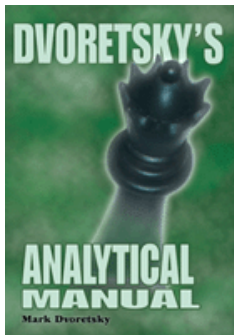




BOOK REVIEWS

From the Archives

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Mark Donlan



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From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, ChessCafe.com has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the ChessCafe.com home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives...*

Exultant Chess: Rave by Rave

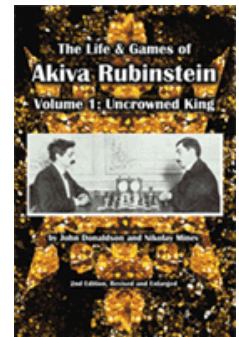
by Paul Kollar

Logical Chess: Move by Move, by Irving Chernev, 1998 Batsford Books, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 256pp. \$16.95

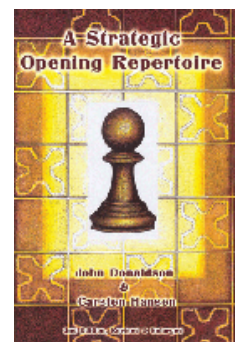
If chessplayers earned ELO points for appreciating chess, for caring deeply about it, for declaring a shameless and selfless devotion to its manifold aspects, for loving the game unreservedly with the pure, hard flame of passion, then the late Irving Chernev would have been rated 3000 plus! The man was besotted with chess he couldn't get enough of it. He was intrigued by chess, absorbed by it, amazed and delighted with it, fascinated, mesmerized, and intoxicated with it. Chess, for him, was the most incredibly beautiful jewel in the world, in the cosmos. He was constantly turning it over and over in his hands, holding it up to the light, glancing at it in shade, watching it glow in darkness, feeling its heft, thrilling to its scintillation, falling headlong into its kaleidoscopic, part-colored interior depths. Next to chess, diamonds were gravel. He could hear it, too, calling him, lulling him, lifting him with its dramatic melodies and heavenly harmonies, moving him to soul-filled joy. For Chernev chess was simply ecstasy.

To those who do not know Irving Chernev, who haven't read his work, the foregoing must appear as highly exaggerated, overblown nonsense those who are familiar with his personality and a good number of his widely-known, much admired books might allow that I understated his relationship to our game. He not only played chess; he played at chess and with chess, almost without pause. I believe him when he writes that he “probably read more about chess and played over more games than any man in history.” That's just the beginning. He searched and researched, he bored and burrowed, he culled and collected, he amassed

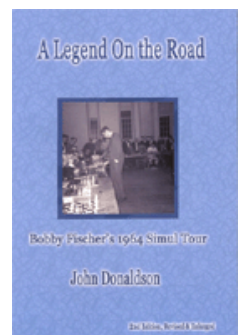
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and stored, he discovered and catalogued, he noted marginally and jotted assiduously for seven decades! He went nowhere without his five or six little black notebooks which were kept for recording wonderful games or fantastic combinations or intricate problems or amusing anecdotes or literally anything chessic that caught his fancy, and damn near everything did. Nothing escaped his attention. There was no line between love and obsession. He was by love possessed. And like many a lover he had to know everything about his beloved. But here the analogy ends, for Chernev was not possessive, he couldn't, wouldn't be jealous, he wanted to share this passion with the world. He became an apostle, a proselytizer, a teacher, a priest of chess. Far from being miserly with his hoard, Chernev would emit as well as absorb, he became a fountain. His worship of chess manifested itself, finally, in a series of wonderfully written books that have entertained, instructed, and inspired generations of chessplayers.

Does that last accolade read like a stereotypical, cut-and-pasted, straight-from-the-publisher tribute? Well, in Chernev's case the fact of the matter is that it's absolutely true. In contrast to those of too many of today's chess authors, Chernev's back-cover blurbs are valid, just, and well earned. Chernev is, as is no other chess writer, "humorous," "entertaining," "witty," "instructive," "charming," "essential," "lively," "lucid," "illuminating," "thoughtful," and, appropriately enough, "masterly"! Several of his twenty books have rightfully become popular classics, and the whole of them have something for everyone. Beginner or master, child or veteran, student or dilettante, tournament warrior or endgame study connoisseur, lore buff or classic game fan whoever or whatever you are or were, Chernev has been there ahead of you, and has brought home terrific stuff for your mind and for your heart. A chess library without a few of Irving's books is like a wedding without a band how the hell are we to dance?

