NOTES FROM: *The Status Game,* by Will Storr

SUMMARY: Put any group of humans together, and almost *instantly* they'll start trying to figure out who should lead, who's most worthy of respect, and who should be praised and emulated.

Not only that, but we each carry around a sense of where we stand in that hierarchy, and many of us go to rather extreme lengths in order to rise to the top.

According to the award-winning writer and journalist Will Storr (award-winning = high status!), the "status game" that we're all playing is an invisible thread that runs through the best and the worst of what human beings do all day.

Whether we're "winning" or "losing" affects our happiness and our self-esteem, our relationships with others, our goals in life and whom we choose to copy, and even how long we'll live.

All this being the case, just think about how *complicated* it is to be alive!

You've got all these forces - the cravings for status and for love, social conditioning, and the impact on the individuals of the wider culture, the subconscious fear of death, the swirling emotional storms affecting our thoughts and actions all day long, and so much more - how do we even *live?* How do we make *sense* of it all?

For that, we should be grateful to Will Storr as he explains a few of the rules of the Game of Life...

"Wherever psychologists look, they find a remarkably powerful link between status and wellbeing. One study of more than sixty thousand people across 123 countries found people's wellbeing 'consistently depended on the degree to which people felt respected by others.' Attainment of status or its loss was 'the strongest predictor of long-term positive and negative feelings.'"

"The minimum requirement for play is connection. Before we can be rewarded with status, we must first be accepted into the group as a player."

"When we're not doing well in the game of life, our bodies prepare for crisis by switching our settings so we're readied for attack. It increases inflammation, which helps the healing of any physical wounds we might be about to suffer. It also saves resources by reducing our antiviral response. But when our inflammation is raised for too long, it can damage us in myriad ways. It increases susceptibility to neurodegenerative disease, promotes the spread of plaque in the arteries and the growth of cancer cells. According to a world leader in this field, Professor Steve Cole, 'several studies have related objective indicators of low social status to increases expression of pro-inflammatory genes and/or decreased expression of antiviral genes.

Being beaten down in the rat race naturally changes what you expect from tomorrow, and that does seem to filter down into the way your cells prepare for tomorrow.'"

"The greater and faster the downward mobility, the more likely it is to trigger suicide."

"Status is an essential nutrient found not in meat or fruit or sunlight but in the successful playing of our lives. When we feel chronically deprived of it, or disconnected from the game, our minds and bodies can turn against us. To our brains, status is a resource as real as oxygen or water. When we lose it, we break."

"Another study, comparing people's self-image on a range of traits found that 'virtually all individuals irrationally inflated their moral qualities.' The researchers wrote, 'most people strongly believe they are just, virtuous, and moral, yet regard the average person as distinctly less so.' Moral superiority, they concluded, is a 'uniquely strong and prevalent form of positive illusion.'"

"The status detection system even reads symbolic information in sounds we can't consciously hear. When speaking, we emit a low-frequency hum at around 500 hertz. When people meet and talk, their hums shift. The highest-status person in the group sets its level and the rest adjust to match. This hum is thought to be an 'unconscious social instrument' that helps sort us into status hierarchies. Analyses of interviews on *The Larry King Show* found the host deferentially changed his hum to match Elizabeth Taylor whilst Dan Quayle adjusted to him."

"Assuming we have enough money to live, it seems relative status makes us happier than raw cash."

"We can think of our reputation as a symbolic version of us that exists in the minds of others. Human brains required the capacity to store these highly detailed symbolic selves. Our neural worlds are crowded with hallucinations of others so vivid they can almost be summoned at will. We all walk around with everyone we know crowded inside our heads."

