



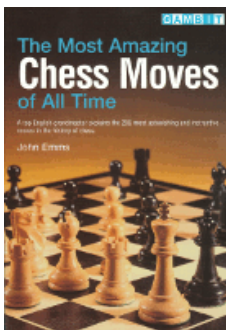
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Cheap Thrills

Taylor Kingston

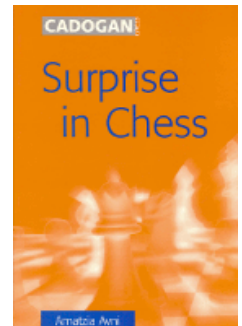
The Most Amazing Chess Moves of All Time, by John Emms, 2000 Gambit Publications Ltd., London, Paperback, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 192pp. \$19.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$16.95)

In 1981 the Dutch GM Jan Donner wrote "The British School [of chess] is characterized by a great show of brilliancy. No idea is too bizarre for them, no concept too fantastic. They are hard workers, to be sure, but rather bent on finding new sensational effects than on constructing something useful." If he were still around today, Donner might regard this book, by a British GM, as a case in point.

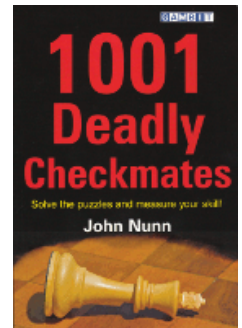
Your reviewer finds himself somewhat ambivalent about it, but mostly positive. Donner notwithstanding, the fact that it is full of "sensational effects" does not make it useless. Tartakower once said "Strong moves are good, but surprising moves are better" (or words to that effect). And if, as Donner himself said, "The ultimate truth about the game of chess is only to be found in unlearning rules," then there is a place for books devoted to surprising moves that seemingly violate the principles of sound play. One recent work, [Surprise in Chess](#) (Cadogan, 1998) by psychologist Amatzia Avni, addressed this in a somewhat academic fashion. Emms, in contrast, goes for pure entertainment and instruction, and he was inspired not by Avni but by a list of fifty "all-time most amazing moves" recently published by the *British Chess Magazine*. Emms felt too many lesser moves were included and too many good ones left out, so he created a list of 200.

This is basically a quiz book, an expanded version of the familiar "Find the Combination" or "What's the Best Move?" section typically found in almost any chess magazine, though with some important differences. One, each of the 200 positions has been selected primarily for its surprise value. Unlike Avni, Emms does not try to define this slippery term, but he seems to know it when he sees it, and his selection process has been aided by such qualified people as Dutch writer Tim Krabbe, who features his own choices for "[The 110 Most Fantastic Moves Ever Played](#)" on his website. Two, unlike the typical quiz (but more like a real game), there is not always a forced win. The "amazing" continuation the reader is asked to find may only lead to an advantage, or it may be a drawing resource, an attempt to complicate when in trouble, the best try in a bad situation, or even an objectively unsound yet why-

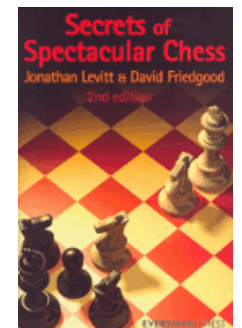
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by Jonathan Levitt
& David Friedgood

the-heck-not swindle attempt in a lost position. However it is almost always the best move available. With each position Emms gives a guiding hint. Some samples follow:

White to play



[FEN "3r2k1/p5p1/6P1/r3B2p/7q/1pR5/2n2RPP/5QK1 w - - 0 1"]

Here Emms writes "Take away the rook from f2 and White would win immediately with 1 Qf7+. How can White exploit this fact, together with the vulnerability of Black's back rank?". The continuation, from the game **Tietz-Schwalb**, Karlsbad 1900, was **1 Rc8!! Rxc8 2 Rxc2! Rf8 3 Rc8! Qe7 4 Qc4+ Kh8 5 Qh4! 6 Ra1+ 6 Bxa1 Qe3+ 7 Kh1 Rxc8 8 Qxh5+ Kg8 9 Qh7+ Kf8 10 Qxg7+ Ke8 11 Qf7+ Kd8 12 Bf6+ 1-0**.

