

ROWSON ON BOOKS

by JONATHAN ROWSON



Alas, it seems that a large number of chess books are now produced to keep things ‘ticking over’. Ticking over for the publisher who needs the sales, the author who needs the money, and the players who need to sustain the belief that they are doing something to improve their results.

The ‘big three’ in the UK: Gambit, Everyman and Batsford, can all produce books of superlative quality, but my impression from some of their recent output, and from what their authors have told me, is that they don’t seem to care much about the quality or originality of their books, as long as the sales figures are healthy.

Of course there is a correlation between quality and sales, but I suspect that it is not particularly strong. The fact is that there is an enduring demand for chess books because most players like to invest in their leisure, so anything that is reasonably well organised and reasonably well edited will sell. As a result, chess books only need to have a title with some sort of injunction or promissory note (Win with... Play the... Mastering the...) and a mildly perfidious back cover blurb to keep the whole process ‘ticking over’. This is why there appears to be an increase in mediocre books, i.e. decent books and on sensible topics, but books that feel like they have been produced by the publisher rather than written by the author.

I much prefer ‘bad’ books to mediocre ones. Bad books have noisy authors, and usually have a distinctive taste and texture. Mediocre books, on the other hand, have complicit publishers and they are usually bland, impersonal and formulaic.

My exemplar of a ‘bad’ book would be Hans Berliner’s *The System* (Gambit). The book is a bit dated now so it doesn’t make sense to give a detailed review here. Suffice to say that I detest it! I feel irritated by the didactic tone of that book, and bemused by the dogmatic pseudo-scientific drivel that passes for its content. Yet it is also highly ambitious and original, so, yes, I might even recommend it, though not necessarily for reading.

Bring on the bad books I say! Let us have more of them! And let the publishers tell us that they are bad, so that we can hear them speak under the avalanche of mass-marketed mediocrity.

I’m glad I got that out of my system. Now we can talk about good books, or to be more precise, quality books. Quality Chess Europe is a new publishing house set up by prolific author IM Jacob Aagaard, who has done the rounds with various publishers and felt he could do better, Scotland’s strong IM John Shaw who has a proclivity for editing, and Sweden’s IM Ari Ziegler, whom I only know as the friendly man with good dress

sense who runs a chess store in Gothenburg.

They have made a very promising start indeed! *Experts against the Sicilian* is ‘a multinational line-up of leading experts (who give recommendations against their own pet lines of the Sicilian defence’. This is such a good idea that I am surprised nobody tried it before, and it is very well executed too. Peter Wells on the Richter-Rauzer, Mikhail Golubev on the Dragon and Sune Berg Hansen on the Kan and Taimanov are particularly convincing chapters.

The others are also very good but I have some minor reservations. It would be unreasonable to expect a refutation of the Najdorf, and Thomas Luther presents a full and plausible repertoire with 6.g5 without pretending that White is necessarily better in all lines. There are a lot of good ideas in this chapter and the illustrative games have been carefully selected, but I felt that the Poisoned Pawn Variation, which seems to me to be critical, was a bit neglected.

Luther’s recommendation of 6...e6 7.f4 ♖b6 8.♘d2 ♖b2 9.♗b3! is playable, but it is presented a bit too casually for my taste because this line is every bit as scary for White as it is for Black. The position is so imbalanced that an improvement on the existing theory could easily turn an assessment around

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completely, so I would like to have seen more attention paid to possible black improvements.

Aagaard says of his chapter on the Sveshnikov: 'In such a reliable opening as the Sveshnikov it would be too much to hope for to prove an easy advantage for White in every line. That I have come as close as I have is pure luck, and was not something I thought possible in advance.' His main recommendation is based on an idea of Nick de Firmian's: 1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cd4 4.♞d4 ♟f6 5.♞c3 e5 6.♞db5 d6 7.♞g5 a6 8.♞a3 b5 9.♞f6 g6 10.♞d5 f5 11.c3 ♞g7 12.ef5 ♞f5 13.♞c2 0-0 14.♞ce3 ♞e6 (against 14...♞g6 he gives 15.a4!? and he thinks White is better after 15...b4 16.♞b4 ♞b4 17.cb4 f5 18.♞c4 ♟h8 19.♞d5! but this doesn't look at all clear to me and this might be a weak spot in the chapter) 15.♞d3 f5 16.0-0 ♞a7 17.a4 ♟e7 18.♞e7 ♞e7 19.ab5 ab5 20.♞b5 d5 21.♞a6! ♟h8 (if 21...f4 22.♞e6! is the idea) 22.♟a4! after which he believes that White is better.

