

If the state is to blame for everything, why should we be punishing individuals? Eriksson's most recently translated novel, *The Devil of Dakar*, bursts the limits of the detective plot in a decisive way. The murderer in Dakar is an immigrant, Manuel, a Mexican who comes to Sweden to find his brother Patricio, in jail for drug smuggling. To get the money owed to Patricio (and to avenge his brother Angel, who died on another run), Manuel tracks down the two drug dealers who employed his brothers, kills one of them, and takes a job in the other one's Uppsala restaurant, Dakar, as a dishwasher. The kitchen at Dakar is a mini UN: other employees are from Portugal, Spain, Finland, and America. "And we are all gathered here," says one of them, in case we missed the point, "[i]n Dakar's kitchen." The group becomes tightly bonded, and Manuel even begins a flirtation with Eva, the Swedish waitress.

Although Manuel comes plotting revenge, Dakar becomes a place where he manages to regain his humanity among other outsiders. In the end, after Patricio is sprung from jail almost by accident, the two brothers slip through Ann Lindell's fingers to return to their village in Oaxaca.

In that sense, *The Devil of Dakar* is a police novel turned almost entirely upside down—the logical conclusion of the process that begins with Mankell's doubts about society's responsibility for crime. Though Lindell and the other detectives remain sympathetic characters, the author is clearly rooting against them—notably, the people who aid Lindell in the manhunt for the two brothers are generally racist: one speaks of "a dark-skinned man of suspicious appearance." A certain justice is carried out when the drug dealers (both ethnically foreign but white), who are presented as the actual bad guys, are both punished, one shot by Man-

uel and one finally imprisoned by the police for drug possession. But the murderer at the center of the novel (and the focus of the detectives' exertions) takes no legal responsibility for his actions—and the detection plot becomes a sinister tool of white oppression. There are higher laws, *The Devil of Dakar* suggests, than our little bourgeois schemes of crime and punishment.

—Britt Peterson

GAME THEORY

Neil Strauss. *The Game: Penetrating the Society of Pickup Artists.* Reagan Books. September 2005.

Neil Strauss. *The Rules of the Game.* Harper. December 2007.

Magnolia, dir. Paul Thomas Anderson. January 2000.

The Pickup Artist. 3Ball Productions, VH1. August 2007.

THE "SEDUCTION COMMUNITY"—most insidious of oxymorons—grew up on message boards and newsgroups when the internet was still a place of social exile.

The early adopters were people prepared to start life anew—that is, losers, or, as the manuals would eventually call them, average frustrated chumps: AFCs. As in recovery movements, acknowledgment of the problem was the first step.

They were hard-up men perplexed by women and determined to figure them out—as they had figured out the algorithms of the computer programs they wrote, or the patterns and strategies they mastered to make it through the video games they played. These were nerds who had been pushed around by jocks and been envious of cool guys all their lives. There were things that cool guys did, innocently, as a function of their social programming, that made them cool. The losers were going to study their behavior, and they

were going to start replicating it. And once they were done with the process of breaking down what the successful behaviors were and why they worked, and once they were done rewiring their own brains (which are far more plastic, the neurologists tell us, than we have ever imagined), they would find they could react in new ways to the old, scary stimuli—ways even more effective than those of their persecutors. In fact, because they were taking a methodical approach to what others did only by instinct, and because they had an analytic understanding of what others did in an unpremeditated way, they were going to be better at being cool guys than any truly cool guy could ever be.

They renamed each other, taking on talismanic handles, each of which declared a hope. Mystery. Extramask. Juggler. Playboy. Sin. Lovedrop. Matador. At sites like alt.fast.seduction.com, men from around the world posted detailed narrative accounts of their dates, soliciting, offering, and receiving critical dissection of every statement and gesture. The men volunteered their experiences as data in a vast scientific trial that no responsible researcher would ever attempt. You could even say that these men were engaged in a strange parody of the activities of the men of the Enlightenment, who used the printing press to diffuse a new attitude toward life that broke with the inherited traditions and dogmas of the past. It was a free and open exchange of ideas across international borders in which men distilled the chaos of experience into universal principles. Together they created a body of knowledge that was rational, pragmatic, purposive, and—above all—subject to the test of experiment.