Here is an example of a lost position salvaged by a surprise move.

Black to play

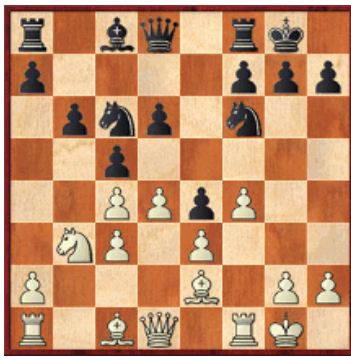


[FEN "2k5/q1p5/3p4/pPpPp1pp/N1P1Pp2/P4PbP/KQ4P1/8 b - - 0 45"]

Emms writes "After a very stodgy game, the position is incredibly blocked, but White has all the winning chances, as he has good knight vs. bad bishop. Does Black have a miraculous defensive try?" As it turned out, yes: **45... Qb6!! 46 Nxb6?** Natural but wrong. Correct was **46 Qd2 Qa7 47 Kb3 Kb7 48 Nb2 Kb6 49 Ka4 Bh2 50 Nd3** followed by **51 Nc1** and **52 Nb3**, piling up on the a-pawn and winning. Play continued **46...cxb6 47 h4 gxh4 48 Qd2 h3! 49 gxh3 h4** with a totally blocked position and eventual draw, **A. Petrosian-Hazai**, 1970.

In some cases there is no real tactical action involved; instead one is to find the best plan, as here:

Black to play



[FEN "r1bq1rk1/p4ppp/1pnp1n2/2p5/2PPpP2/1NP1P3/P3B1PP/R1BQ1RK1 b - - 0 12"]

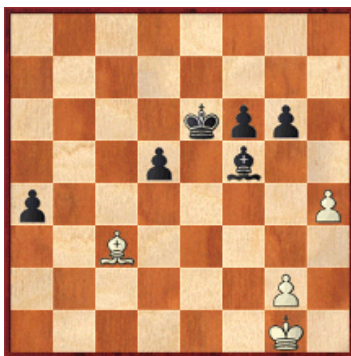
Johner-Nimzowitsch, Dresden 1926, with its unusual prophylactic maneuver **12...Qd7! 13 h3 Ne7 14 Qe1 h5! 15 Bd2 Qf5! 16 Kh2 Qh7!** when White has no play on either side of the board.

The book's premise (and it seems a valid one) is that study of such positions helps remove the blinders and loosen the bonds that unconsciously limit a player's vision and constrain his imagination during play. Most players would immediately reject or never consider the first two examples' moves, thinking they just drop material, and few would entertain Nimzowitsch's **12...Qd7** because it violates such general principles as "Don't block your bishops" and "Avoid early queen development." Advancement to the higher levels of chess performance requires throwing off such stereotyped thinking when the situation calls for it. Of course, just playing over such games will not make one the next Alekhine any more than watching a Jackie Chan movie will make one a kung fu black belt, but they do provide that sort of "Aha!" experience" that indicates learning is taking place.

Another way in which *Amazing* differs from and improves on the typical quiz book is that in the answers Emms usually gives the full game, along with substantial annotations of the critical moves. The answers in fact take up many more pages than the quiz positions. This adds to the instructive value, allowing the reader to see how the critical position came about, and increasing his understanding of why the "amazing" move is the best alternative. While occasionally Emms' prose is bit too breezy for my taste, his annotations generally are clear and to the point.

A pointless exercise Emms avoids is any attempt to rank the 200 games in terms of "amazing-ness," except to name his personal Top Twenty. Instead the positions are organized thematically: mating attacks, wins of material, long-term sacrifices, quiet moves, king walks, openings, endings, etc. His number one? **Topalov-Shirov**, Linares 1998:

Black to play



[FEN "8/8/4kpp1/3p1b2/p6P/2B5/6P1/6K1 b - - 0 47"]

Emms gives two-and-a-half pages of detailed analysis in support of Shirov's startling **47...Bh3!!**. Interestingly, this is Krabbe's number two, while Krabbe's number one, **Averbakh-Spassky**, USSR 1956, is only number twelve with Emms. However, *de gustibus non est disputandum*, so I'll not enter that dispute, except to a small extent further on.