"We might've stored the reputations of others in our brains, but those reputations lived and died in the stories we told of them. The current dominant theory says this is why we evolved speech – to gossip. If others in the tribe spoke well of us, we'd be rewarded with a prestigious reputation and its glittering dividends; if bad, we'd sink in the rankings and risk punishment. We could also gain status from gossiping. Who we gossip with can itself be a status symbol: swapping tattle with high-ranked others implies we're of high rank too. Furthermore, one of gossip's critical purposes was to demonstrate the rules of the tribe and what happened if you broke them. By gossiping we demonstrate our knowledge of the rules, and our loyalty to them, and this can also earn status. Gossip has been described as 'an activity that is attention seeking, promoting self-interest and self-image through social comparison, and the discrediting of others.' It's universal and essential to our gameplay: children start to gossip almost as soon as they can speak."

"Without symbolic prestige, it's difficult to see how complex societies could have developed."

“It’s this distorted and partial avatar we play at life with, not our whole self. Nobody ever truly knows us. They never will.”

“Whenever people use a word so often that they abbreviate it, it is clearly central to their moral and emotional vocabulary.”

“Gilligan once believed muggings and armed robberies to be motivated primarily by greed or need. ‘But when I actually sat down and spoke at length with men who had repeatedly committed such crimes, I would start to hear comments like, I never got so much *respect* before in my life as I did when I pointed a gun at some dude’s face.’”

Roger Gould: “The more ambiguous the relation is with respect to who should be expected to outrank whom, the more likely violence is.”

“In life, even the subtlest interpersonal events can be symbolic. They’re all too easily read by the status detection system as ‘fuck you.’”

James Gilligan: “One after another of the most violent men I have worked with over the years have described to me how they had been humiliated repeatedly throughout their childhoods.”

“The child who is not embraced by his village will burn it down to feel its warmth.”

“Social media is status game. It can’t not be: it’s human life, unfolding online. It’s all there, the success games of the selfie-takers and humble-braggers; the virtue games of the wellness gurus and political campaigners; the dominance games of the mobbers and the cancellers.”

“Faith, not truth, is incentivized.”

“When brilliant people are motivated to find evidence to support their group’s false beliefs, they’re brilliant at finding it. Their superior intelligence simply makes them better at reaffirming their bent story of reality.”

“In the places where status is won and lost, we can be vulnerable to believing almost anything.”

“The moral reality we live in is a virtue game. We use our displays of morality to manufacture status. It’s good that we do this. It’s functional. It’s why billionaires fund libraries, university scholarships and scientific endeavors; it’s why a study of 11,672 organ donations in the USA found only thirty-one were made anonymously. It’s why we feel good when we commit moral acts and thoughts privately and enjoy the approval of our imaginary audience. Virtue status is the bribe that nudges us into putting the interests of other people – principally our co-players – before our own.”

“When people accept a core belief and act on it, as the price for earning connection and status, they allow themselves to become possessed. That belief is now a status symbol. As their hallucination of reality bends itself around it, they become its host and crusader, deranged and impossible to reason with. In short, their belief has become sacred.”

“Of course, progressive activists don’t only gain outsized status via their mobs. With their peerless levels of wealth and education, they’re also able to insert their elites into many of society’s most powerful games. It’s important to note, too, that concluding *all* progressive activists approve of mob behavior would be extremely unfair. But this is the point. Those who play in their mobs are a minority of a minority. And yet too often their commanding voice on social media becomes a commanding voice in our democracies. Like ISIS, they achieve this outsized status partly by the spreading of dread. Their gossip, accusation and merciless fury is designed to weave the illusion of consensus, wake our ancient dread of the cousins and bully us into their social cage. This is how mobs win.”

Michele Gelfand: “Groups that deal with many ecological and historical threats need to do everything they can to create order in the face of chaos. The greater the threat, the tighter the community.”

“Successful groups are status generating machines. They thrive when they make status, both for their players and for the game itself.”

“Successful leaders tell their players the same irresistible story: we deserve more status and, under my direction, we’ll get it. The forty-fifth President of the United States, Donald Trump, told this story, by promising to ‘Make America Great Again’; so did his predecessor Barack Obama by seeking to embody ‘Hope.’ Whilst the terrorist group ISIS used the dread machine of social media to terrify their enemies, they wove for themselves an altogether different fantasy. One analysis of their glossy magazine *Dabiq* found only 5 percent of its imagery featured violence; far more prevalent was that depicting their glorious future in an ‘idealistic caliphate.’”

