



COLUMNISTS

Checkpoint

Carsten Hansen

*Rating Chart*

◆ – A poor book.

◆◆ – Not very good.

◆◆◆ – A useful book.

◆◆◆◆ – A good book.

◆◆◆◆◆ – An excellent book.

Reviewed this month:

Chess Explained – The English Opening
by Zenon Franco

Chess Explained – The Modern Benoni
by Zenon Franco

Chess Explained – The Queen's Gambit Declined
by James Rizzitano

Chess Explained – The Meran Semi-Slav
by Reinaldo Vera

Grandmaster Secrets – The Caro-Kann
by Peter Wells

En Passant

Sicilian Defense with 2.c3 – Alapin Variation (DVD)
by Sergei Tiviakov

Beating The French Vol. 1 (DVD)
by Rustam Kasimdzhanov

Beating The French Vol. 2 (DVD)
by Rustam Kasimdzhanov

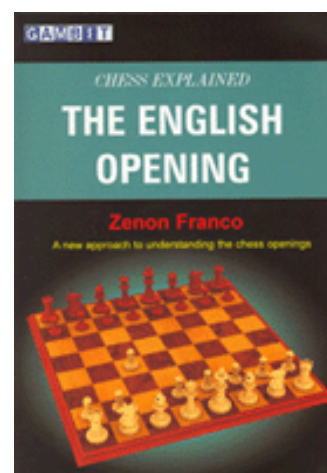
Beating The French Vol. 3 (DVD)
by Rustam Kasimdzhanov

Chess Explained

This month we'll explore four volumes from Gambit's relatively new series of opening monographs, *Chess Explained*. In addition, we'll take a look at the first book in another Gambit series, *Grandmaster Secrets*. Lastly, we will briefly review a number of new ChessBase DVDs, including a three volume work on how to beat the French. This should get us off to a good start in 2008. Happy New Year!

Chess Explained – The English Opening by Zenon Franco, Gambit Publication 2006, Paperback, 111pp., \$23.95

The author of this book is from Paraguay, but he now resides in Spain, where he has coached some of Spain's strongest players, including Paco Vallejo-Pons. Prior to this, he has written two worthy books, [Chess Self-Improvement](#) and [Winning Chess Explained](#).



The *Chess Explained* series is a sort of a middle ground between the often very basic *Starting Out* books from Everyman Chess and the more extensive monographs that tend to have less explanations and more hard-core theory. The concept is explained in detail on the backcover of each volume, and since we are covering four volumes from the series this month, it makes sense to quote it in full in order for you to keep my comments in proper context:

Chess Explained is a new series of books about chess openings. They are not theoretical works in the traditional sense, but more a series of lessons from a chess expert with extensive over-the-board experience with an opening. You will gain an understanding of the opening and the middlegames to which it leads, enabling you to find the right moves and plans in your own games. It is as if you were sitting at the board with a chess coach answering your questions about the plans for both sides, the ideas behind particular moves, and what specific knowledge you need to have.

- 25 recent and highly instructive games discussed in detail
- Chapter introductions and conclusions emphasize key points
- Full indexes of games and variations
- Extensive verbal explanations of plans and manoeuvres

I have written two books on this opening: *Gambit Guide to the English Opening: 1... e5* and [The Symmetrical English](#), and co-authored one that deals with the English, the soon to be released *A Strategic Opening Repertoire for White*. Therefore, it was with great interest that I picked up this volume. Before we continue, let's look at how the material is divided:

- Symbols
- Bibliography
- Dedication (first three items share one page)
- Introduction (2 pages)
- **Part 1: Symmetrical English: 1 c4 c5**
- 1 The Hedgehog (18 pages)
- 2 The Double Fianchetto (9 pages)
- 3 Symmetrical: Miscellaneous (9 pages)
- 4 The Rubinstein System (12 pages)
- **Part 2: Reversed Sicilian: 1 c4 e5**
- 5 The Reversed Rossolimo (23 pages)
- 6 1 c4 e5: Miscellaneous (13 pages)
- **Part 3: Nimzo-English: 1 c4 Nf6 2 Nc3 e6**
- 7 Nimzo-English and Mikenas Attack (18 pages)
- List of Games (1 page)
- Index of Variations (2 pages)

