



Stacked Deck: A Story of Selfishness in America (America In Transition)

Lawrence Mitchell

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Americans for generations have been raised with the mantra that we can grow up to be anything we want to be, achieve anything we can imagine. How many of us believe the message? Dream big. It is a fundamental ideology of unbounded opportunity underscoring our drive to succeed. Yet for many Americans the reality, no matter how hard they try, is far from the visions of glory, the unattainable dream of rags to riches that leaves them feeling like failures.

To understand this ideology and its effect on society, Lawrence E. Mitchell instructs us to look at the myth of individualism that pervades our laws, our social thought, our institutions, and our philosophies. It is the touchstone of our national debates on welfare reform, salary equity, FDA regulations, and a criminal defendant's right to a fair trial -- and it even infiltrates our private lives every time we argue about the division of household chores or television time. In *Stacked Deck*, Mitchell shows us how this artificial reality buries the way we truly live.

Mitchell uses examples drawn from history, politics, law, and culture to show how our singular concern with fairness has diminished our sense of vulnerability, so that our ideas of justice, equality, and efficiency are modeled on the capabilities of the strongest in society. Large scale examples -- such as blue collar layoffs and corporate downsizing, natural disasters and catastrophic illnesses -- illustrates the rickety bridge between comfort and disaster. We must be reminded that we are all vulnerable to the forces of economics, society, politics, and nature. Thus, Mitchell proposes, those who start out at the top tend to stay there, just as the weak tend to remain weak.

Stacked Deck does more than outline this problem of American selfishness; it proposes a solution that is nothing less than a massive reconception of the way we relate to one another. Mitchell retains what is productive about the myth of the self-reliant individual, while asserting what is necessary to restore a sense of community. He suggests a sweeping intellectual recovery of fairness available to all levels of American society, thereby reclaiming our true sense of responsibility to others in society.

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