



No House Limit (Hard Case Crime #45)

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Casino owner Joe Martin faces down a Syndicate-backed gambler in a marathon craps game, with millions of dollars and possibly even his life at stake.

No House Limit (Hard Case Crime #45) Details

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From Reader Review No House Limit (Hard Case Crime #45) for online ebook

Dfordoom says

Steve Fisher was an amazingly prolific author, his output totaling around a hundred novels, 900 short stories and 120 movie and television scripts. His best-known crime novel was probably *I Wake Up Screaming*. His 1958 novel *No House Limit* was subtitled *A Novel of Las Vegas* and is perhaps the ultimate gambling novel.

Joe Martin owns and runs the Rainbow's End casino in Las Vegas, one of the biggest casinos in the city. It's a completely independent operation, not associated with any crime or gambling syndicates. Since the days when mobsters like Bugsy Siegel established the city as a gambling centre the Las Vegas syndicate had been trying to clean up its act. They wanted to avoid anything that would scare off the customers. That meant no gangland-style killings. If Joe Martin refused to join the syndicate that was his business. There was more than enough money to go around and they were content to leave him alone.

Now someone is targeting Joe Martin. He has his sources and he knows the attack is coming but he has no idea who is behind it. He does know what the weapon will be though. It will be Bello, the world's most famous professional gambler. Whoever is out to get Joe has provided Bello with a \$400,000 stake. The objective is to wipe out Joe Martin at the crap tables, to take everything he has including the casino. And if anyone can do it, Bello can.

Joe Martin is not going to be a pushover though. You don't survive for a decade as one of the major casino operators in Vegas without knowing a thing or two about survival. Joe is no criminal, his operations are strictly legitimate, but he's still one very tough guy and he has the reputation of having the proverbial nerves of steel.

Joe has other things on his mind at this time. Well one thing in particular - a girl called Sunny Guido. No-one really knows much about her. She just turned up at the casino but she's obviously pretty interested in Joe Martin. And he's rather interested in her as well. He's the kind of guy who has always prided himself on not needing anyone, especially women, but Sunny is different. To his own amazement he finds that he is falling for her. Maybe it's just the pressure. And that pressure gets pretty intense after two days of non-stop action at the crap tables have seen Joe lose \$2 million to Bello. At the moment he's in need of emotional support. But maybe it's more than that.

The Rainbow's End is being targeted in other ways as well - counterfeit gambling chips, loaded dice, betrayals by employees. It's all part of a concerted plan to break Joe Martin.

Bello is not without his weaknesses as well. His girlfriend Dee is getting restless and she's making a play for Mal Davis, a lounge singer and piano player at the Rainbow's End and an old friend of Joe's. Bello has the reputation of being a man who doesn't like to lose at anything and Mal knows that stealing his girl could get him killed.

Fisher builds the tension remorselessly as fortunes ebb and flow in the epic gambling battle that will decide the fate of Joe Martin. Fisher was a keen gambler himself and displays his encyclopedic knowledge of the world of the high rollers. The book has a heady atmosphere of dangerous glamour mixed with desperation.

The character of Bello was based on a real-life gambler, the legendary Nick the Greek - a man reputed to

have won and lost \$500 million at the gambling tables.

No House Limit has been reissued by Hard Case Crime and is highly recommended.

Dan Schwent says

The Syndicate wanted to shut Joe Martin and his casino, Rainbow's End, down and brought in the best gambler in the world to put him out of business. Can Joe Martin keep his casino? And does the girl who's stolen his heart have anything to do with the people who want his money?

Yeah, there are some awesome books in the Hard Case Crime series and some that are only okay. This is one of the okay ones.

I like the idea of an independent casino owner going up against the mob to keep his business. It sounds good, right? Too bad it was kinda boring. I don't find the idea of a guy playing craps with Syndicate money trying to break a casino very exciting. Sunny Guido (Guido? Really?) would have made an interesting love interest for Joe if she wasn't such a bland doormat. The subplot with Dee and Malcolm didn't really do anything for me. Other than Joe Martin, the only character I cared about was Sprig, security at the Rainbow's End. By the end, I just didn't care anymore.

It wasn't a horrible book. It was fairly well written. I just don't see the attraction of Las Vegas, I guess.