By means of the collective efforts of hundreds of recovering AFCs and aspiring PUAs (pickup artists, in the literature), they

were able to observe, tag, categorize, and devise a winning response to every twitch, flutter, or hesitation that a woman might offer in the progress, as their eventual leader Mystery would flatly put it, “from meet—to sex.” If a subject looked back at all his successful sexual encounters, he would see that each and every one of them passed through a sequence of three stages. Mystery defined these as attraction, building comfort, and seduction. By detaching oneself from the welter of passions that afflict us in our everyday behaviors, one could arrive at a method to move through those stages, consciously, and with maximum efficiency.

All of us who have tried and failed to break through to the opposite sex think about what works and what doesn’t when it comes to the entirely unnatural sociability one must learn to master in a city full of strangers. The internet created a new space to transform that blind empirical groping into what would become, in the hands of its most gifted practitioners, a positivistic system of human relations.

WE HAVE A RECORD, OF SORTS, of what the world of the pickup arts used to be like. Tom Cruise is the medium, in the role of Frank TJ Mackey, in *Magnolia*. Mackey opens his class by slowly flexing his biceps beneath a brightening spotlight on a darkened stage of a rented hotel conference room. Richard Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra* blasts through the speakers.

“Respect the cock!” Cruise shouts, to the answering cries and bellows, hoots and chanting of his audience, “and”—and with this he launches himself to the lip of the stage, revealing his chiseled face to the camera, kneeling with his arm outstretched in a gesture of embattled striving—“tame the cunt!”

His students are beefy rage-filled mooks in pleated Dockers. They work themselves into a frenzy at every cue, including the moment in Cruise's presentation when he feigns the act of intercourse—intercourse from behind—onstage. They learn how to, as the overhead projections tell them "Fake Like You Are a Nice and Caring Guy." They are instructed to "Form a Tragedy," as a technique for earning sympathy, all in service of turning "Your 'Friend' into a 'Sperm Receptacle.'"

Cruise's portrayal was a cartoon that nonetheless captured something about the state of the pickup artists in their early days. The pioneering figure of the online seduction community was a man named Ross Jeffries, whom the music writer Neil Strauss, in his immersive account of the PUA world titled *The Game*, describes as a "tall, skinny, porous-faced self-proclaimed nerd." Jeffries's early e-books, which relied on a pseudo-hypnotic technique called neuro-linguistic programming (which instructs its would-be practitioners to "seed" conversation with subtly hidden commands that will act on the subconscious of the recipient), were crudely written and full of sarcasm, resentment, and rage. His e-books were distinguished by the typographical quirkiness, tonal crudeness, and brash salesmanship common to the work of autodidactic experts. Jeffries claims that Frank TJ Mackey was based on him. Though Jeffries certainly looks nothing like Tom Cruise (Strauss quotes Cruise denying that his character was based on Jeffries) the claim was an entirely plausible one.

"There's no such 'thing' as love. There's no such 'thing' as passion. There's no such 'thing' as attraction, or chemistry, or lust," Jeffries wrote in one of his early manuals.