Interesting as it is, the premise of presenting "the most amazing moves of all time" does have a drawback: it requires including many older games that were amazing in their day, but which by now have become cliches (viz. the above **Johner-Nimzowitsch**). Well-read students of chess history will no doubt quickly recognize many of *Amazing's* positions, such as this,

White to play



[FEN "8/p3q1kp/1p2Pnp1/3pQ3/2pP4/
1nP3N1/1B4PP/6K1 w - - 0 30"]

or this,

Black to play



[FEN "6k1/3q2pp/p2bp3/3p1r2/1p1Pp3/
3bQ1PP/PP1B1rB1/1N2R1RK b - - 0 25"]

or this,

Black to play



[FEN "5rk1/pp4pp/4p3/2R3Q1/3n4/
2q4r/P1P2PPP/5RK1 b - - 0 23"]

along with perhaps several dozen more depending on one's erudition and memory (if you don't recognize these three, answers are supplied at the end of the review, and you're not reading enough chess books).

A mildly annoying omission is an index of players, if only because it would be interesting to see at a glance who the "most amazing" players are. Out of curiosity, I did a rough tabulation of Emms' selections. The top scorer, as might be expected, is Kasparov, with eleven amazing moves, followed by

Fischer and Alekhine with seven each, and Karpov with six. Next are Vishy Anand and, perhaps unexpectedly, Julian Hodgson at five, then Tal and Rubinstein at four, and a large group at three: Botvinnik, Bronstein, Geller, Keres, Miles, Nimzowitsch, Short, and Spassky. Some very famous players are little seen: Morphy, Lasker (both of them), and Euwe each made only one move that qualified for the Top 200. Emanuel Lasker also appears twice as a victim. The most frequent victim? Karpov, four times (three by Kasparov), followed by Ivanchuk, Shirov, Spassky, Topalov, and Emms himself at three. Make of this what you will. An interesting oddity is that Rashid Nezhmetdinov, who had an outrageous disregard for material, appears only twice, the same as Capablanca and Petrosian, exemplars of soundness. Some names one might expect are absent; e.g., Adolf Anderssen, while many little-known "one-move wonders" are to be found, showing this is not the sole province of the great.

No doubt many will disagree with some of Emms' choices; that always happens with any "all time greatest" list. Here's my two cents' worth. A definite error of omission was **Torre-Banks**, Detroit 1924:

White to play



[FEN "2k2r1r/2p1b1pp/1p1p1pb1/1P6/2B1Pnq1/2B1Q3/2PN1PPP/R4RK1 w - - 0 22"]

This is analyzed at length in *The Life and Games of Carlos Torre*, by Gabriel Velasco. If Torre's **22 Qxf4!!!?** here was not amazing, the word has no meaning. Yes, I worked on the Torre book, so I'm biased and this is a shameless plug, but by Emms' own criteria the game deserved to be included. *Amazing's* only mentions of Torre are the predictable ones, **Torre-Lasker**, Moscow 1925 and the well-known but apocryphal game with Edward Z. Adams (erroneously called "Edwin"). Not only the Banks game but several others by Torre were good candidates for this book. Surprising is the complete absence of Steinitz; one would think that at least his game with von Bardeleben at Hastings 1895 merited inclusion.

Aside from that predictable sort of quibble, I have two caveats. One, a book like this can help advanced players increase their tactical prowess, but it may be detrimental to average or at least to below-average players, who usually need more work on fundamentals before trying "special effects." One must learn to walk before leaping tall buildings. Also many of these combinations are quite difficult, and inexperienced players may find themselves more baffled and frustrated than enlightened. Two, while a narrow conventionality can be bad for one's chess, so can an obsession with the spectacular. An "amazing" move is justified not by causing amazement, but by helping to win the game.