Chris says

Steve Fisher is another author whom I'd never heard of before despite his swath of material. He's written, from what I can tell, hundreds of novels, almost a thousand short stories, and a hundred-twenty movie scripts/screenplays, including those for Raymond Chandler's *Lady in the Lake*, and the Bogart films *Dead Reckoning* and *Tokyo Joe*, along with the final *Thin Man* film, and the screenplay for his own bestseller *I Wake Up Screaming*. The afterword by one of the author's son fills in a lot of interesting details. Living in Las Vegas, Fisher was enamored with the glitz and gambling of the city, and used a lot of research and insider's intel to craft this novel, *No House Limit*.

The book has three main plot threads, which I'll go over individually. First and foremost is that of Joe Martin, owner of Rainbow's End. Joe became an expert craps player as a private in Europe, and went to Vegas with his winnings to start a casino. After refusing to buy protection from The Syndicate, they attempted to crash his casino by out-gambling him; they lost, and Rainbow's End became the luxurious dream it is now. Now, The Syndicate is trying again: they're backing the world's greatest gambler, Bello, to win all of Joe's money away. And right away, he's off to an impressive start.

While Joe spends most of his time down at the tables, keeping an eye on Bello (and hoping he'll lose), he's also dealing with a love interest: schoolteacher Sunny Guido. Joe is Humphrey Bogart in everything but name; just look at the dialogue. He's a rough-and-tumble man of action who also happens to be scared witless, self-isolated by his own rough attitude. Joe needs Sunny—not just from attraction, but as a psychological safety net and caretaker in his penthouse hideaway, but he never wants to say what he means. You know how in those old films, Bogart would get into a verbal sparring match with the love interest, she'd send a zinger

back at him, he'd slap her, she'd slap back, and within a few moments they'd be making out? Yeah, he's that kind of character, with deep-seated issues that won't let his romantic side play out.

The second thread is that of Mal Davis, lounge singer/piano player at Rainbow's End. He's more or less a washout, and is waiting on his agent to give him a call on his record contract attempts, stuck playing piano for Joe and hoping someone will notice his talents. Mal spends a lot of time at the bars and lounges, meeting a variety of interesting characters taken from all walks of Vegas life: gamblers and showgirls, weirdos, freaks, drunks, starry-eyed dreamers and harsh-toned cynics. Soon, eye-catcher Dee, Bello's girl, entangles him. Dee enjoyed living the high life with Bello as her sugar daddy, but now wants to get out. Their relationship builds over a series of secret rendezvous; eventually they're told by their respective sides to lay off. And then they find out that they can't.

The third storyline is that of Sprig, Joe's head of security, who's implied to be ex-FBI or law enforcement. Either way, he's kind of a ninja, in that he's best at everything: he rough-houses traitorous employees, sees through disguises and plots, unearths counterfeit chips, and even beats the crap out of a Chicago hitman hired to kill... Sprig himself. Sprig's sections are the shortest; they illuminate the greater scheme without getting in the way of the two parallel romantic entanglements.

I have to say, Fisher did a fantastic job building tension throughout the novel: there's a strong sense of Joe's fatigue in the claustrophobic casino interior as Bello's gamble drags on. I give him more credit because the plot is ludicrously thin. Bello's big plan is "have the house take its limit off of maximum bet amounts, then gamble like nobody's business," which is not the plan I'd have if I wanted to break the bank. On the other hand, it's implied he's not only lucky but so mathematically astute that his betting style and choices aren't repeatable by mortal men. Bello is an analogue for Nick the Greek, famed gambler who won and lost an estimated \$500 million in his lifetime, which can help explain Bello's fame, luck, and numbers-crunching skills. But the idea of trying to win \$10 million just by making larger bets doesn't fly.

Fisher's experience with Bogart screenplays and crime thrillers is a strong advantage: it shows, in the terse dialogue, the pounding tension, and the web of sub-plots which build up to a crescendo. Fisher's handling is deft, making it a sublime treat for the '50s noir fan. The only downside is that its horrible Fifties feel is worse than most other books from the era; the Joe-Sunny relationship makes it one of the more misogynistic Hard Case Crimes I've read, and it's from an era when "Negros" weren't allowed on the Strip.