I know, I know, you're saying. That's the problem ... for most of you, most

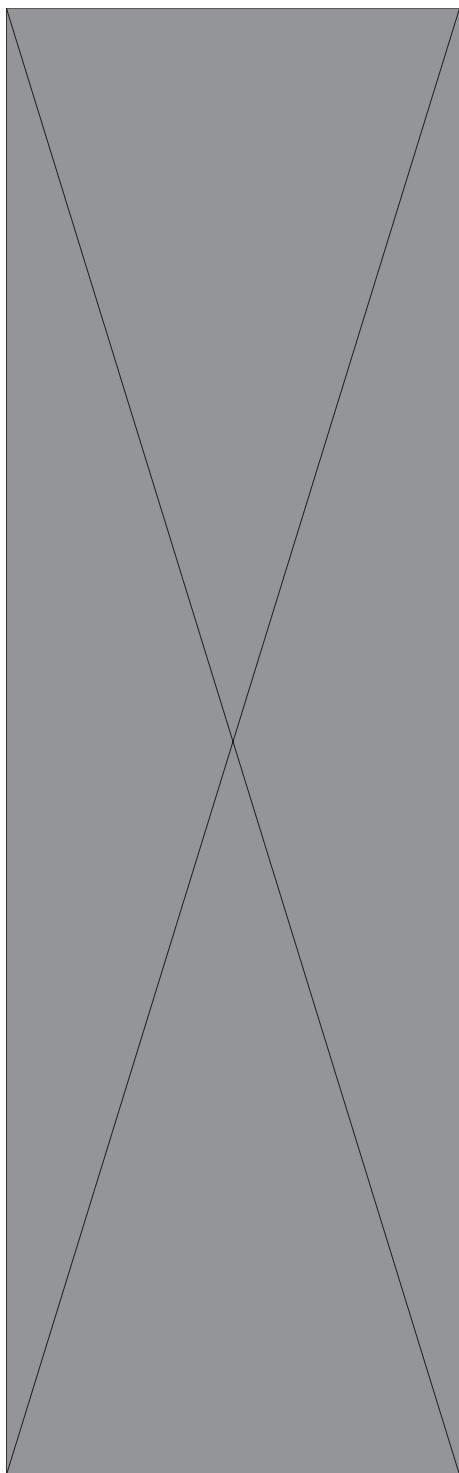
of the time, there's no such thing. There's just boredom, frustration, and playing with Mr. Winky. But that's not what I'm talking about, so pay close attention.

*I'm not saying that people don't experience *states* of 'attraction' or 'chemistry' or 'lust'. What I am saying is that these states are processes that take place inside the human mind and body. Which means that they are states that ...*

*CAN BE SUMMONED FORTH
AND DIRECTED AT WILL!!!*

NEIL STRAUSS LEARNED ABOUT THIS community just as it was beginning to make its transition from being the obsession of a few weirdos to a flourishing commercial venture for many weirdos. He was handed a copy of one of the first "Layguides," and ventured onto the message boards as a reporter researching a story. It didn't take long for him to lose his reportorial detachment. Soon he was stuffing \$500 cash into an envelope addressed to Mystery. Strauss overcomes the reader's skepticism with the same élan with which he learned to "blast last-minute resistance," conceding, with disarming candor, that it is "no easy feat to sign up for a workshop dedicated to picking up women. To do so is to acknowledge defeat, inferiority and inadequacy. It is to finally admit to yourself that all these years of being sexually active (or at least sexually cognizant) you have not grown up and figured it out."

By the time Strauss arrived on the scene, the pickup artists had already begun to clean up their act. The documents they wrote were becoming more professional in their style and presentation, the theoretical framework



had grown more sophisticated. The experts had begun to scrub away the resentment and raw misogyny adhering to the community's rhetoric. Accordingly, a new kind of student entered the community: good-looking, successful, and competent men who were looking to make their sex lives less like gambling and more like shopping. These men had other aspects of their lives working; now they wanted to "solve" the woman problem.

Strauss was present at the first seminar, run by Mystery, at which students actually left the classroom to go "in field." Mystery began by explaining the basic structure of seduction—FMAC, for find, meet, attract, and close. He explained the power of the mysterious "neg," one of the great innovations of the seduction community. Strauss describes it thus:

Neither compliment nor insult, a neg is something in between—an accidental insult or backhanded compliment. The purpose of the neg is to lower a woman's self-esteem while actively displaying a lack of interest in her—by telling her she has lipstick on her teeth, for example, or offering her a piece of gum after she speaks.

"I don't alienate ugly girls," Mystery explains. "I don't alienate guys. I only alienate the girls I want to fuck."