On the surface, this looks reasonably acceptable, although the coverage of certain lines seems somewhat scanty. For instance, I was downright puzzled when I examined the chapters in greater detail and discovered what was missing. While the books in this series are not supposed to cover every variation in detail, I think you will agree with me that the following lines should have been included or at least deserved mention:

- 1 c4 c5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 g3 g6 4 Bg2 Bg7 5 Nf3 Nf6 6 d4 or 6 0-0 0-0 7 d4 – The Pure Symmetrical
- 1 c4 c5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 g3 g6 4 Bg2 Bg7 5 Nf3 e5 – The Swedish
- 1 c4 c5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 g3 g6 4 Bg2 Bg7 5 e4 (or 5 a3) – The Botvinnik System
- 1 c4 c5 2 Nc3 Nf6 3 g3 d5 4 cxd5 Nxd5 5 Bg2 Nc7 and now all lines without 6 Nf3 receive no mention – The Rubinstein Variation
- 1 c4 c5 2 Nc3 Nf6 3 g3 e6 4 Nf3 Nc6 5 Bg2 Be7 6 0-0 d5 7 cxd5 Nxd5 – The Keres-Parma Variation
- 1 c4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Nc3 e5, 3...Nd4 and 3...g6 – Three Knights


If these were unimportant variations, then I could understand their omission, but these lines are integral parts of the Symmetrical English. Moreover, the list of omissions continues:

- 1 c4 c5 2 Nf3 Nf6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 e5 – The Kasparov Gambit
- 1 c4 c5 2 Nf3 Nf6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 e6 5 g3 – Anti Benoni - the lines without Nc3 Nc6
- 1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Nf6 3 Nf3 Nc6 4 g3 Bc5
- 1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Nf6 3 Nf3 Nc6 4 g3 g6
- 1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Nf6 3 Nf3 Nc6 4 d4, 4 e4, 4 a3, and 4 d3
- 1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 g3 g6 4 Bg2 Bg7 5 d3 d6 6 Nf3 Nf6 or 6...f5
- 1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 g3 g6 4 Bg2 Bg7 5 e4 and 5 e3
- 1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 g3 f5
- 1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 d6 3 Nf3 f5 or 3 g3 f5
- 1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Bb4

And these are just some of the major omissions; there are many other minor lines that also go unmentioned. In general, lines where Black doesn't play ...Nf6 early on are completely ignored, as are lines where White omits Nf3. Considering how many lines this encompasses, it is an absolutely huge bulk of material that should have received some sort of mention. One can also question the huge emphasis on the Hedgehog and Double Fianchetto, which covers more than a quarter of this rather slim volume.

Still, the material that is covered is of a very decent quality with good explanations of the strategic and tactical nuances of the particular lines. I only wish that the author had balanced his presentation better and left room for the coverage of more lines.

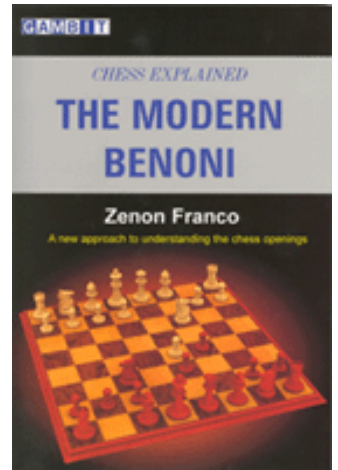
Those who play the English Opening may find something of interest pertaining to particular lines, and for those who face the English Opening, this book will only scratch the surface, but it does offer a decent discussion of the Hedgehog. Overall, I was disappointed.

