Book Review: Say Cheese

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earlier this fall term a writing student handed me a xeroxed copy of Spencer Johnson's *Who Moved My Cheese?*, saying only that the book might interest me. I gave the sheets a cursory glance, set them aside, and didn't recall them until a month or so later when, at a meeting, someone mentioned that the organization was using *Cheese* to foster 'imagineering' among its employees and volunteers. Curiosity aroused, I went websurfing to learn what I could about *Who Moved My Cheese?* and discovered the book occupying first position—as of 11-8-2000—on USA Today's bestseller list of business books and second place among its general trade book bestsellers, bested only by the latest Harry Potter. In second position on the business list appeared *Rich Dad, Poor Dad,* by Robert T. Kiyosaki, C.P.A.


Rich Dad, Poor Dad is a manual for wannabe plutocrats. It teaches that money is an 'illusion'—I'd say an abstraction—that the knowledgeable can manipulate. Many people, obsessed with chasing a weekly paycheck, don't comprehend this lesson and remain benighted. Kiyosaki learned early, he tells us, when while working with Rich Dad's son Mike in Rich Dad's convenience store, they discovered that the store manager was returning to the distributor for credit the covers from outdated comic books and throwing the comic books away. The boys made a deal with the distributor not to resell the comics, then opened a library in Mike's cellar where for ten cents admission the neighborhood children could spend afternoons reading up on Mickey Mouse and Felix the Cat. This Horatio Alger pluck and ingenuity has its charm when practiced by boys, but, as *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* develops, Kiyosaki assumes something of a conman, opportunist tinge. He observes that, contrary to popular belief, viewing home ownership as an investment rather than as an expense blinds those in the 'rat race' to the opportunities provided by real estate investment, especially if one can frequent the bankruptcy court. Kiyosaki, when he relocated to Phoenix, picked up foreclosed houses at bargain basement prices only to resell them at triple profits. He concluded his first such deal quickly and profitably. The friend who had loaned him the $2000 down payment "was happy, the home buyer was happy, the attorney was happy, and I was happy." We're never told the bankrupt's emotions.
Kiyosaki blurs the line between investing and speculating. "It's not gambling if you know what you're doing. It is gambling if you're just throwing money into a deal and praying." He possesses a very western U.S. mistrust of government interference in the market, though he urges incorporation as a means of insulating business transactions from taxation and litigation, and, in fact, understands the fine points of the Internal Revenue code. He makes frequent disclaimers that his examples are meant only as advice and are not for emulation.

Kiyosaki is insightful, inquisitive, and intrepid. The reader can't help but applaud his willingness to take risks. He depicts himself as the American entrepreneur in the tradition of an ingenious Tom Sawyer convincing the neighborhood gang how whitewashing the fence can be fun, a gambit Rich Dad would approve. He bills himself as a teacher—the millionaire school teacher" the end cover calls him—who can ignite the entrepreneurial fire in anyone, in which endeavor, he resembles an Elmer Gantry, calling his flock to the marketplace of their dreams, a seduction that likely made Poor Dad squirm.

Poor Dad perhaps consoled himself with George Eliot's remark that "a nag-got must be born i'the rotten cheese to like it." If Rich Dad, Poor Dad offers practical how-to advice for those who want to be millionaires, Who Moved My Cheese offers the philosophical underpinning, the fontina of wisdom, so to speak. Spencer Johnson, M.D., in the words of Kenneth Blanchard's introduction, tells us how "it would be to our advantage to do the simple things that work when things change."

For those unfamiliar with Who Moved My Cheese? (a Velveeta slice sized book with a Camembert price) the allegory concerns (quoting again from Blanchard's introduction) "change that takes place in a Maze where four amusing characters look for 'Cheese'-cheese being a metaphor for what we want to have in life, whether it is a job, a relationship, money, a big house, freedom, health, recognition, spiritual peace, or even an activity like jogging or golf"—almost the whole dairy counter. We meet the principals, two intuitive mice named Sniff and Scurry, and two illiputian humans named Hem and Haw. They reside in the Maze and search for cheese, the mice employing their instincts and the humans their complex brains. They find cheese and locate their cheese cottages near this Bel Paese, thinking the fromage will last forever. "Having Cheese makes you happy" we're told in big, bold letters superimposed on a wedge of Swiss. Inevitably, one day the parmesan goes missing. "The mice did not overanalyze things" or yield to the bleus but, quicker than Monterey Jack, scurry off to sniff out more mozzarella. The "littlepeople" realize they're in a not so gouda situation but have grown arrogant—cheese is an entitlement, American cheese anyway—and complacent—cheese is forever. They decry whatever boor sinned against them: "We've lost our way," they moan. The intuitive mice, unhindered by any sense of feita accompli, quickly find their new Edam while the "littlepeople" sit around like a pair of sages wondering what to do. They

My Cheese? (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1998)

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