I read *No House Limit* as a period piece in more ways than one. It's a vision of Vegas that looks nothing like our contemporary one—in fact, hasn't been seen since the Rat Pack was swingin' through the Strip—and the misogynistic relationship is dated. But Fisher's prose is steady, unblinking as it dives through intrigue and tension at an ever-increasing pace. And his writing style... man, it's slick. Despite its flaws, of which there are several, *No House Limit* was worth the time, thrilling and convincingly written, and now I'm on the lookout for more Steve Fisher novels.

(Full review found [here](#).)

Andy Nieradko says

This is one hell of a book. This is the first time I've read anything by Steve Fisher, and it damn sure won't be the last. This guy wrote around 100 novels, and wrote tons for TV and Film, including two Bogart movies (*Dead Reckoning* and *Tokyo Joe*.) Seems I learn something new every day, and my stack of books "to read"

is growing faster and taller than my kids. Anyway No House Limit is a Las Vegas story. It has a cool, jazzy narrative that pulls you in by beginning most chapters with a little Vegas gambling lesson. Which is very helpful, especially if you don't speak the language of gaming. This is hardboiled fiction at its white-knuckled best. Originally published in 1958. Reissued in 2008 by that Godsend to the genre Hard Case Crime. It includes a really cool afterword written by one of Steve Fisher's sons.

Dave says

No House Limit was first published in 1958 and, as described by "one of his sons" in the afterword to the book, really described Las Vegas in the 1950's as one or two solo casinos held out against the crime syndicates and big corporations had yet to move in. It was a magical oasis of gambling and glamour. Apparently, Fisher knew many of the people who came to Las Vegas then chasing their dreams and coping with their desperations.

This is not so much a story with a conventional plot as a series of vignettes about a casino showdown taking place over the course of several days. Joe Martin, a tough Bogart-type, runs the biggest independent casino in Las Vegas and the Syndicate wants him out. They bring in Bello, the greatest gambler in the world, to break the casino. It's the world's greatest craps game and, even with Bello on the greatest winning streak in history, Martin cannot back down because he can't risk the casino's reputation and be seen as a cheapskate that won't take on the big bets.

On and on, the craps game goes down with brief breaks in between and dollar by dollar the casino is being bankrupted. Meanwhile, a side show takes place with Martin's fascination with Sunny Guido, a virginal schoolteacher. "The first time he saw her she was clad in a skintight white bathing suit and was lying face down so that the only visible part of her was the back of a rubber bathing cap, a slimly arched back and long, tawny legs, and he'd thought, idly, if any girl's face could equal this girl's figure, I'd trade the casino for her. And then she was on her back, looking up, as Mal introduced them: a saucy pug nose, a generous mouth, and wide green eyes that slanted up."

Mal Davis is the piano player. The General is a sharp, rich man claiming he was in town with his mistress and his daughter and that they were both nineteen. The general insisted on buying everyone drinks and making dates with every showgirl in the casino. Sprig is head of security and the power behind the casino. There are a myriad of such characters in this story as Sprig fends off attack after attack with counterfeiters and loaded dice and other distractions.

But the main event of the story is the showdown between Martin and Bello and Martin has to be there on the floor to okay the bigger and bigger and more complicated bets that Bello lays down with no house limit in an effort to break the last independent casino.

All in all, a top-notch book that gives the reader the flavor and feel of the 1950s era of Las Vegas, including the glamour, the desperation, and the dry desert air. Highly recommended.

Craig Childs says

It is 1958, and Joe Martin is the last private casino owner left on the Vegas strip. The mob has decided it's

finally time to push him out. Their plan is simple: Stake the world's best craps player, Belo, and send him in to bankrupt Joe's casino during a non-stop 3-day gambling siege.

This would be a preposterous premise in today's high-tech, corporate-owned version of Vegas, but everybody has heard the urban legends of big-time gamblers called whales who could bankrupt a casino over the course of a good weekend in the 1950's.

It is interesting to note the author would have certainly been familiar with these stories; he lived only 3 blocks away from Bugsy Siegel, the mobster who built the first Vegas casino and then was later gunned down by his unhappy partners in his home!

This story is at its best when it focuses on Skip, the head of casino security, as he tries to outmaneuver the shenanigans of the mobsters. Skip seems to be the brains; Joe simply stares down Belo over the tables and fights exhaustion for 200 pages.

