

The Washington Post

May 2, 2006 Tuesday Final Edition

Style; C08 , BOOK WORLD

A Man's Passion, Seen in the Cards

By Jonathan Yardley

VULNERABLE IN HEARTS

A Memoir of Fathers, Sons, and Contract Bridge

By Sandy Balfour

Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 204 pp. \$22

The game of contract bridge -- a variation and improvement upon auction bridge, itself an offspring of whist -- was introduced by Harold Stirling Vanderbilt "while on a cruise ship called the SS Finland sailing through the Panama Canal in the fall of 1925," Sandy Balfour writes. It was an immediate hit with the three men with whom he played, and before long it was a hit just about everywhere. It featured, according to Vanderbilt, "a number of new and exciting features," all of which increased the game's complexity and added "enormously," Vanderbilt claimed, to its popularity.

One of those who fell under the game's spell was a Scotsman named Tom Balfour. He learned the game as a youth in the 1930s and became an expert player after moving during World War II to South Africa, where he spent the rest of his life, working as an engineer but concentrating his greatest passion on the game he loved. At the age of 28 he met a young woman "at that almost obsolete social event, the bridge evening at the home of a mutual friend," married her and had three children, two sons and a daughter. He was a purposeful, orderly, stubborn man who had a secret side that he expressed through bridge: "Although he learned to play in Scotland and spent most of his life in South Africa, the sort of bridge to which my father aspired, the bridge of elegant squeezes and dramatic coups, had its spiritual home in the smarter clubs of London. He could imagine that the

dashing men in tuxedos played for high stakes while sipping vodka martinis and seducing women of impeccable breeding and pleasingly fluid morals."

As that passage suggests, "Vulnerable in Hearts" is, as Balfour acknowledges, "a book about bridge that [isn't] really about bridge at all." It is, as its subtitle says, about fathers and sons, and about how a game can become not merely a metaphor for certain aspects of their lives but also something far more than a mere game. The rules and conventions of bridge fascinated Tom Balfour, and he saw their deeper implications. "Everyone gets dealt some cards," he said. "It's what you make of them that counts. Just remember to trust trumps more than you trust your high cards," to which his son adds: "For Dad, character will always count for more than wealth." Later, Balfour elaborates upon the point:

"It was his firm belief that the card once played, even the wrong card, must stay on the table as it does in bridge, a penalty card the playing of which one's opponents may determine at their leisure, which is to say at the moment when it may extract from your good self the greatest price. For just as he loved its rules and their certainties, Dad loved the fact that bridge has no particular etiquette of sympathy, and even the most brilliant players will be able to recount the intense, public, and drawn-out humiliation of playing a mistakenly bid hand."

Tom Balfour was a very good player, not a brilliant one, but the quality of his play clearly matters less to his son than what it said about him: "Bridge became a form of expression for Dad, a kind of storytelling where the story is on a loop and repeats itself ad infinitum. . . . It's how he talks about people. It's how he tells us about himself." Thus, for example, he hated being dummy -- the person whose cards are on the table while his partner plays the hand -- because he was "a natural 'hog' and believed that 'it was in my interest as well as his to let him play the hand,' " hogs being "those who want to play the hand no matter what the cost . . . a well-known phenomenon in bridge clubs."

For Tom Balfour, playing bridge "was to enter a purer world and to leave behind the noisy and dislocated distractions of other worlds." He knew that the game "allows for the most exquisite cruelty and aggression as well as moments of extreme beauty," and he appreciated all such moments as they arose. He understood perfectly the lesson absorbed by Ely Culbertson, the first great bridge player and the person who, more than any other, spread the game around the world:

"Everything is an opportunity. Everything is possible. Wind and rain, sunshine and snow -- all are the same for the bridge player, for one's success in the game depends not on whether you win or lose, but on how you cope with what you have. You are not playing the cards, but the people."

Or, as Balfour writes elsewhere, "Each hand of bridge is a story. Character and plot are determined in advance. Cutting for partners determines who will play the hand. The deal decides with what. But the narrative unfolds only as each card is played, and . . . the story is both physical and psychological."

In life as in bridge, success and failure were "old friends to Dad, and he [treated] them both the same." He had the right temperament for bridge and was accomplished at those aspects of the game -- most notably bidding -- that require concentration and purposefulness.

Sandy Balfour is himself a bridge player, but just to show that not all children are chips off the old block, his brother, David, "has never shown any interest in bridge. Not a glimmer. Once when asked to play he said he would rather bathe in soggy lettuce, a vegetable to which he at that time had a near pathological aversion."

Yet after their father's death in the summer of 2003, David sat down for a round of bridge with the three other surviving family members, and when he became declarer (the player who bids trumps and plays the dummy's hand and his own), he ran out the cards with professional aplomb: a lovely moment on which Balfour ends this lovely book.

The question remains, though: In this busy world in which contract bridge is no longer so widely or so passionately played, will many readers be able to make connections with "Vulnerable in Hearts"? The short answer is: absolutely. The lovely title makes clear why. In contract bridge, a team that wins a game is thereafter vulnerable because it is liable to higher penalties if it loses but higher rewards if it continues to win. The phrase "vulnerable in hearts" thus has obvious meaning for bridge, and no less obvious meaning for human relationships. That Sandy Balfour has managed to connect the two is one of the many strengths of this original, unusual and surprisingly moving book.