My assessment of this book: 

**Order *Chess Explained – The English Opening*
by Zenon Franco**

Chess Explained – The Modern Benoni by Zenon Franco, Gambit Publications
2007, Paperback, 111pp., \$19.95

I have always found the Modern Benoni to be an extraordinarily difficult opening to understand and play well, and thus I have been handed some of my ugliest defeats in this opening, but also some of my nicest wins. This opening can make you look like a genius if your plan works out, or a complete patzer if something goes wrong. Even grandmasters occasionally make fools of themselves in this opening. Therefore, it is about time that a good book about this difficult opening has been written. Hopefully, for those of us who study this book carefully, there will be gold at the end of the rainbow or at least after the last page.



The material is divided as follows:

- Symbols
- Bibliography (the first two share one page)
- Introduction (1 page)
- 1 Classical Variation (17 pages)
- 2 Modern Variation (11 pages)
- 3 Fianchetto Variation (13 pages)
- 4 Mikenas, Taimanov and Four Pawns Attack (24 pages)
- 5 Knaak and Kapengut Variations (13 pages)
- 6 Systems with Bf4 and Bg5 (15 pages)
- 7 Knight's Tour Variation (8 pages)
- 8 Transpositions and Move-Orders (2 pages)
- List of Games (1 page)
- Index of Variations (2 pages)

The above lines are really all you need to cover when studying the Modern Benoni. Franco manages to pass along the main details with regards to the strategic and tactical features of each line, and the prose leaves you with the impression that you understand the opening far better than you did before.

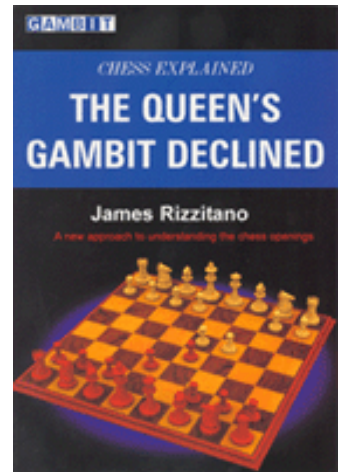
For those employing the Modern Benoni, up to around 2100-2200, this is a valuable book, both on a theoretical level and pertaining to overall understanding. White players will also want to read and study this book, as the knowledge you acquire will allow you to play these types of positions with much greater confidence and understanding.

My assessment of this book: 

**Order *Chess Explained – The Modern Benoni*
by Zenon Franco**

Chess Explained – The Queen’s Gambit Declined by James Rizzitano, Gambit Publications 2007, Paperback, 127pp., \$23.95

American international master James Rizzitano has written three impressive books to date: [*How to Beat 1 d4*](#), [*Chess Explained: The Taimanov Sicilian*](#) and [*Understanding Your Chess*](#). In this volume he takes on the Queen’s Gambit Declined, which covers a lot of ground and there are many different variations that have very little in common in regards to pawn structures and basic strategic ideas.




The material is divided as follows:

- Symbols
- Dedication
- Acknowledgements (the first three all share one page)
- Bibliography 1 page)
- Introduction (3 pages)
- 1 Alatortsev Variation (10 pages)
- 2 Tarrasch Defence (16 pages)
- 3 Exchange and Blackburne Variations (22 pages)
- 4 Ragozin Defence and Vienna Variation (15 pages)
- 5 Semi-Tarrasch Defence (11 pages)
- 6 Cambridge Springs and Lasker Defences (13 pages)
- 7 Tartakower Defence (13 pages)
- 8 Classical Defence (16 pages)
- List of Games (1 page)
- Index of Variations (2 pages)

The page allocation is just about right, and he has included all the critical lines. However, this book seems to focus more on variations and the current status of theory than it does on explaining strategic ideas and the fundamental structural elements of the lines. This goes somewhat against the grain of the series, and lower-rated players may view this as a major flaw in this work. Yet, higher-rated readers will enjoy the excellent summary of the current standing of the individual lines in this popular opening.

The material in this book is excellently presented with good evaluations of the actual value of each main line and many sub-main lines, in addition to many new ideas and improvements over existing theory, just like in Rizzitano’s other works.

