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Bluff

By Michael Kardos
Mysterious Press
288 pp.

Michael Kardos has made a name for himself among readers in recent years for creating exciting, fast-paced thrillers. A native of the Jersey Shore, he has also become a source of pride in both the Mississippi and Starkville literary scenes while also heading up the creative writing program at Mississippi State University. In his newest book, *Bluff*, Mr. Kardos returns to his home state of New Jersey in a tale involving the worlds of magic and poker, where nothing totally seems to be as it first appears.

Kardos wastes little time throwing us into the world of his main character, a down on her luck magician named Natalie Webb. The first scene sees her performing at a show she doesn't want to be at in front of a group of lawyers unappreciative of her talents. Natalie specializes in what is termed 'close-up magic,' which includes various sleight of hand tricks such as the one that sees her almost blind a heckling volunteer out of frustration. For Natalie, magic started out as a refuge from a devastating childhood, one where she blamed herself for the accident that left her father crippled and ultimately led to the splitting of her family. By the time of the novel's action, it has become a series of crippling setbacks triggered by an ill-advised affair with an older and, unknown to her at the time, married magician. This causes her to go from an up and coming star to a pariah, and acts as a driving force for the numerous decisions, mostly disastrous, that she makes going forward.

The potential legal trouble that Natalie faces, combined with the traumatic events from her past, place her on a course that leads into a world that is somewhat related to magic, but almost completely unknown to Natalie herself: cheating in underground poker games. The early part of the novel also introduces the reader to two of the most important themes throughout the book, chance and deception. While working on a magazine article on card cheats, Natalie stumbles upon the other main character, a woman that goes by Ellen who is a brilliant con-artist that uses disguise and ruse to win big at poker. She recognizes and takes advantage of Natalie's desperation to recruit her in helping her go after a massive payday at a high-stakes game involving powerful New Jersey businessmen, one of which is shadowy figure from Natalie's past who played a role in her father's decline.

Kardos makes a point of explaining the similarities and differences between magic and cheating at poker upon the fateful meeting between Natalie and Ellen. Both rely on a delicate art of deception to get the job done; however, as the author points out, whereas an audience agrees in a way to be deceived by a magician in the name of entertainment, a 'card cheat' has to mislead their fellow players without any of them knowing it even happened. The latter is therefore in much more danger if the trick, so to speak, falls apart. This principle helps create a constant tension as Natalie moves deeper into Ellen's world, and eventually leads to a very satisfying, harrowing climax.

The only noticeable issue with the novel comes with the long expositions on the use of card tricks and different poker dealing techniques that mark the middle sections. While necessary and interesting, they tend to drag a bit and throw off the otherwise blistering pace of the characters' journey. However, this is a small complaint due the handling of the story by Mr. Kardos. He uses many of the same techniques of deception as Natalie and Ellen to keep the reader on edge, making us think the plot is going one way before driving it in a drastically different, and often shocking, direction. Despite this, we never feel maliciously tricked, and every character, event, and decision, no matter how seemingly minor, is given a wealth of significance. This all culminates in a quick, well-crafted thriller that is a perfect read for the summer months ahead.