

ROWSON'S REVIEWS

by JONATHAN ROWSON



I know a club player, rated around 1700, who has a massive chess library and loves buying chess books. Yet he reads very few of his books properly and even wonders whether they might be harming his chess, in the sense of 'educating him beyond his intelligence'. In a recent conversation he went further and suggested that he now believed that the only thing that might improve his results would be for his house to burn down, and for his beloved chess books to go up in smoke!

Such a motive for arson would elude even the most cunning detective, but I'm glad that the house still stands. Yet this individual's predicament leads to the question: why buy the books in the first place? Apparently he gets a buzz for about a week after his purchase, thinking of all the great things inside the book that will transform him as a chess player. For several days the new chess book is the golden child of the house, shining on the coffee table. But inevitably it will lose its magic, and return to the anonymity of the shelves. Perhaps later it will be relegated again, to a box in the store-room of a charity shop.

The sad fact is that many books that are bought, chess related or otherwise, are not read; and most of those that are read are not read in their entirety. The idea of writ-

ing a book about this phenomena appeals to my sense of irony, but instead I offer a simple contention: good content might make somebody read a book, but a good title is often enough to make them buy it.

My favourite non-chess title is *On Having No Head*, followed closely by *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* Chess titles tend to be more limited because they usually have to include 'chess' to give the book a nest in the marketing jungle. It seems that it also helps if 'strategy' is used, because the word has a certain amount of gravitas that appeals to the genius complex within every chess player.

Foundations of Chess Strategy by Lars Bo Hansen (Gambit) meets both of these criteria and is presented with Gambit's usual polished production quality, so I suspect it will sell very well, but the question is: will it be read?

I hope so, because it has that all-too-rare quality among chess books: originality. It is built around a central idea that has at least some intuitive plausibility; namely that our understanding of chess strategy might benefit from a little understanding of business strategy.

While beginning to read this book, I was reminded of a lecture by Mark Dvoretzky on the subject

of which chess books to read, and which to avoid. One of his points was that if a book is written by a strong player who also seems to be 'a smart guy', then the odds that the book will be good are quite high. He mentioned John Nunn as an example, but I think it applies to Lars Bo Hansen too. I have never met the author, but he has a background as a lecturer in business studies in addition to being a seasoned grandmaster.

What I like about this book is that there is no hard sell. Hansen is a credible proponent of the connections he is making, but he seems to be aware that they are a little tenuous at times. I see this as a good thing, because rather than trying too hard to convince you that there is link between chess strategy and business strategy, he just uses this as the central idea to organise a lot of instructive material. He constantly emphasises that his models are just that – models, and should not be confused with the chaotic human reality of a chess game.

For instance, he borrows a model from business to characterise players as 'reflectors', 'theorists', 'pragmatics' and 'activists' but he is fully aware that personal idiosyncrasies mean that nobody will perfectly conform to any one of these types.

I particularly like his use of the distinction between 'outside in' strategy and 'inside out' strategy. The former dominates chess writing in that we tend to emphasise the objective elements of a position with some sort of symbol or number, and place less emphasis on our personal reaction to it. This is especially true now that we find it hard to think or feel anything about a position ('inside') without having an analysis engine ('outside') there to endorse our thoughts, and worse still, the engine often directs our thoughts to the extent that we are no longer 'thinking', but 'watching'. In any case, Hansen makes a compelling argument that we need a shift of emphasis towards 'inside-out' strategy by which he means (crudely simplified) that we should start from our ability to handle a position before we ask who is better and by how much.

My only reservation about the book builds on this distinction in the following sense: a careful reading of the text ('outside') shows that the author has a healthy sense of perspective and very little dogmatism, but I fear some readers might process it in their own way ('inside') and try to apply these models too directly. This is not a criticism of the author, who has done his best to avoid this, but rather a cautionary note to prospective readers: Buy this book, and read it (!) but remember the old adage: the map is not the territory.