My assessment of this book: 

[Order](#) *Chess Explained – The Queen’s Gambit Declined* by James Rizzitano

Chess Explained – The Meran Semi-Slav by Reinaldo Vera, Gambit Publications 2007, Paperback, 111 pp, \$23.95

Cuban grandmaster Reinaldo Vera is a regular contributor to *New In Chess Yearbook* and some Spanish-language chess magazines, but is otherwise largely unknown to a wider audience. However, that is likely to change with the publication of this book. The Meran Semi-Slav arises after 1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Nf3 e6 5 e3 and the material is divided as follows:




- Symbols (1 page)
- Introduction (2 pages)
- 1 Classical Meran with 8...a6 (16 pages)
- 2 Modern Meran with 8...Bb7 (21 pages)
- 3 The Reynolds Attack (15 pages)
- 4 Capablanca's 8 Be2 and Korchnoi's 8 Bb3 (11 pages)
- 5 The Shirov-Shabalov Attack: 7 g4!? (10 pages)
- 6 Positional Anti-Meran Systems (12 pages)
- 7 The 5...a6!? Line (14 pages)
- 8 Notes on Move-Orders (3 pages)
- List of Games (1 page)
- Index of Variations (2 pages)

The allocated number of pages well reflects the volume of games and the current popularity of the respective lines. Vera has aimed for an approach with voluminous explanatory prose and just a bit of game quotations and theory, almost as an afterthought to let us know he is not making it up as he goes.

Given that these lines are highly topical and constantly played at top level it is amazing that the author is able to make the overall presentation so digestible for the average reader, by explaining all the fundamentals, and the strategic and tactical elements that are needed to implement these variations.

While you will not know all the theory in the various lines, this book ably provides the reader with all the knowledge he or she needs in order to understand the theory and the essential aspects of the positions that arise during play.

This book is excellent. I recommend it to anyone rated from 1400 to 2300. You will learn more than just the variations covered, but also about chess in general, because this book is a fountain of knowledge and it is so accessible that it is a shame not to take advantage of it.

My assessment of this book: 

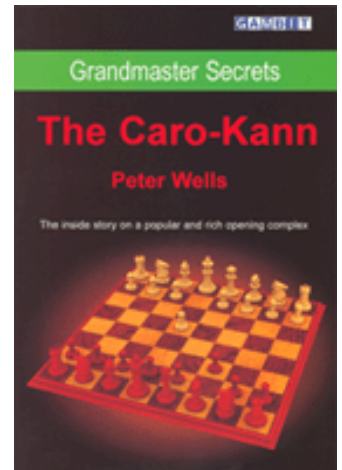
[Order](#) *Chess Explained – The Meran Semi-Slav* by
Reinaldo Vera

Paperback, 176pp., \$29.95


English grandmaster Peter Wells is one of favorite my chess authors. His book on the Trompowsky was fantastic, and his articles for *ChessBase Magazine* are always the first thing I read. As with the *Chess Explained* series, the material is presented around twenty-five main games, but here the annotations are much deeper, while still providing plenty of explanatory prose and carefully measured doses of theory.

Wells' book covers all variations of the Caro-Kann, and the material is divided as follows:

- Introduction (4 pages)
- 1 Main Line with 4...Bf5 (27 pages)
- 2 Main Line with 4...Nd7 (19 pages)
- 3 Main Line with 4...Nf6 (11 pages)
- 4 Advance Variation: Sharp Lines and Black's Early Alternatives (26 pages)
- 5 Advance Variation: Short System and Other Modern Treatments (26 pages)
- 6 Panov-Botvinnik Attack and 2 c4 (38 pages)
- 7 Miscellaneous Systems for White (17 pages)
- Index of Variations (4 pages)



Reading this book is a joy, because Wells manages to make it a lively and entertaining read, while being instructional and educational at the same time. This volume lives up to every expectation. If you play the Caro-Kann as black, or 1 e4 as white, or if you just want to become a better chessplayer by studying interesting material with plenty of explanations of chess strategy, then buy this book. It is a modern classic.