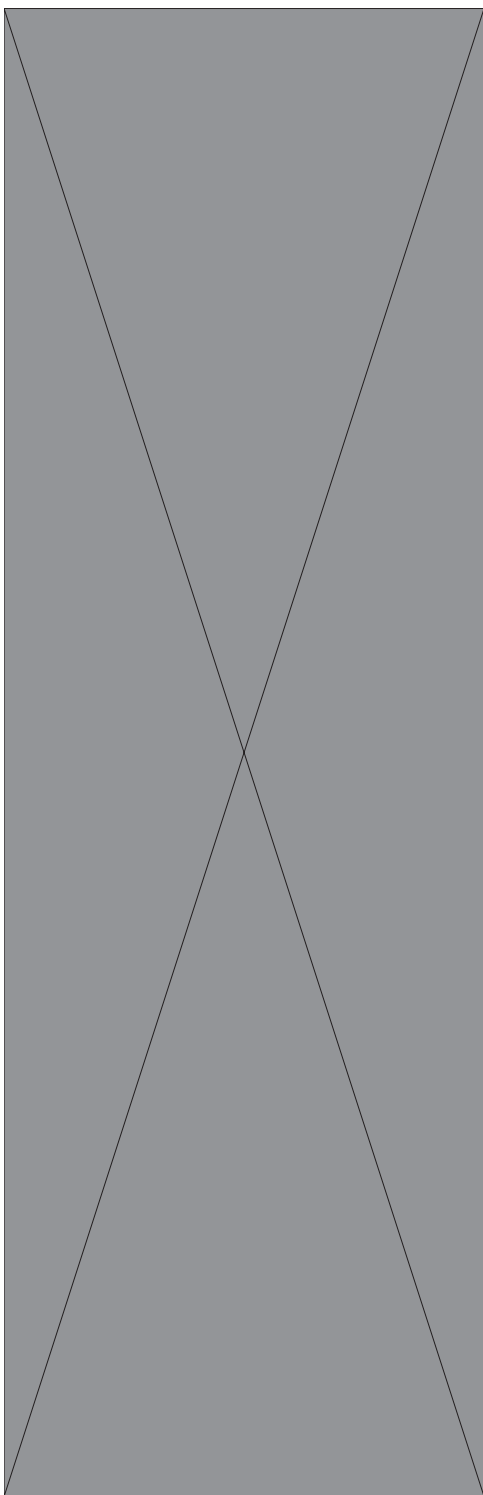
Armies of outlandishly dressed men (done up in accordance with "peacock theory") began appearing in bars around the country. "Did you see those two girls fighting outside?" they would ask their targets, delivering the same canned material time and time again. They would come in with their bodies at an angle and give the appearance of being ready to leave at any moment. "I can't stay long—I've got to get back to my friends," they would say, delivering

the “false time constraint” that preempts any social discomfort their entrance into the “set” would generate. With their first entrance, they’d “buy the next thirty seconds,” and with the story they told, they’d buy the next two minutes, while “demonstrating higher value” through precisely calibrated routines. “I need a quick female opinion on something,” they’d begin, and then launch into a story. “Would you let your boyfriend keep a box of photos of his ex-girlfriend? Because my buddy . . .” They’d talk to the “obstacles” (the ugly girls surrounding the target) and the men in the set, conspicuously ignoring the target. When she began to clamor for their attention, they’d throw out a neg. “I like your nails. Are they real?” Strauss carried around, in his seduction kit, a large ball of lint that he would pick off a girl’s sweater. (Strauss eventually received historical confirmation of the value of the neg when he learned that Warren Beatty would blow his nose and hand the crumpled tissue to a woman.) Then the men would reverse course, give the target an opportunity to demonstrate her higher value, and play push-pull, like dancing a string around for a cat to chase. Once you have reached the “hook point,” when she stops wondering when you’re going to leave and begins looking for ways to make you stay, then it’s time to propose an “instant date”—“bounce” to another club, party, or diner, to embed the impression of familiarity that movement from one location to the next will generate in her mind. “Every location that you move with her in which she doesn’t wind up raped and murdered by you,” Mystery observes, “builds comfort.” And when it comes down to last-minute resistance—which is a perfectly natural feature of her primal cognitive programming—she’ll ask herself “Do I know this guy?” and have a panorama of images of you in different settings to refer to.

With the rise of “in field” training on the Mystery model, the emphasis on esoteric techniques (such as Jeffries’s neuro-linguistic programming) for controlling the behavior of women fell away. The new pickup artist was fun and positive. He had empathy with a woman’s feminine needs, and was willing to remake himself into the kind of man able to fulfill those needs. Not the things she says she wants, or even the things she thinks she wants, in accordance with the cant espoused by our Rousseauist-egalitarian upbringing, but the primal needs designed into her neural circuitry 40,000 years ago, when people developed their social instincts while living, as Mystery puts it, “in a fifty-person society” with an alpha male at its head.

