballas' stories in context of the perfect storm of very particular factors going on at the time, both in online poker and, on the rare occasions merited, in the rest of the world. As someone who is very interested in the sociology of nerd groups, I was especially fascinated by the roles of the 2+2 forums and the eventual formation of the "crew" in shaping not only these kids' social lives, but their sense of normality and their poker games. I actually would have liked to hear a little bit more about how the way this community pooled knowledge and built off each others' ideas advanced the strategies and understanding of how poker works and the way it's played, but probably throwing in more stuff about math and spreadsheets would have slowed the book down a bit.

While there are certainly a lot of anecdotes about crazy expensive shenanigans that are entertaining, unsurprising, and possibly thrown in to let the reader live vicariously a little and wonder if we'd be that bananas if we were that rich at that age (since face it, most of us weren't but would like to be), there are also a lot of things that were toothache-inducingly familiar to me as someone who spent a lot of time around young nerd dudes, including living with them. Like, these kids went and bought a mansion in Vegas and they... did not know how to house. At all. I have lived with people who didn't know how to house. It is viscerally awful. Also these kids once got all their shit stolen because they didn't know where the circuit breaker was or, apparently, what a circuit breaker was. (Apparently I was the only person who came of age in the 2000s whose parents made sure she knew what a circuit breaker was before leaving home.) The descriptions of the Balla mansion were like all my worst bad roommate memories on steroids. All the stupid shit about *The Game* and pickup artistry was also unfortunately familiar. I don't know exactly how much *The Game* was responsible for nearly every dude I talked to between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five being completely intolerable, but Jesus, it did not help. There is one line regarding one of the kids profiled that says "Talking to women feels like a video game whose rules he can't figure out," which is probably intended to be sympathetic and which the authors probably felt was an at least middlingly original line. That shit gave me traumatic flashbacks. Dudes who think women are video games are legion, they are almost never subtle about it, and I spent ten years being mistaken for a video game before I managed to structure my life to avoid these people; what am I doing to myself going and reading about them? It took chapters before I could give a fuck about this character again at all, and then he goes and fucks it up again at the end of the book by noting in a tone of surprise that some of the techniques he has since learned for talking to women also help him talk to people in general. Hm... I wonder what talking to women and talking to people have in common? What's the connection between "women" and "people"? Everyone knows women are the opposite of people. 'Tis truly baffling.

Casual misogyny masquerading as social awkwardness aside (not that I'm the type to put that aside, obviously), the book does an excellent job of humanizing these weirdos, and illustrating the effects of their alienation from their non-stupid-rich peers, of being very successful very young at something that doesn't necessarily have a lot of meaning or social utility, of forming a crazy tight group of friends in your teens and slowly having it dissipate as you all go your separate ways as adults, of pursuing a goal and feeling empty once you achieve it because what are you going to do with yourself now? It grounds the book a lot more than you'd think it could be grounded considering the sheer volume of vapidly humorous anecdotes about obnoxious behavior and spending money on stupid things that fill the book.

The stuff about the transition from online to live poker and the generational warfare between the storied old guard and the "these Internet kids!" was, personally, my favorite material covered in the book; generational warfare always makes for lots of drama, also, Phil Hellmuth is annoying as hell and good on Tom Dwan for calling him out. Tom Dwan may have been my favorite person in the book, probably because he came off the

least bro-y and the most like a space alien.

One thing about this book that is kind of weird is that all the online players are referred to by their screennames instead of their real names, throughout the entire thing. Some of these screennames I could match with players already and some I could not; it was also fun playing Spot the Screenname I Actually Recognize when other members of the online poker community were mentioned. Another upside of this dedication to screen names is that "durrrr" is consistently spelled right throughout the entire book, which is apparently not standard among poker publications.

There are some slightly disjointed-feeling bits near the end as important things happen in and around the world of poker that our now well-established main characters aren't necessarily in the middle of, such as the sneak passage of the UIGEA, and a deep dive into the gossip and scandal of the rest of the 2+2 forum subculture. This is all very important material to understanding the rise and fall of online poker in the U.S., it's just presented in a way that includes some very sudden jumps from the World Series to Washington.

But that's my only criticism of the book; all my other criticisms are strictly about the subject matter. *Ship It Holla Ballas* was a fun, fast, insightful, surprisingly grounded read about a bunch of idiot boy geniuses in a very unique, bizarre time and place.

Originally posted at In which poker is great and nerds are... well, nerds

Kjersti says

This kind of book is right up my alley. I love learning about other people doing fascinating things. I don't play poker so didn't understand some of the references, but I managed just fine.

Jeff says

I really enjoyed this book about the true story of a group of college kids who drop out to pursue the riches, rewards, and pitfalls of the online poker craze of the early 2000's.

The kids earn more in a few hands sitting behind a laptop than some people do in a lifetime. Although, there are stories out there about the true stories of players exploiting the game this is not one of them. This is a bunch of college age kids who, too young to play in live tournaments, are able to play online using multiple games open at one time and making fast, quick decisions costing them thousands or earning them the same.