I don't know the Sveshnikov well enough to comment on the lines with any conviction, but I followed the argument of this important chapter and felt quite comfortable about where it ended up - which is basically a nuance at the end of a main line with the assessment that the unclear position is probably better for White, rather than just unclear. That may not sound very exciting, but it is presented as the minimum you can expect in the unlikely event that your opponent knows the line extremely well, and I am inclined to believe that this is a sound reflection of what you should expect if you take an honest look at mainline theory these days.

The remaining chapters all seem

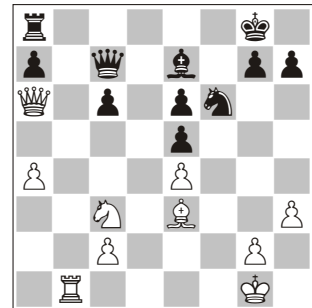
to give reliable suggestions so my overall impression is that this book is well worth buying for every 1.e4 player, including those timorous creatures who have never found the courage to learn Open Sicilians.

Learn from the Legends by Mihail Marin is no less impressive. I feel a bit self-conscious about reviewing another book by Marin, because I reviewed his last one, *Secrets of Chess Defence*, so recently, and very favourably. However, *Learn from the Legends* is outstanding and cannot be ignored. It is wonderfully balanced: original and personal, deep and clear, entertaining and instructive. It must be a strong candidate for any existing book of the year award, and if it doesn't win any, someone should create a new award so that the book's quality is properly acknowledged.

'Legends' is a good word to capture people like Rubinstein and Kortchnoi who are usually suspended somewhere between 'masters' and 'champions'. Marin has selected games in which they display their finest qualities. The selection is: Rubinstein on rook endings, Alekhine on major piece endings, Botvinnik on a familiar good knight vs bad bishop ending, Tal's handling of rook versus two minor pieces, Petrosian's exchange sacrifices, Fischer's love of his king's bishop, Karpov on opposite bishop endings and Kortchnoi on fighting chess.

When I heard that one of the chapters was Petrosian on exchange sacrifices I feared that it might look a little too familiar - remember that ♞e7-e6 move with the idea of ♟e7-d5? Or ♞f6-f4 against Tal? I imagine most readers do,

without further details, because these examples are so widely used. However, it is a tribute to Marin's breadth of research that these examples are not used here. Instead he gives several games where the concept is not quite as tidy, and compensation is not quite as obvious, but the resulting positions are therefore more interesting. Consider the following:



Hübner-Petrosian
Candidates m-7 Seville 1971
position after 20.a4!

'Despite his extra pawn, Black has serious problems. He has several weaknesses and the b-file is totally controlled by White. The main threat is ♟b7. If Black loses the a7-pawn his position would become critical. The white outside passed pawn would be simply too dangerous.'

20...h6

'A rather mysterious move. Black answers the strong queenside threats by timidly advancing a pawn on the other wing. The idea behind this move will be clear in the future.'

21.a5?

'Not feeling the danger, Hübner aims to carry out his plans in an optimal form. However, even if he was not aware of Petrosian's habit of sacrificing the exchange, the previous move should have put him on his guard. Better would

have been: 21.♖b7! ♖b7 22.♖b7 ♗d8! 23.♖a7 ♖a7 24.♗a7 ♗a5 25.♗d1! ♗e4 26.♗e3. After the match, Petrosian confessed that he would not have liked to defend this position. The a-pawn is obviously stronger than the black doubled pawns in the centre.'

21...♗h7 22.♖b7?! ♖a5!

23.♖a8 ♖c3 24.♖a7 ♗e4

'How radically the character of the position has changed in just a few moves! Black has managed to eliminate not only the dangerous passed pawn, but also the important e4-pawn, which restricted the black knight. It can be felt that Black has the better coordination. His pieces control the center of the board, while the white pawns are rather hanging. The queen is tied down to the defence of the bishop, while the bishop cannot leave the g1-a7 diagonal because of the deadly check on c5.

The white king is also more exposed than his colleague. For instance, if White tried to regroup with 25.♖b3 Black would create decisive threats with 25...♖e1 26.♗h2 ♗h4. Hübner apparently understood the situation quite well, since around this moment he offered a draw...'

