

Review *In Order to Amaze*, Genii magazine June 2016 (John Lovick)

Twenty-five years ago I read something that I've never forgotten, a quote from Bert Allerton in *The Close-Up Magician*: "You can take a stacked deck and follow any great artist with cards and your spectators will think you are the better magician." While I didn't doubt it, I had not yet learned how true it is. In the years since then I've realized that almost all of my favorite close-up magicians - Asi Wind, Dani daOrtiz, Denis Behr and Eric Mead among them - use a memorized deck, and this is no coincidence. One thing their work has in common is that they don't seem to do *anything*, and yet magic happens. Mem-deck work (as it is popularly known) is a big part of what makes this possible.

Memorized-deck magic has a long, interesting history. There is evidence it existed as far back as the 1600s. A couple centuries later Hofzinser memorized every card position in a rosary deck, a rotating stack, and 89 years ago Luis Nikola ushered-in the modern era of mem-deck work when he published his card system. The popularity of this genre of card magic has really ballooned in the last thirty years largely because of the writings of Juan Tamariz and Simon Aronson. Despite its popularity, there is not an enormous amount written about it in English. The most significant writings are Aronson's books, Tamariz's *Mnemonic*, Denis Behr's two *Handcrafted Card Magic* books, a large chapter in Michael Close's *Workers 5*, and an essay in Eric Mead's *Tangled Web*.

Now there is an admirable volume to add to that list: Pit Hartling's *In Order to Amaze*. Hartling, as a writer, member of the Flicking Fingers troupe, and solo performer is admired by magicians around the world, and I would include him in my list above of favorite close-up magicians.

This beautifully produced book amply illustrated with colour photographs, is a collection of twenty-one mem-deck miracles. The first seventeen routines will work with any stack, and the last four are designed for the Tamariz stack specifically (more on these four tricks later).

The material here is suitable for intermediate cardicians. Like a lot of mem-deck work, most of these tricks require you to think on your feet, and be proficient with fundamentals sleights such as a cull, second deal, false shuffle, multiple turnover, color change, palm, etc. If you are brand-new to mem-deck magic, you'll probably want to limit yourself to one or two of the routines, until you get comfortable with the stack, and then try to tackle the remainder of the book. There is a wide variety of effects described, from fairly quick revelations to extensive multiple-phase set pieces. The plots include impossible locations, mind reading, matching tricks, poker demonstrations, predictions, transformations, and more. Some of the tricks are quite visual and as Hartling points out, mem-deck work does not have a reputation for being particularly visual.

Of course, everyone will have their favorites, based on their interests and styles, but here are the routines that stuck out for me: In "Catch Me if You Can" two cards catch a freely named card in the middle of a shuffled deck. Then the named card is caught by the same two cards in a second deck that the performer has literally not touched since before the beginning of the trick.

“Sherlock“ is an extremely fair impossible-location routine where the spectator can select the card while standing across the room, return the card himself, shuffle the deck twice, and give it multiple cuts. The performer will still find it.

In “Duplicity“ a spectator shuffles a deck and deals two hands of poker. You deal the exact same hands from a second deck.

“The Poker Formulas“ is a highlight of the book. I might not have appreciated this from reading it, but about a year ago, I saw Hartling perform it at the Magic Castle and it's terrific. If you were to take Tamariz's „Any Poker Hand Called For“ from *Mnemonic*, pump it full of steroids and then crank it up to 11, this would be the result. Spectators name any very specific poker hand such as a full house fives over sevens or nine-high straight flush in clubs and they also choose the number of players and without so much as shuffling the deck, the magician deals himself the exact requested hand. This trick can be adapted for any stack, and Hartling in conjunction with Denis Behr has a website where you can enter the details of your stack and print out the formulas that make it work - the formulas being simultaneously an amusing part of the presentation and, surprisingly, part of the secret.

There is a “Quartets“ section in the book which contain seven routines, all involving controlling any named four-of-a-kind. It uses a method Hartling worked out with Denis Behr. It is a very powerful concept, and this section of the book was my favorite. The stand-out routines in the section were:

“Murphy's Law“ where the performer uses the deck to test how lucky a spectator is. Unfortunately, he proves to be as unlucky as possible. This is a very amusing trick, and to remove any “sting“, there's an ideal follow-up called “The Chosen“ in which the spectator finds four freely named mates.

“The Illusionist“ is a demonstration of skill, with a magical ending that proves that the first demonstration never happened: The magician puts four cards into his pocket. He then locates a named four-of-a-kind. Those four cards vanish, and it is revealed that they were the four cards placed in his pocket at the beginning.

The last four tricks in the book all use the Tamariz stack. However, one of them also works with the Aronson stack, another does not require any particular stack at all, and all four of them can be done even if you don't have the stack memorized. If you set up the deck, and follow the instructions, the tricks would work without needing to know the stack! I thought all four routines were quite interesting, two of them in particular:

“Fairytale Poker“ is an extremely impressive and self-working poker demo. The magician demonstrates an enchanted deck of cards wherein seven very strong hands are dealt, yet he wins with four aces. Further, the presentation is such that it seems spectators determine various aspects of the deal, such as the number of players and the specifics of certain hands, which really increases the impact.

“Game of Chance“ is a five-phase routine that is hard to describe. It reminds me of the Ten Card Poker Deal in that the spectators always lose. In a simple game, they

constantly get cards of the wrong color. It's the kind of trick that can generate a lot of fun in a show or even in informal performances.

In addition to being beautifully designed and produced, the book is well written. Fairly complicated segments are explained clearly, and there is a gentle humour sprinkled throughout. The reading experience is further improved by the commentary paragraphs that follow many of the tricks. These mini-essays cover topics such as conviction, mental snapshots, emotional hooks, scripting strategies, the use of absurd presentations in card magic, truth versus artistic truth, prologues and callbacks, and a very good description of how to learn to deal thirds.

The advice and wisdom Pit offers are applicable to all card magic, and not just the mem-deck, so reading the book would be valuable even if you never bother to memorize a stack. Finally, if maintaining stack order is important to you, Hartling ends every trick with the procedure to restore the stack.

So, what are you waiting for? Buy this book.