Dr. Liliana Mason: “Without a threat to a social group, members are less likely to derogate outgroups, and they have less of a motivation to improve the status of the group.”

“Nations the world over become dangerous when humiliated.”

“One study of ninety-four wars since 1648 found 67 percent were motivated by matters of national standing or revenge, with the next greatest factor – security – coming in at a distant 18 percent. Anthropologists Professors Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai find that frequently, ‘decision-makers and public opinion are motivated to declare war to maintain or raise the rank of their nation vis-à-vis other nations, particularly when they feel that they have been unjustly pushed down to a low rank among other nations.’ The warring party will tend to attack in a dream of toxic morality, convinced of its virtuous intent: ‘the more a nation feels humiliated by a moral violation against it, and the more the nation experiences the act as morally outrageous, the more it seeks vengeance.”

“The most potent weapon of mass destruction is the humiliated mind.”

“History is not made by individuals, but by individuals connected into groups. Those groups are status games. The data, and our history, are clear. If we truly want to help others and make the world a better place, we must play games of success.”

“The neoliberal dreamworld glisters with such symbols. Success cues might’ve started in ropes of teeth around a hunter’s neck, but in twenty-first-century Westernized cultures, they’re everywhere. Maddened by them, we sweat and spend and hurry to keep up. We strive to improve, to bend our personalities into a certain shape, to become a better, different person. But where does it come from, the contemporary ideal of self? We see this perfect human all around us, beaming with flawless teeth from advertising, film, television, media and the internet. Young, agreeable, visibly fit, self-starting, productive, popular, globally-minded, stylish, self-confident, extrovert, busy. Who is it, this person we feel so pressured to punch ourselves into becoming? It’s the player best equipped to win status in the game we’re in. It’s the neoliberal hero, the fantasy of an economy. And when we don’t measure up, we read these success symbols as signals of our failure. We’re individualists: believing it’s in our own power to win means believing that, when we don’t, it’s our fault and our fault alone. So we’re a loser, then: that’s who we are. We’ve been weighed on God’s scale and found wanting.”

“I believe we can usefully settle on three dimensions for successful play: warmth, sincerity, and competence. This constitutes a kind of blessed triumvirate of human behavior and, whilst undoubtedly being easier said than done, it at least offers an ideal to aim at. As we’ve learned, there are three major routes to status in human games: we can grab it in acts of dominance or we can earn prestige by proving ourselves useful to our group, with acts that signal virtue or success. When we’re warm, we imply we’re not going to use dominance; when sincere, that we’re going to play fairly; when competent, that we’re going to be valuable to the game itself, both in its own battles for status, and to individual players who might learn from us.”

“It’s easy to forget that we have status to give, that it costs nothing and it never runs out.”

“Perhaps the best mode of protection is to play many games. People who appear brainwashed have invested too much of their identity into a single game. They rely on it wholly for their connection and status, the maintenance of which requires them to be filled up with its dream of reality, no matter how delusional. Not only does this put them at risk of committing harm to others, they risk catastrophic collapse themselves. If the game fails, or they become expelled, their identity – their very self – can disintegrate. No such risk can befall the player with a diversity of identities who plays diverse games. Indeed, doing so seems to be profoundly good for us. Psychologists find those with ‘complex,’ multiple self-identities tend to be happier, healthier, and have more stable emotional lives. But it’s important, too, that every game isn’t played with equal focus. If we’re going to earn the prestige we desire, we must strive to become truly valuable to our co-players. This takes time. It requires an amount of dogged attention to one pursuit over others. Life, then, should be organized as a hierarchy of games, with that at the top drawing the most effort and generating maximal meaning.”

“Never forget you’re dreaming.”

“We should remind ourselves of the truth of the dream: that life is not a story, but a game with no end. This means it isn’t a final victory we should seek but simple, humble progress: the never-ending pleasure of moving in the right direction. Nobody wins the status game. They’re not supposed to. The meaning of life is not to win, it’s to play.”