Evolutionary psychology and computer science, combined with behavioral economics’ study of the systematic irrationality that is intrinsic to human cognition—that is to say, machine engineering combined with those growth areas in social scientific research that elaborate the materialistic, calculating, and hedonistic view of human nature that dominates “ideas” in the mainstream—all contributed to the pickup artist’s vocabulary. “We backwards engineer the way the brain works, to figure out why she does what she does,” says Mystery. According to Mystery, we are all “biological machines” programmed to do just two things: to survive and replicate. And we go through life looking to align with people who will increase our likelihood to survive and replicate.

By offering a method and a pseudoscientific rhetoric to accompany it, the pickup artists offered hope to men who had lost hope. By giving students canned material to repeat, they overcame the single most intense social anxiety of any man in a club—that he will have nothing to say. By encouraging the men to see the activity of approaching wom-



en, as Mystery did, “as a video game,” they provided emotional prophylaxis to men who were terrified of rejection. By assuming an authoritative role as paid experts, the lead pickup artists were able to tell men things they need to hear: Lose the sweater. Shave your head. Get contacts. Get a tan. By introducing their students to the concept of sub-communication—body language, vocal intonation, and rhythm—they equipped them to begin the most important self-reappraisal they would ever do. The most valuable things the pickup artists told men were things that others had told them before, but that no one had ever directly linked to sex. Things like, for instance—“Smile.” “Don’t be the guy trying to look all serious and deep,” Lovedrop told his students, with a wicked impression of a brooding face perched over a beer at a party. “*Mr. Serious Deep Guy.*”

MYSTERY TAUGHT EIGHT MEN THE RUDIMENTS of his art in the VH1 reality television series *The Pickup Artist*. It was a spectacle that managed to make Mystery’s ruthlessly Darwinian method into the basis of heartwarming television. It was an exemplary product of our culture industries, on the cutting edge of the drive to combine uplift, self-help, and sociopathy into an appealing entertainment package.

Mystery appeared. “Who you are today,” he said—slowly, clearly enunciating, maintaining eye contact with his audience, dramatically pausing—“dies here.”

And we saw, right away, who his students were: a 40-year-old virgin, a fat guy, an Indian guy, an Asian guy, two computer nerds, and, a bit incongruously, a buff, good-looking Hispanic guy who was also a boxer. With the exception of this last, they were the sort of people who appear in the media only as comic figures. They remained so here—they could not sustain any other role—but there

was no derision in the feelings they evoked; they were the protagonists on a quest for their manhood, and we watched them grow and change. They had been carefully vetted—they were awkward, they were abashed by their predicament, but not a single note of resentment toward women escaped them. One of the first rules that a pickup artist learns is that it's never her fault. "She's not a bitch," as Mystery put it. "She's just being a bitch to you." Because a beautiful woman, you see, has been hit on thousands of times in her life, and she has developed strategies for screening out the "bucketful of bore" that men want to impose on her. "Hi. My name's Charlie. What do you do?"

And thus the principle, "It's never her fault. It's always yours," reinforced the assumption that the game, properly played, could never fail. If at any point she shrugged you off, it was because you failed to do something essential in an earlier stage of seduction. This was, at one and the same time, a way of overcoming the ugly resentment that afflicts some AFCs, the ultimate form of self-protection, and, of course, a descent into total solipsism. Early on in *The Game*, after Strauss had his first "fool's mate" (the term for scoring with a woman just as eager as you to get laid on a given night, who does not require any game) and after he had "number closed" a woman in a video store who turned out to Dalene Kurtis, the *Playmate of the Year* (he's too frightened to call), he begins to notice it:

It was then that I realized the downside to this whole venture. A gulf was opening between men and women in my mind. I was beginning to see women solely as measuring instruments to give me feedback on how I was progressing as a pickup artist. They were my crash-test dummies, identifiable only by hair colors and numbers—a blonde 7, a

brunette 10. Even when I was having a deep conversation, learning a woman's dreams and point of view, in my mind I was just ticking off a box in my routine marked rapport. In bonding with men, I was developing an unhealthy attitude toward the opposite sex. And the most troubling thing about this new mindset was that it seemed to be making me more successful with women.