25.♖f1 25.♖e7 ♖e3 26.♗h1! (Marin) 26...♗f2 27.♗h2 ♖f4 28.♗g1 ♗h3 with a draw. **25...♗h4 25...♗g3! 26.♖f7 ♗f6 27.♗h2 ♖c2 28.♖d7 ♖b3 29.♗f2 29.♖f8! 29...♖d5 30.♖a7 ♖d2 31.♖e3 ♖c2 32.♗e1 c5 33.h4?! c4 34.♖c7 ♖d3 35.♖f3 ♖b1! 36.♖e3 36.♗c3! Marin. 36...♗d6 37.♖d2 ♗f5 38.♖c4 e4 39.♖c2? 39.♖b4! draw - Marin. 39...♖e1 40.♖e4 ♗e5**

'The game was adjourned and Hübner resigned without resumption. He also announced that he would not continue the match; the

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effect produced by the exchange sacrifice must have been very strong. The objective situation (4-3) was not that desperate'

Hopefully this example (which I have edited) illustrates the richness of the text. I should also say that the book is beautifully produced and excellent value for money. So in light of these two books we can expect good things from Quality Chess Europe. Let us hope that it is not just a honeymoon period. It will be interesting to see how they develop, and I wish them luck!

From standard publishers, to the new publisher, to the self-publisher. IM Igor Khmelnsky recently sent me his *Chess Exam and Training Guide* and explained that it is difficult for self-publishers to market successfully, but that he was proud of his book which has been recommended by Yermolinsky, Shabalov and Ehlvest. I am happy to add my endorsement, all the more so because chess authors tend to be underpaid and anyone taking the initiative to buck this trend by self-publishing should be supported! The book is based on the sensible idea that you need to discover your strengths and weaknesses before you can understand what you should be working on.

There are 100 training positions of different kinds and varying degrees of difficulty followed by a more general training guide. This is all succinctly presented and the whole book is very reader-friendly. Most readers will hone their skills simply by going through the exam, which is packed with problems that require skills of evaluation and calculation. More importantly, the tests implicitly shows how cal-

culatation and evaluation are related because the author asks for an assessment and a move, and these have to match! This in itself is hugely valuable because many players have difficulty balancing general positional features with immediate tactical issues and one often seems to block out the other. I suspect that 100 test positions will help to weed out this tendency, if anything will.

However, I am much less sure of the way the author uses the results of the exam as a statistical tool to give general recommendations like 'improve your tactical skill'. Khmelnsky does make an effort to explain how these sorts of things can be done, but not in a way that I found really convincing. It is extremely difficult for adult players to improve their chess, and in so far as improvement is possible, I suspect it is much more personal and idiosyncratic than a position-based diagnostic tool can provide. Therefore I have become quite sceptical of anything resembling a system of improvement, i.e. 'do this and you will get better'. However, there is a huge demand for precisely this type of thing and Khmelnsky meets it much better than most. Those who want to know more should go to www.iamcoach.com

Test Your Chess with Daniel King (Batsford) is very pleasant to read. It involves a choice selection of games from recent stars that you are encouraged to work through in a typical test your chess format. The quality of writing and analysis is excellent throughout.

Play the Sicilian Dragon by Edward Dearing (Gambit) reminded me of the story of a man who was

thinking about learning to play The Dragon, but decided to learn three foreign languages instead. The point of the joke will not have been lost on Edward Dearing, who must have spent hundreds of hours in a labyrinth of variations. However, from looking at the lines I know, it seems he has taken a red thread through the labyrinth and can show the reader around with some authority. He has not pretended that The Dragon is anything other than a mass of complications requiring deep theoretical knowledge, but it looks like he has made a commendable effort of directing the reader and minimising his workload.

Starting Out: Attacking Play by James Plaskett (Everyman) basically amounts to a collection of Plaskett's best attacking games... but these are great games! Plaskett is not the most consistent GM in the world but on his day he can cut through world class players as if they were patzers. Recommended for anyone who loves to attack and would like to do it better.

Beating the Petroff by Kotronias and Tzermiadianos (Batsford) is certainly a book whose time has come. I haven't had the chance to study it in detail yet but I know that Kotronias is an extremely diligent worker and that he thrives on removing the obstacles between 1.e4 and victory! The authors have chosen the main line with 3.♘e5 and 5.d4 and seem to have found an advantage of some sort in every line. This is good news for e4 players who feel discouraged by the Petroff, and a challenge to those who love to neutralize White's most dangerous first move in this way. ■