Of course there are the vignettes of what you would think young college guys would do if they wound up making half a million to a million dollars. They live the rock and roll life style thinking nothing of the monetary cost of too much. For instance - when it comes to dropping \$7,000 on dinner they play a game called credit card roulette where they all hand the waiter or waitress their cards and he/she shuffles the cards and whomever's card he/she pulls out pays for dinner...and no one worries about it due to the enormous amount of fund they have in their online accounts.

They play o many hours sitting behind a laptop playing poker, poker, poker, poker, you almost feel their boredom that some of the start to complain about and the realization that money is not just a means to make

money but a means to an end, an accomplishment. By the time (and I am not giving anything away here that is not history at this point) the government shuts down the online poker rooms you are almost happy that they are forced to pursue something else. However, by the time they are forced to do that they have all reached the age of 21 able to legally enter the live poker world which almost all of them do and continue to do.

Very well written, fun, detailer book. Ship it!

Emi Bevacqua says

I actually dated an unemployed, multi-tabling, 2+2posting, 20-something, online poker player who subjected me to hours upon hours of waiting table-side at casinos in Reno, Vegas, Niagara Falls, Missouri Riverboat, etc not to mention the watching of forevermany hours of televised poker play; so I have a rudimentary understanding of the subject matter, and I have to say this is the funniest non-fiction poker book I ever read!

These 19-year old Hundredthousandaires made me cringe, with their disrespect for their elders, their surroundings, and even their own health. I thought Grotenstein and Reback did an entertaining job of chronicling the rise of the Ship It Holla Ballas crew, and online poker in general from 9-11 through to post-Black Friday. Their effusive thanks to the crew in the Acknowledgments is sweet but I find it highly unlikely that all these kids were able to perform so winningly under such constant influence of such excessive drink and drugs and stripper sex, with no negative consequences (except for that one Perky guy who went to rehab and dated Lindsey Lohan). I'd opt for a little more journalistic integrity, and a little less ass-kissiness on the part of the authors. But I still give it 3.5 stars.

Bill says

This the true story of a few teenagers who are used to playing video games on their computers. These guys are able to convert that experience, along with their knowledge of how to get the most out of the internet into a ton of cash. This is a story of what they did, not a "How to Win at Online Poker" book. The book is about their lives as they found out that they could win a lot of money playing Texas Hold'em on the various online poker web sites. They got together in online forums and discovered that other guys were doing the same. They discussed winning and losing strategies on the forums. They made even more money.

This is their story of over the top wins and jaw dropping loses. Most of these guys were barely out of high school and were pulling in thousands of dollars a week, so they were going nuts with their instant riches. They were living like rock stars.

This is also the story of how they moved from a loose knit group of online gamblers to the real world of poker. How they played in the big poker tournaments that were being broadcast on cable in 2004 - 8. How some of them hit bottom and how some of them are still winning today.

I really enjoyed reading this book. I can relate to these guys, even though I never played online poker. I have played Texas Hold'em with friends, but I don't consider myself a gambler. I do use a computer, have played some computer games, and have been on a few forums and discussion boards, so all of the concepts in this book feel quite real and possible.

I give this book a big double thumbs up and 5 stars out of 5. This is more of a guy's book, there is a lot of drinking, going to strip clubs, and way over the top party descriptions, that may be offensive to many people. It is now illegal to play online poker for real money in the United States, but many countries still allow it.

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

Daniel says

Basically, this one is The Dirt: Confessions Of The World's Most Notorious Rock Band, only instead of being about rock stars, it's about poker stars. It's fine as far as it goes, but nothing special.

Having spent years playing, I already knew a lot of these stories and basically all of these players, but I can see the appeal to a certain sleazy glance into what happens when people who are very young suddenly find themselves making absurd amounts of money.

The book never really does the job it sets out to do when it comes to suggesting that they "grow up" eventually, but that shouldn't stop you from enjoying it. It's an odd fault to have, since they did and most of them lead fairly normal lives now.

[The reality is that I probably wouldn't have bothered with a review if it weren't for the fact that all the reviews on the first page here were by a bunch of people so busy moralizing that they hardly had time to insert their brags about getting this book for free or how important they are to have the publisher send it to them. Seriously, some people shouldn't be allowed to review books unless it's for their sunday school indoctrination class or clearly marked as a thinly-veiled attempt to brag about something no one is impressed by.]

The one real complaint I have about the book itself is that you don't come away with even a cursory understanding of just how radical some of these guys were as poker thinkers. Sure, you get a bunch of stories about strippers and booze, but you miss out on the fact that several of them have created theories about the game that are so profound that you can barely consider yourself a player anymore unless you have the concept down. Galfond's (Jman) contributions to the game with "gBucks" is such an important concept in the game that you can literally divide players into the category of those who know and it and apply it properly and those who don't (hint: if you don't know what it is, you're probably in way over your head in anything but a home game). But then, combinatorics don't generally make for a very thrilling read, do they?