BUT THIS OBVIOUS OBJECTION came later in the progression through the *Game* than any of the AFCs on the first few episodes of *The Pickup Artist* had yet reached. They had baby fat, they had smooth skin, they hadn't done a day of honest labor in their lives. They possessed that wide-eyed look—at once mentally slack, physically languid, and emotionally frightened—that you find when you meet the cosseted children of American suburbia. The Asian guy, when asked what sort of man he would like to be, responded, without missing a beat, "James Bond." The viewer cringed, a little, and squirmed, a little—a painful little ecstasy. Later on, the fat guy, who managed to last until the later episodes, broke down in tears of appreciation, not just of his new skills, but of the new male friends he'd made. We learned that in real life he lived in his parents' basement, that there wasn't a door on his room. We learned that his only friends were friends he had made playing *World of Warcraft*. When, on a show that used his pain as a diversion from the emptiness of the lives of bored gawkers, whose diverted, emptied consciousness VH1 in turn sold to advertisers, he told his housemates that they were the coolest guys he had ever met, and the best friends he had ever known, with his face reddening and his eyes brimming over with tears, we knew that he meant it. This was good TV.

It was also a series-length infomercial. On the show, we watched pickup artistry slough off its vestiges of Ross Jeffries-style cynicism and pick up by a new kind of cynicism: that of professional self-help. Mystery went from a dark seducer to a figure oozing that commercially factitious “caring” of our major corporations. These were some of the most helpless and emotionally immiserated men in America—and while it was true that Mystery had gotten rich off them, maybe he had done more for them than most therapists could. Admittedly, it was the two handsome guys who were there in the end, the handsome blonde guy who made out with a stripper in the backseat of a limo, and the handsome and gregarious Hispanic guy who was ultimately selected by Mystery to complete his training as a master pickup artist. And, admittedly, the first guy off the show was the sweet Asian guy (as I predicted), and the second guy off the show was the 43-year-old virgin.

The pickup artists were once good cinema because they were far outside the mainstream of American life and mores. The pickup artists became good television by embedding their practice within a familiar rhetoric of change and growth. In December of 2007, Neil Strauss released *Rules of the Game*—a slender, two-volume guidebook that promised to help its readers “master the Game in thirty days.” In fact the book does not attempt to come close to delivering on that claim. A true PUA defines mastery according to Mystery’s immortal formula: “five for five.” That is—the true master has the skills to walk into a party, open five sets, and turn them into five girlfriends. The reader of *Rules of the Game* aims to get one date in thirty days. It is pitched at the most benighted of way-below-average frustrated chumps, consisting of bite-size assignments to complete each day (first assignment: say

hello to a single stranger), interspersed with nuggets of wisdom fished from self-improvement books. The devious “neg” appears now as the more benign “disqualification.” The wicked gleam in the eye of a man getting over on the world has been carefully suppressed. A new earnestness brings the whole enterprise closer to the mainstream than it has ever been before.

The book’s chastened tone makes the new enterprise feel like an act of expiation. “I didn’t want to write this book,” Strauss writes in the very first line. “I am as embarrassed to write this as you may be to pick it up.” Strauss presents the book as his gift to the world. “Even though I had no such intentions when I wrote *The Game*, I started doing a few things in my spare time to help the many guys who reached out to me after its publications with emails, calls, and letters full of heart-wrenching stories. I coached frustrated teenagers, thirty-year-old virgins, recently divorced businessmen, even rock stars and billionaires.” He observes that women have culture industries “to help cope with the challenges that come with being a woman in the world.” He contrasts this to the cultural landscape of men. “Everywhere they turn, men are shown images of women they are supposed to desire. Yet there is little advice of substance available to help them learn to attract these women, to figure out who they are, to help them improve their lifestyle and social skills.”

As pickup artistry became a business and changed the face it showed to the world, it lost the utopian, collaborative dimension of its earlier internet days, when men produced knowledge together for free. Now Mystery competes for the dollars of men who pay up to \$5,000 for a weekend spent in field. The website TheMysteryMethod.com is no longer affiliated with Mystery the man, who is suing and being sued by its current owners.

Even as his show makes him the most visible face of the pickup-artist world, as Strauss is the best known scribe, rivals and challengers in seduction lairs around the internet announce technical breakthroughs in the science of pickup that claim to put Mystery's primitive techniques to shame.