Returning to the subject of titles, one of Batsford's recent attempts to energise their book titles was 'The Controversial King's Indian Sämisch' by Chris Ward. The book itself is a solid effort written in Chris Ward's usual 'I'm

a nice bloke, and I even teach salsa dancing' sort of way, but I'm not sure what to make of the title. My first reaction was to smile, and enjoy the fresh approach, but the idea of any chess opening being 'controversial' is a bit hollow, and beyond that, if it's really 'controversial', surely the title is a bit redundant? It reminds me of those public signs that grab your attention with: 'Polite notice' in big letters, but underneath there is an instruction in bureaucratic jargon that basically means: 'Go Away!' It would be no less absurd to have a 'controversial notice' or a 'fascinating notice'.

When I see such things I am inclined to think: I'll read your notice, or your book, but please don't impose an adjective on me before I've read it.

Which brings me to *The Fascinating King's Gambit: A Repertoire for the 21st Century* by Thomas Johansson (Trafford Press). The less said about the title, the better, but two things on the back cover are worthy of comment. I have the impression that the author did 'labour with analytical work for nearly two years' and I was intrigued by Bronstein's remark: 'You want to play the king's gambit? Well, Black can draw after 3.Äf3. Play 3.Äc4 if you want to win!'

Dense theory (even with verbal explanations) in sharp variations is not really my cup of tea, so I haven't spent a long time with this book, but some of the variations are sufficiently striking that I was briefly tempted to return to playing 1.e4 just to have the chance to give this line a try. I felt moved to mention this book here for two main reasons: it's clearly a labour of love, and that usually makes for

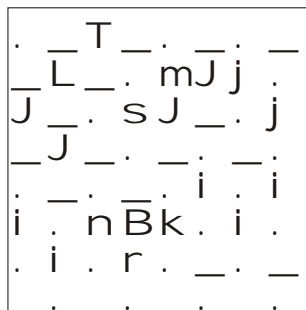
pleasant reading and careful analysis; and it's self-published, which means that there are probably lots of '21st century kingsgambiteers' who will be fascinated by the book, but may not otherwise have heard of it.

Last, but by no means least, *Rethinking The Chess Pieces* by Andrew Soltis (Batsford) is a good title for an important book. The basic thrust is that the simple point scale for material values is in need of a radical rethink. I totally agree with this, and already made my own version of this argument in *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins*. Soltis takes a wider look at the issue, and devotes a whole book to different ways of thinking about how the pieces should be valued.

For instance, he quotes Gerald Abrahams as saying that a strong player understands the many roles of their pieces but a weaker one is 'only aware of their values', and goes on to illustrate the many roles of the pieces. While reading through this I was struck by some fairly obvious things that had never occurred to me before, for instance that stronger pieces attack weaker pieces more easily than vice-versa.

The book is also full of little gems of insight that Soltis must have collected over the years. For instance Nimzowitsch's observation: 'Who checks an ambitious pawn best? A pawn. Who protects one of his own pieces best? A pawn. And which of the chessmen works for the least wages? Again the pawn.' But my favourite was the Russian aphorism concerning the relative value of the minor pieces: 'The bishop is stronger, but the knight is more cunning.'

I found the following example particularly noteworthy:



Karpov-Anand
Brussels 1991 (Game 6)
position after 54.h4

54...Äc4?

'Anand called this "a real mistake" and explained: In endings with a bishop and knight each, exchanging dissimilar pieces has the effect of improving the defender side's drawing chances.'

55.Äc4 Öc4 56.Öd4 Öc5 57.a4! e5 58.Öb4

'White should now continue 58.fe5 Öe5 59.@f2 and ab5. Black would have to try to win by creating a passed pawn without losing the b-pawn or swapping too many pawns altogether. But that is a much more difficult task than he faced in the diagram. Anand didn't elaborate on his comment. But his reasoning behind it goes this way: since Black was a pawn ahead in the diagram he would benefit from trading similar pieces, Ä for Ä or Ä for Ä. But once dissimilar pieces are swapped (55.Äc4), trading the remaining pair of minors is more difficult. Black's bishop cannot attack a white knight on c3 or the rook on d4. The extra pawn is harder to promote and White's drawing chances have increased. The situation would be different if material were equal – if say, you add a white e-pawn to the diagram. Then 54...Äc4 55.Äc4 would be a valid way of keeping Black's winning hopes alive. He would have a

much smaller – and purely positional – edge. But White would be the one trying to swap the last pair of pieces and this would be difficult because they are dissimilar.'