The story is at its worst when it focuses on the maudlin love story between Joe and a visiting schoolteacher, or on the trivial subplots of Mal Davis the bar pianist who tries to save every showgirl and damsel in distress he meets.

I particularly enjoyed the climax of the story, even if it did rely more on Joe's luck rather than his brains or brawn. Several seemingly trivial subplots came to bear on the outcome, and the final scenes are both triumphant and bittersweet. With a few plot tweaks here and there, I could not help but wonder if this could be made into a really good movie one day.

This is not a groundbreaking addition to the Hard Case Crime library, but it is a fun, easy read nonetheless.

Tom Steer says

Probably nearer 3.5 stars, but the authenticity of Fisher's descriptions of 50's Vegas make me round this up to a 4—after two nights reading this book, I genuinely feel like I've been on holiday to Nevada and back. The "siege" of Rainbow's End is a great idea for a story, although one that feels a little static at times. The novel's charm, however, lies in its Vegas anecdotes, and the rogues gallery of characters which pass through the casino doors. The tone is enjoyably pulpy, and it comes as no surprise that Fisher wrote films for Bogart, since the novel's central character reminded me of Bogey throughout.

An interesting—if imbalanced—gem. Worth investigating, although I expect that *No House Limit* is something of an acquired taste. I can say it suited mine, though.

Michael Mallory says

"No House Limit" is a very unusual and unique novel by one of the most undersung masters of noir, Steve Fisher. It is structured somewhat like a screenplay--perhaps not surprising, since Fisher spent decades in Hollywood--and concerns the attempts of the unnamed syndicate in Vegas to break the bank of a casino owned by a lone wolf by hiring the world's best gambler. That's about it for high concept, but what keeps the reader reading (at least this reader) is Fisher's interwoven threads of the various casino employees working

day and night to fend off the attack by the syndicate. In the process many of these characters evolve mightily, and there are a few genuine surprises along the way. If you want a formula noirish crime caper set in pre-Rat Pack Las Vegas, this is not it. If, however, you want to see a different way of looking at a heist story, then you should read this book.

Glenn says

Four stars for Fischer's superb dialog throughout this slightly corny but fast paced little diversion. Yes, the characters are typical, and the action predictable, but it's quintessential '50s noir, as it should be.

David says

There was one thing about *No House Limit* that bugged me and bugged me and bugged me such that it really interfered with my ability to enjoy the novel: the portrayal of the gambler Bello and his craps expertise. On the one hand, *No House Limit* presents itself as an insider's look at Vegas and crapshooting: most of the chapters begin with short tutorials about Vegas and/or craps, and in an afterward he wrote for this Hard Case Crime reprint, one of Steve Fisher's sons mentions the research that his father did for this book. But the portrayal of Bello playing craps is all wrong. Bello, we are told, is a legendary craps player with a betting system so mathematically complicated that onlookers are helpless to understand what he is doing. But this is nonsense. Saying that someone is a great craps player is like saying that someone is a great slot-machine player. In both games, the house always wins over the long haul. That's the point of casino games! So Bello has developed a complicated system of placing bets . . . that all favor the house! Fisher should have done more with the loaded dice angle (which does figure to some degree in Bello's success), and leave the idiocy alone. Did I mention that this bugged me?

Eric_W says

I guess the first question many would ask is why bother read these old pulp fiction novels. Nostalgia, plot, setting, voyeurism, writing style, pictures of busty blonds on the cover; all of these I suppose. For lack of a better reason, I guess it would be the same reason why some people watch football. They provide easy, often thoughtless, entertainment.

That being said, Hard Case Crime, reissued a whole series of novels from the fifties and early sixties, most of which might be defined as noir, or representing the underbelly of American culture.

No House Limit portrays Joe Martin, owner of an independent, i.e., not controlled by the syndicate, casino in Las Vegas. The syndicate has vowed to shut him down and their approach is to hire a well-known gambler, Bello, to gamble him out of existence. An implausible scenario, certainly. What makes the reader want to continue is the atmosphere, the ambiance, the recreation of what we think a fifties casino might be like. Note I suggested it's what we imagine it might be like. Whether it was or not, is really irrelevant to me. It's a story and an intriguing one that allows the reader to lose himself in another world.