BUT WE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN where it was heading all along. About two-thirds of the way into *The Game*, Strauss is dating ten women at once. "They were what PUAs call MLTRs—multiple long-term relationships. Unlike AFCs, I never lied to these girls. They all knew I was seeing other people. And, to my surprise, even if it didn't make all of them happy, none of them left me." Strauss had become what Freud called the primal father, though on the free market model—he didn't mind if his women were having other relationships too, just as long as they responded when he called, and as long as he didn't owe them anything, by way of protection or otherwise, beyond offering enough value to keep them around in exchange for the value they offered him. It was a rational, realistic arrangement that everyone went into with eyes open, assented to voluntarily, was free to back out of at any time. Not backing out meant implicit consent, and implicit consent meant they remained because they calculated that they were better off by remaining. Everybody wins, right?

Early on, we watched as Strauss transformed himself into the man he has since become. He studied hypnotism, voice training, the Alexander technique, and the secrets of a sexual shaman named Steve P., who gave him a method of stacking orgasms to make any woman squirt. Once he mastered the Game, this lovable loser who used to constantly find himself in LBJF ("Let's just be friends") Land, could walk into every encounter in a bar with an HB (Hot Babe)

knowing that he would be able to "kiss-close" her within a half an hour.

By this time, Strauss was living with Mystery and a handful of other PUAs in Dean Martin's old mansion in the Hollywood Hills, a headquarters they have named, in a reference to *Fight Club*, Project Hollywood. Men flew in from around the world to take classes with them. Soon Strauss would successfully run Game on Britney Spears. Courtney Love moved in to the house. Strauss was about to stumble across a more or less foolproof technique for getting women to engage in a threesome.

And yet the whole endeavor had already begun its descent into hell. Strauss opens the book with a scene in which he drives a suicidal Mystery to a psychological clinic. Throughout the book he builds a portrait of a profoundly damaged person with "a gaping hole in his soul." Mystery's goal in the Game was "a blonde 10 and an Asian 10, who will love each other as much as they love me." His goal in life was "for people to be envious of me, for women to want me and men to want to be me." "

You never got much love as a child, did you?" [Strauss] asked him.

"'No,' he replied sheepishly."

They were living with two other pickup artists known by the handles Papa—a rich Asian boy—and Tyler Durden—the name of the new identity hallucinated into life by *Fight Club's* psychotic narrator. Papa's immediate claim to fame was number closing Paris Hilton at a taco stand (she never did come to a party at the mansion), but his obsession was building up the pickup school business he was running with Tyler. Leading and profiting off men, rather than meeting women, becomes their dream. Tyler and Papa represented a new breed of pickup artist—preternaturally obsessed with observing and modeling the best PUAs, incapable

of talking about anything else. These younger PUAs came to the Game before they developed autonomous personalities. They really were nothing more than the sum of their programming.

Strauss began to see that the Game had turned many of these men into what he calls “social robots.” He produced a long post for the online group discussion board in which he listed the attributes of a social robot, and clearly the men fit. And from there on out, Strauss started to tally up all the costs the PUAs had absorbed in exchange for their conquests, and the costs they imposed on others.

So while the first half of the book induces an irresistible high as we watch Strauss’s brazen ascent, the second half of the book is a long, painful withdrawal from the inflated hopes placed on a handful of rather threadbare routines. Cruelty enters Strauss’s behavior. Misogyny insinuates its way into the others’. They manipulate people and then despise them for their susceptibility.

Given an opportunity to fuck a coked-up porn star in a bathroom, Strauss can’t get it up.

THE GAME SAYS, LET WHOEVER CAN ATTAIN transcendence attain it, whoever wants to pine for it, pine for it. As for us pickup artists, we serve the world as it is. We give it what it wants, and what it would ask for, if only it could bear the reality of its own desires.

The attitude of these men followed a sorrowful trajectory—from resentment toward women for their intractability to contempt for the same women upon their capitulation—though along the way, there were all the excitements that come with mastering a skill, as well as the incidental sexual gratification that one encounters in one’s homosexual quest for self-empowerment. The men gleefully pursued an antinomian goal, and

grew powerful because of their disregard for limits that other less-desperate and -disenchanted men still obeyed—the illusions that give love whatever meaning it still sustains in a world that has systematically converted every transcendent value into a mere advertising slogan, except for the one idea whose sanctity we cannot yet extinguish, advertising slogan though it may be—that two souls might meet and assuage each other’s loneliness.