I mean, really, who wants to hear about applied statistics and equity evaluation formulas when you could be reading about people doing lines of blow off a table in the middle of a game at a casino?

Richard Magahiz says

Luck delivered this paperback into my hands when I won a giveaway on Twitter; it was not one I normally would have pulled off the shelf. It's a book you can read with virtually no poker knowledge at all, just substituting "extreme good luck" and "extreme bad luck" at appropriate points. Mainly I kept with the reading as a sort of reference to a set of characters I know I wouldn't meet in person if I were given a thousand years, because the kinds of things that motivate them never matched those that I followed. I found it instructive as a student of human nature to take a look at people who drive themselves so single-mindedly adopting means and chasing a goal that none of the rest of us would select. Still, I completely understand the fascination that follows the prodigal, even in this case (view spoiler). By the end I was able to start telling the different handles apart and keep straight the level of degeneracy associated with each, which helped it

become a more palatable narrative.

Kelly says

This book was a quick read. It did become grating after a while to have all the players referred to by their screen names instead of real life names, as some of the names are super asinine (understandable, as they were created by sophomoric boys in the late 1990s).

Rob Slaven says

As usual I received this book from GoodReads as part of a giveaway. Also as usual, despite the very kind and generous consideration of getting a free book, I give my candid opinions below.

The subtitle really sums it up pretty nicely. A group of kids from different parts of the country get hooked on online poker, do nothing but play all day for years and make a ton of money doing it. They live decadent lifestyles, learn some key life lessons (or don't) and finally end up happy (or not). Think bildungsroman with computers, gambling and lots of illegal mind-altering substances.

The writing in this little bit of non-fiction is merely sufficient; it's readable and can be consumed in a handful of determined hours. There's nothing particularly gripping about the whole thing except the anticipation of some explosive failure on the part of our protagonists as you either cheer for their success or their comeuppance. The book provides us with a view of a subculture we'd normally not get to see and paints an intimate enough portrait to keep the reader engaged.

I will spare my own reader the rather obvious and easily anticipated rant that I could go into about children gambling illegally and engaging in all manner of idiotic behavior, though as an adult it's hard not to have one's mind wander there. There is quite a bit of anthropological value to be found in these pages to be sure but it sets a rather poor example.

Pondering to whom I could recommend this book, I do have some difficulty finding a target for it. Most adults will doubtless be rather put off by the various irresponsible shenanigans demonstrated and I would be terrified for any teenager who reads it for fear that they will view this as an example to be emulated. The book lacks any of the technical detail that would make it interesting to either the mathematically inclined or the gambling addict. It can be assumed, at least, that those who were caught up in the now defunct gambling craze of the mid-2000s might be interested.

In summary, the book is a well-constructed view of society gone amok. It has, I suspect, a fairly narrow range of appeal and should be kept out of the hands of impressionable children. There is some very small bit of moral to our story but it fades rather quietly behind the glitz of \$200 bottles of liquor and generally decadent lifestyle choices.

Christopher says

This is a fantastic, quick read that couldn't have been more fun for someone who spent most every waking

moment from 2003 to 2006 thinking about cards. It's a sort of pop-anthropology of a brief era in the gambling world and gaming culture that will never be replicated, when a bunch of insanely talented teenagers got fantastically wealthy by becoming very good cardplayers at exactly the right moment.

I picked this up the night before a day I knew would be filled with standing around and killing time. It happened to be at the top of the kindle charts, and it fit the bill. Imagine my surprise when it turns out it's about a bunch of kids that got internet-famous (and rich) around the time I was fixated on the game, playing, reading, studying, and haunting the same Two Plus Two forums where these guys learned how to play.

The book skirts the traditional failing of poker books by neither idiotically oversimplifying (to the annoyance of seasoned cardplayers) nor boring the gambling novice with unexplained jargon and cultural references. Both groups can enjoy this one, in large part because the authors tell a damn good story.

If I've got one quibble, it's that the book underplays just exactly how impressive were the achievements of several of these kids. Nearly every one of the characters detailed in the book was a very, very, VERY good cardplayer, among the very best in the world at the time. Presumably in the interest of avoiding technical discussions, the authors gloss over how much work these guys put in to become excellent players, and the reader is occasionally left to infer that they were the first ones to show up knowing how to do math. Some of this is true, and it's certainly true that the games were loose and soft for a good while in the middle of the last decade. And money is how you keep score, so fancy cars and bar tabs are part of the story. But a guy like Tom Dwan (referred to in the book by his online handle "durrr") combined statistical acumen, ultra-aggressiveness, utter unpredictability, and emotional solidity in a way that had next to nothing to do with the internet or the era; he might currently be among the best five players alive.

That's a small complaint, though, and overall the book is excellent. Recommended to poker players and curious generalists alike.

Aviv says

This book was absolutely awesome! It was so well written, fast paced and crazy that I completely forgot that I was reading a book of non-fiction. Completely nuts! I would most definitely recommend reading this book!