To Emms' credit, he seems to have been conscientious on this score. Post-game analysis has proven a few of the "amazing" moves to be unsound, but Emms notes that where appropriate. Only once could I find an instance where a simple, strong move was passed over for an "amazing" but less good alternative. Where simpler methods are available Emms usually points them out, as here,

Black to play



[FEN "2r3k1/p2N2p1/1b5p/7q/8/
4p1Q1/PP4PP/4R1K1 b - - 0 1"]

Arnold-Duras, Prague 1920, where the straightforward 1...Bd4! stops White's threats and leads to the win of a piece. However, the "amazing" **1...Qd1!!** is superior in practical terms, as after **2 Nxb6** (or 2 Ne5 e2+ 3 Kh1 Qxe1+! 4 Qxe1 Bf2; obviously not 2 Rxd1 e2+) **2...Rc1** 3 Qxe3 Qxe1+ 4 Qxe1 Rxe1+ 5 Kf2 Ra1 and 6...Rxa2 Black has forced simplification to an elementary won endgame. Thus in advocating the amazing, Emms is not seducing his readers into thrill-seeking, rather he's teaching sound chess.

An exception I found is this position:

White to play



[FEN "2rr1n1k/6pp/p3Q3/qb1p1N2/1pp5/
3P3P/1PP2BP1/1R3RK1 w - - 0 1"]

Blumental-MacGonnegal, 1962, the book's puzzle number three. Play continued with the "amazing" **1 Qh6** (punctuated "!!") **1...Rd7?** (not 1...gxh6?? 2 Bd4+ Kg8 3 Nxb6#, but better was 1...Qc7 2 Bd4 and only then 2...Rd7) **2 Bd4?!** (missing 2 Nxb6! Rxb6 3 Bb6 and wins, as Emms notes) **2...Qc7 3 Rf3 Ng6 4 Rbf1 Kg8 5 Qxg7+ Rxb7 6 Nh6+ Kh8 7 Rf7 Qxf7??** It's this move, not 1 Qh6, that decided the game. **8 Rxf7 Rg8 9 Rd7!! 1-0**. Very exciting and "amazing," but Emms points out that with the counter-sacrifice **7...Qe5!** (instead of 7...Qxf7??) **8 Bxe5 Nxe5 9 Rf8+ Rg8 10 Nxb6 Rxf8 11 Rxf8 Kg7**



[FEN "5RN1/6kp/p7/1b1pn3/1pp5/
3P3P/1PP3P1/6K1 w - - 0 12"]

"Black is still in the game." This seems rather an understatement: after, say, 12 Rf5 cxd3 13 cxd3 Nxd3 14 Ne7 Nxb2, or 12 Rd8 cxd3 13 cxd3 Nxd3 14

b3 Nc5 15 Ne7 Nxb3, it would appear that if anyone has winning chances it's Black. This calls into question the validity of the initial "amazing" idea, and indicates that objectively White should have avoided the flashy **1 Qh6** for the mundane **1 Qf7 Rd7 2 Ne7**, forcing Black to give up the exchange by **2...Rxe7 3 Qxe7**, leading with best play probably to an exchange-up-pawn-down ending that White might not win but should not lose. Another arguably simpler-is-better example was the first position above, **Tietz-Schwalb**, where Emms himself notes that **1 Rcf3**, virtually forcing **1...Qxf2**, also wins.

However these were the only such cases I could find (and I did look hard). In general, Emms leads his readers "not into temptation," but delivers an instructive set of lessons that should help many players see tactical opportunities they've been missing, and motivate them to improve their powers of calculation, perhaps in hopes of making the list in the future. I strongly advise also studying other, less sensational aspects of the game, but *Amazing* can be a useful part of one's chess education. Or if one is not so ambitious, the book is enjoyable just for its entertainment value, a sort of chessic highlight film, dessert cart, or "greatest hits" album. At a cheap ten cents a pop, *The Most Amazing Chess Moves of All Time* provides a lot of good thrills.

Answers on unidentified diagrams:

- **Botvinnik-Capablanca**, AVRO 1938: **30 Ba3!! Qxa3 31 Nh5+ gxh5 32 Qg5+ Kf8 33 Qxf6+ Kg8 34 e7!** and mate in a few more moves.
- **Saemisch-Nimzowitsch**, Copenhagen 1923, "The Immortal Zugzwang Game": **25...h6!! 0-1**.
- **Levitsky-Marshall**, Breslau 1912, the famous "Gold Pieces Game": **23...Qg3!! 0-1**. Interestingly, this is another position where less amazing moves also win: **23...Qe2, Qa3, Qb4, Qb2, and Ne2+**, but the text is strongest.

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by John Emms

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