58...Äc6 59.ab5 ab5 60.Äe2 f6! 61.Öb3 @e6 62.Öa3 Öc2 63.fe5 fe5 64.Öa6 @d6 65.b4 Öc4 66.Öa7 Äd7 67.Öa6 @e7 68.Ög6 @f7 69.Öd6 Äg4 70.Öd5 Öc2 0-1

Anand's point was a real eye opener for me, but I am not certain that his 'reasoning' is quite what Soltis suggests. In fact I suspect it's not primarily based on 'reasoning' at all, but rather on chess strength and experience, which, as we know, is often difficult to communicate. Soltis's explanation might even be confusing for some readers, and I think it raises as many questions as it answers.

For instance, if the problem with exchanging dissimilar pieces is that it's hard to exchange the remaining minor pieces, one might infer that the aim from the initial position is to exchange the minor pieces. But if, for example, I exchange knights, then bishops, I'll be left with a rook ending. Aren't they supposed to be drawish?

I think what Soltis wants to say is that once the knight is exchanged for the bishop, you are liable to be stuck with two 'teams': rook and knight against rook and bishop. These teams are playing the same game but often controlling different colour complexes and critical squares. The harder it is to contest control of critical squares the more difficult it is to demonstrate the salience of the extra pawn.

But why is that? 'It just is' is not a very satisfying answer, but it's

probably closer to the truth than any kind of inductive argument. In this case, White should have taken control of important dark squares on d4, f4, b4 and as long as he managed to control these squares he would have been better coordinated to defend what needs defending (b2 and g3) and prevent what needs preventing (f5-f4). This is not crystal clear, but nor should we expect it to be. It takes a fair amount of top-level chess experience to appreciate where Anand was coming from, and although his point can be developed, it cannot and should not be formalized.

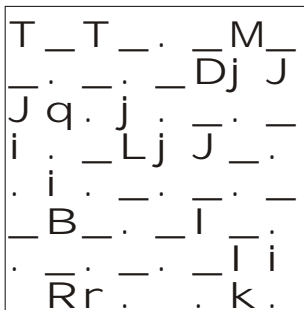
I also feel very uncomfortable with the author's use of the database surveys of IM Larry Kaufman and GM Gennady Timoschenko who both sought, by a method that isn't made fully transparent in this book, to reach more precise valuations of the pieces and examine how these values changed when pieces are exchanged. These studies interest me, but only in an academic sense, and any application of the findings to practice should carry a health warning so big that it obscures the findings themselves.

For instance, Timoschenko found, via his database survey of 150,000 games, that taking a knight with a bishop makes most sense in the opening, because a knight is generally at its peak near the start of a game but gets weaker as the game goes on. This is an interesting but gross generalization, and nobody (I hope) is explicitly pretending otherwise. However, the danger is that so many aspiring chess players are seeking precisely this kind of general advice in the hope that it will improve their ability to make decisions.

If somebody followed such a guideline without a suitably arrest-

ing health warning, they could easily jump to conclusions like: 'The Ruy Lopez Exchange is good because knights are better in openings, but bishops are better in endings'. Confusion would swiftly follow when they see that many lines of the Exchange Lopez involve White trying to exchange pieces, thereby, it would seem, diminishing the relative value of the knights. Soltis doesn't seem to want such a crude appraisal, and he doesn't directly endorse the findings of these surveys. However, he doesn't seriously critique them either, which makes me think that he hasn't given enough consideration to the hungry reader who has to eat these findings almost raw, and digest them without supervision.

Yet despite some reservations, I would still highly recommend the book in its totality because it contains a lot of rich and enjoyable material. I leave the following as a glittering example:



Karjakin-Kosteniuk
Brissago 2003 (Game 4)
position after 29...Äd5

30.©a6! Öc1?
30...Öcb8! 31.©d3 Äb3 32.Öb3 e4
33.fe4 fe4 34.©e3 ©e6 35.Öbb1 is
unclear.
31.Öc1 Öa6?
31...Öf8 gave some hope of survival.
32.Öc8 ©e8 33.Öe8 ®f7
34.Öa8!! 1-0 n

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