The Game players made explicit the workings of a new sexual economy, one that was always implicit in the old, but was mediated by illusions that, it turns out, did more than merely obscure. We had disaggregated community, love, sex, and the family to allow a new protocol of maximum efficiency to establish itself. The Game players applied the logic of bourgeois productivity to slash open the myth of bourgeois romance. The mystery of romance yielded all its secrets to a method, ruthlessly deployed, which set its practitioners free from a fate that was never going to include them in its hoped-for happy endings anyway. Without explicitly criticizing it, they disclosed with unusual clarity the nature of the larger game we all play: one in which each player gives what he must and takes what he can. In this ordinary game, you judge your own value dispassionately, and cultivate the art of presenting it in the best light. Inasmuch as the purpose of the Game was to recalibrate a man’s own programming to make him a better kind of biological machine, it was also a form of self-discovery, because every step along the way brought a new discovery of how much his own programming, and the world’s, already consisted of self-maximizing behaviors that he simply hadn’t mastered properly: You neither offer nor expect loyalty; in place of this premodern virtue, you offer honesty, transparency, and efficiency. If you find a better

deal, you are free to go. If both members of a pair rationally calculate that they aren't likely to do better on the open marketplace than they are with each other, they commit, though they know that commitments are always reversible. They may search for stable foundations, but they should preserve flexibility for the day—its arrival is inevitable—when conditions change.

And so our individual quest to render ourselves invulnerable to the storms of fortune makes universal vulnerability the rule from which none of us can opt out. Inequality is built into the structure of this game, as nature assigns its endowments, and fortune doles out favorable circumstances in an unequal way. So the woman who does not have it all will not get it all: maybe she talks a little too loudly; maybe she weighs a little too much; and the man she wants will take what she offers without giving her what she seeks in return, and will not feel obliged to. So the man who has it all will get it all, and the man who has none will get none, and they all will be grateful for the little they get, or grow sickened on the excess of all they can have, or consume themselves with bitterness knowing they are stuck with nothing, and be given commercial substitutes for what they cannot get on their own—pornography that traffics in revenge fantasies, online dating sites that reinforce the world's hierarchies.

The Game exposed that system by taking it apart piece by piece and showing us how it worked. But it also shored it up. It told us that through dogged effort and the application of science, anyone could transform himself from pauper to prince. Helena Rubinstein, the cosmetics magnate, once said that there were no ugly women, only lazy ones. The promise of magical self-transformation offered by the marketplace is at the same time a pitiless injunction suggesting that women born without the favor of beau-

ty deserve the neglect they experience from the opposite sex. And what good does our pity do them anyway, if pity alone is all we were willing to give to them? Better to give them the knowledge and techniques they need to remake themselves as the world will have them. Once informed, the responsibility for continued failure to rise above genetic inheritance is theirs alone. So too, now, for the men who didn't acquire Game.

Strauss's dark cautionary tale has a happy ending. The contrast is as glaring as in one of those Hollywood endings from the 1930s, the kind that spiteful directors would tack on at the behest of the studios, deliberately playing up the mechanical artifice to expose its falsity. In Strauss's case, however, you feel that he is personally invested. He wants to tell us that after extending his capability to such inhuman lengths by such inhuman means, he's still human after all; he's preserved that fragile part of himself that in the social robots has gone callous and cold. He wants us to know—and he wants himself to believe, you feel—that he's still capable of love. And so, he finally meets a woman who is impervious to the tactics of the Game. She is beautiful, she is smart, she is unflappable, and she can't be manipulated. "Lisa was neg-proof. Next to her, other girls seemed like incomplete human beings." And so on. She becomes his case of "one-itis," and though he does go on the fuck rampage that is the preferred PUA cure for the syndrome, he can't get her out of his mind. We are meant to diagnose this not as thwarted ego, or the Gamer Gamed, but as the stirrings of true love. When they finally fuck, he stays hard for four or five sessions in a row, and without the aid of Viagra. This must be the real thing.

At the end of the book, Strauss turns his back on the Game. It's a nice ending, but just because you leave the practice of the Game,

you don't leave the world for which it is a useful guide. A year later, Wikipedia reports, Strauss's one true love left him for the British pop star Robbie Williams.

—*Wesley Yang*



