



What Really Happens When You Get 'Lucky'?

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By Luke Taylor

Odds of winning the lottery in America are 1 in 200 million; as such, not only is it impossibly unlikely to win the lottery, it's unlikely most Americans even know someone who has.

Director Jeffrey Blitz surmounts those odds with *Lucky*, his 2010 documentary that follows five lottery winners as they adjust to their newfound wealth. Originally aired on HBO, *Lucky* goes beyond the celebrations and press conferences to further explore the longer-term effects a lottery win can have on people. Blitz, whose 2003 documentary *Spellbound* was Oscar nominated, has achieved something extraordinary with *Lucky*.

Although lotteries are not uniquely American, Blitz examines the game's reverberations in the context of American culture. Through the inclusion of newspaper cuttings, talk-show clips and a mid-20th-century soundtrack replete with rags-to-riches imagery, Blitz illustrates America's pop-culture fascination with lottery winners and the lottery's firm entrenchment in American mythology.

The film opens with an interview of Mike Pace who, at the time of production, was host of the televised multi-state Powerball lottery game. Pace is philosophical about his work and establishes the film's thesis. "When you think about it, the lottery maybe says a lot about what's going on in America," he observes. "It might tell us a lot about who we are, what we dream of being, what our most basic ambitions are."

That's when Blitz turns his camera on lottery players and most intently, on lottery winners. Given the rarity of a lottery win, the diversity of winners that Blitz finds is truly commendable: Robert, a PhD in mathematics from California; Quang, a Vietnamese immigrant from Nebraska; Kristine and Steve, a middle-class New Jersey couple; James, a semi-recluse from Illinois; and Buddy, a blue-collar worker from Pennsylvania.

Using a wealth of archival footage and candid first-person interviews, Blitz spends the first half of the film establishing each person's life, the circumstances of each lottery win and the initial aftereffects. We see the winners' lives transformed as they delve into more profligate spending and even dabble in philanthropy. Each winner appears to have achieved what he or she believes to be the American Dream. In a telling sequence, Kristine and Steve, together with

their children, board a private jet from New Jersey to Las Vegas. In flight, Steve and Kristine toast one another with glasses of white wine; Steve earnestly declares, “I love this.”

And it’s just when the film begins to feel like an advertisement for the lottery that Blitz begins to intensify his examination. He revisits each winner one year later, and for some of them, incredulity has given way to disillusionment; for others, adjustment has become acceptance.

Beyond interviewing the winners, Blitz finds their friends and relatives, showing how the effects of the lottery extend to those on the periphery. A friend of one of the winners wryly observes that winning the lottery is akin to pouring “Miracle Gro on your character defects.”

It’s a fascinating psychological and sociological study, presented in a way that is accessible and human. *Lucky* is as viewable in college classrooms as it is in living rooms.

Strengthening the film’s premise are expository animations that place American lotteries in a historical, social and economic context. Much like in 2009’s *The Age of Stupid*, these animated sequences are whimsically drawn yet informatively substantial. One of the more surprising findings Blitz unearths is that Americans spend more on lotteries than they do on books, movies or sporting events combined; thus the lottery is the most popular form of paid entertainment in the United States.

There are key questions that *Lucky* leaves unanswered; despite reference to Washington, D.C., being built with 1820s lottery money, there is no description of what lottery monies are funding nowadays. Also left unexplained is the way lottery prize money is carved out of the income dedicated to project financing.

Lucky is not rated, but a videotaped sequence contains a spate of coarse language. There is also a segment where a lottery winner describes paying for an ex-wife’s breast augmentation in sexist terms. Extras on the DVD include additional profiles of three lottery winners and one lottery player. For the most part, these deleted sequences are not additive.

Despite its minor shortcomings, *Lucky* is an excellent piece of documentary filmmaking, if not journalism. While many of today’s documentaries present a polemic, director Blitz steps aside and lets the content speak for itself.

In the opening, Powerball host Mike Pace asks “[If you win the lottery], do you become what you dreamed you would or do you become what you most deeply secretly are?” Blitz invites viewers to consider that question in light of each person profiled in his documentary. Individual viewers’ conclusions will likely vary, but one thing is certain: with *Lucky*, the most fortunate of all are those who view this intriguing work.