Written by Steve Fisher who, according to a postscript by his son wrote close to one hundred novels in the fifties. It has a very archaic flavor with stock characters straight out of the movies for which Fisher wrote

many scripts.

Bello was patterned after the infamous Nick the Greek, a rather pathetic gambler who was introduced to Michael Fisher by his father. Nick once said he had won and lost close to \$500 million in his lifetime and what really made him pathetic in Michael's eyes were the boxes of letters Nick kept in his garage from people who might enclose \$5 or \$10 and ask Nick to gamble it for them in hopes he would strike it rich for them to help pay their medical bills or save their home.

I certainly learned a lot about craps.

Neil McCrea says

Steve Fisher is a hugely influential, yet surprisingly little known noir author. Incredibly prolific, he adapted many noir classics for the screen, including *Double Indemnity*. His most famous novel, *I Wake Up Screaming*, has one of the most imitated plotlines in all of noir (troubled alcoholic wakes up next to the corpse of a beautiful young woman with no memory of the night before). In *No House Limit*, Mr. Fisher gives us a sort of crime fable set in the far away land of Las Vegas.

No House Limit is subtitled "a novel of Las Vegas", and the changing face of mid-1950's Las Vegas is the real protagonist here. The novel takes place a mere seven years after Bugsy Siegel and the syndicate began to transform Vegas from an interesting stopover to a destination. The independent casinos are on their way out and multinational entertainment corporations are only beginning to notice the possibilities in this town. For a hot couple of decades, the mob was in ascendance here. I read *No House Limit* while I was on my way to Las Vegas on vacation. A certain contextual jolt made the reading and my trip a few degrees more pleasurable.

Joe Martin is the last of the independent casino owners, and the mob is out to break his bank. The level of Federal interest in mob activity in Vegas makes direct action impossible, so instead they bankroll Bello "The World's Greatest Gambler" to break the bank of his casino in a single marathon craps game. The game runs almost non-stop for days w/ short hr long breaks for eating and sleeping. Once the game begins the novel sustains a slow boiling tension throughout. Most of the action is restricted to the casino itself, but there is a wide range of characters surrounding the action, each with their own horse in the race and their own attempts to influence the outcome. The set-up is so outrageous that the novel takes on a fable like quality as fortunes rise and fall with each roll of the dice. Unbelievably, the situation is based on a real life event in which "The World's Greatest Gambler" Nick the Greek was bankrolled by the mob to break the bank of a small casino in a marathon poker match.

I enjoyed the hell out of this novel, but I have to knock off one star because the women in this book are completely ridiculous. It's not just a matter of period sexism, it's lazy and unrealistic writing. The celebrity obsessed, albino waitress and the cynical showgirl hoping to be proved wrong are one note characters, but at least they are somewhat interesting. The two female leads, Sunny Guido the ingenue schoolteacher and Dee the gambler's girl are nothing but a loose collection of tired stereotypes and convenient plot devices.

Read *No House Limit* for its evocation of a gambling fairytale, read it for its impeccable sense of time and place, and then quietly shake your head at the short stick Mr Fisher gave his female cast.

Matt says

Mal was only slightly more interesting. Joe Martin might be the most boring character in the Hard Case Crime series I've come across. Gimme a Sprigg series! ... don't get me started on the female characters. Worst HCC book since Straight Cut by Bell.

Jure says

The whole "siege" concept seemed a bit silly to me. But I did think at the beginning that it had a potential to develop into something (more) interesting. There are few cool characters and beautiful dames (we are in Vegas after all) and parallel to the main story there's another subplot in which Joe's right-hand man is shielding his boss from the various distractions that might break his concentration. Because during this "siege", syndicate tries to disrupt things by "pushing the queer chips", switching dices with "shaved" ones and even dispatching a hit-man from Chicago.

But all those episodes are just fillers for the main theme. Which is not even gambling, it's LOVE! Joe and his piano player both fall desperately for two women they've just met. In fact, once the siege is over, both of them will propose to their new found loves. So instead of hard-boiled gangster pulp novel, this turns into incredibly cheesy and at times hilariously funny romance crap. Too bad.

More here (review includes spoilers!):
<http://a60books.blogspot.ie/2014/10/n...>

Kemper says

Not a bad story, but comes across as very dated.