My assessment of this book: 

Order *Grandmaster Secrets – The Caro-Kann* by Peter Wells

Sicilian Defense with 2.c3 – Alapin Variation (DVD) by Sergei Tiviakov, ChessBase GmbH 2007, DVD, Running time: 4 hours, \$37.95

It has always struck me as a bit odd that a strong theoretician such as Tiviakov plays the 2 c3 Sicilian. But on this DVD he explains the ins and outs of this opening, as well as the reasons why he plays it.

As with his previous DVD on the [Maroczy System](#) in the Accelerated Dragon (which was reviewed in my [October 2007](#) column), Tiviakov discusses the



lines honestly and clearly. He appraises which lines are critical, which are not and which are completely useless. I have never enjoyed playing against the 2 c3 Sicilian, and upon seeing Tiviakov's games and his presentation of the ideas, I can see that I'm not the only one. In the hands of a well-prepared white player, this harmless-looking opening can become quite a beast. Tiviakov's scalps include Magnus Carlsen, whom he beat in 2005, and who, when better prepared in January 2007, still only managed a draw.



Despite Tiviakov's somewhat broken English, the presentation is easy to follow, and he makes the material approachable for players between 1400 and 2100. Undoubtedly there will be a new crop of players picking up this opening as white, and those facing this line as black will want to find out which lines to avoid and which are worth employing.

My assessment of this DVD: 

**Order *Sicilian Defense with 2.c3 – Alapin Variation*
(DVD)
by Sergei Tiviakov**

Beating The French Vols. 1-3 (DVDs) by Rustam Kasimdzhanov, ChessBase GmbH 2007, DVD, Running times: approx 3 hours, \$37.95

Some readers may remember the impressive and very lengthy DVD on the [French Defence](#) by Ari Ziegler (which was reviewed [here](#)). That DVD was one of the best introductions I have ever seen to the French Defense. Now ChessBase has enlisted the help of Rustam Kasimdzhanov, the former FIDE World Champion, to present a repertoire for white against the French, and in doing so he spends about ten hours of screen time over the course of three DVDs. While it is nice to know how to beat the French, I'm a little put off by the price of investing in all three volumes.



The presentation on all three DVDs flows easily, and Kasimdzhanov speaks eloquently and convincingly about the subject, though his voice has a tendency to fluctuate in pitch, which can be disconcerting in that one tends to focus on that rather than on the material at hand. However, this is a rather minor quibble.


The material is divided as follows:

- Volume 1: 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 e5 – 13 lessons
- Volume 2: 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 e5 Nfd7 5 f4 c5 6 Nf3 Nc6 7 Be3 – 12 lessons
- Volume 3: 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 dxe4 4 Nxe4 – 11 lessons

Despite the lengthy presentation, Kasimdzhanov has been forced to take a number of shortcuts in the presentation; often he mentions alternatives for both sides without properly indicating the correct path to continue along. This may have been unavoidable, but it is problematic for weaker players to come up with the correct answers to these lines on their own.

The games are well-chosen, but there is a lot to learn and to remember, because the lines are sharp and accuracy is required. While I have always regarded chess learning through this medium with some skepticism, these DVDs have changed my opinion. Though there is a danger that the viewer will become lazy and omit studying the material independently in order to become properly acquainted with it.

For those who want to gain a greater understanding of the French, particularly from White's perspective in the 3 Nc3 lines, these DVDs will provide you with a fountain of information, plus help you understand the foundation of the strategic and tactical ideas.

My assessment of these DVDs: 

[Order](#) *Beating The French Vol. 1*

(DVD)

by Rustam Kasimdzhanov

[Order](#) *Beating The French Vol. 2*

(DVD)

by Rustam Kasimdzhanov

[Order](#) *Beating The French Vol. 3*

(DVD)

by Rustam Kasimdzhanov

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