



The Lottery Wars: Long Odds, Fast Money, and the Battle Over an American Institution

Matthew Sweeney

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The story behind the American lottery: gambling, lawsuits, corruption, moralizing, financial ruin, and more gambling.

Despite the infinitesimal odds, more than half of Americans admit to playing the lottery. We wait on long lines and give up our coffee breaks. We scratch tickets, win, and spend the winnings on more scratch tickets. We play our “lucky” numbers, week in and week out.

In a country where gambling is largely illegal, this is a strange state of affairs. Lotteries kept the Jamestown settlers alive, despite misgivings from the throne of England. After centuries of a love-hate relationship with the public and the government, including a nationwide ban, forty-two states and the nation’s capital now encourage lottery gambling in the name of school kids and senior citizens. The lotteries have succeeded despite opposition from an odd pairing of the religious right and liberal opponents, who claim the government ought not be in the business of promoting long-odds jackpots to the poor or gullible.

Why do we play this game that brings few rewards and leaves us rifling through the garbage for the ticket we swear would be a winner? How has this game persisted, even flourished, against so many obstacles?

In this perceptive, compulsively readable book, Matthew Sweeney gives a history of the American lottery, stopping along the way to give us the bizarre—and sometimes tragic—stories that it makes possible: the five-million-dollar miracle man who became a penniless preacher, investing in a crackpot energy scheme; the senator whose untimely injury allowed the lottery to pass into law in his home state; and many others.

Written with insight and wit, *The Lottery Wars* gives us the people and the stories that built a nationwide institution, for better or worse.

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