Chernev was born in czarist Russia in the first month of the 20th century. Lasker was in the sixth year of his world championship reign, Alekhine was just seven years old, and Capablanca would, at 12 years of age, defeat Corzo in a famous match a year later. The boy Chernev and his family, according to Arnold Denker, left Russia in 1904 to settle in Brooklyn, New York. His father taught him chess when he was twelve, and young Irving developed as a player during the ascendancy of Rubinstein, Nimzowitsch, Alekhine, and Capablanca. It was the great Cuban genius who had the most lasting and profound influence on Chernev. He, like countless others, was bedazzled and smitten by Capa's power and grace, awed and astonished by his crystalline, pluperfect play. For the rest of Chernev's long and fruitful life, he would worship Capablanca unabashedly, and perhaps the simplicity and clarity of Chernev's instructional books had their roots in this early and lasting devotion.

By the thirties, Chernev was a major figure in the New York City chess world, rubbing shoulders and trading pieces with such names as Fine, Reshevsky, Kashdan, Horowitz, Denker, and a certain Fred Reinfeld. Since Irving and Fred are very often associated with one another in the American chess mind, a word about the latter would not be out of place. Reinfeld, like Chernev, made his mark on U.S. chess much more through his literary efforts than by competitive master chess. Reinfeld was the stronger player and more prolific writer, incredibly so, but his best efforts, some of which were definitely superior to Chernev's best, at least in the quality and depth of analysis, were often lost in the ever rising flood of his dashed-off pot boilers. Reinfeld loved chess perhaps as much as Chernev, but he was somewhat more hard-boiled about it he gushed less and used fewer exclamation marks. In tandem, however, they were amazing curators of chess culture. The two of them knew everything, saw everything, were everywhere chess was to be found. Who but Chernev and Reinfeld could come up with, for our delectation, games like Parr v Wheatcroft, London 1938, and inform us that, "Parr's masterpiece has well-founded claims to being considered the finest attacking game of all time." Who knew? All in all, the two complemented one another wonderfully, down to Fred preferring Alekhine to Capablanca. I like to

think of them in chess heaven, walking along in mild dispute, exactly like Plato and Aristotle in Raphael's painting, The School of Athens, Irving pointing upward toward the ideal positional perfection of Capa, while Fred gestures down to the real, concrete, tactical brass tacks of Alekhine.

It was also in the thirties that Chernev first wrote articles for Horowitz's new *Chess Review* magazine, and published his first books, *Chess Strategy and Tactics*, with Reinfeld, and *An Invitation to Chess*, with Kenneth Harkness. By the early forties, if not before, Chernev had become, in Denker's words, "a solid master," and was twice invited to play in U.S. closed championships in 1942 and 1944. Any satisfaction or pride Chernev may have felt at those invitations to join the cream of U.S. chess in heavy, merciless combat was evidently severely diluted by the crushing disappointment of negative results. He took a beating he was out of his depths. In his own words he "wanted to enjoy chess as well as play it, and competing in those tournaments was not chess to enjoy."

Some who have had their hopes and expectations dashed in that manner have renounced their love, lapsing into the sorrow of the unrequited if not the bitterness of the spurned. Fortunately for all of us, Chernev avoided that all too human response and simply redoubled his efforts at spreading the gospel of chess beauty, continuing to produce many more chess books remarkable for their infectious enthusiasm and exuberance. For the next forty years Chernev presented us with, to name a few: *Chessboard Magic!*; *The Bright Side of Chess*; *The Fireside Book of Chess*; *Combinations: the Heart of Chess*; *The Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played*; and, probably his most accomplished book, *Capablanca's Best Chess Endings*. My guess is that every American chessplayer over, say, thirty or forty years of age, has at least one Chernev book, or, at least, remembers one with great affection. I still recall, from the days when I didn't know much more than the moves, coming home from the town library with *The Bright Side of Chess*, and laboring through Anderssen's "Immortal Game," and Zukertort's spectacular win against Blackburne. Naturally, like millions of players before and since, I was utterly zonkered by the fantastic attacks and sacrifices. This was not the chess I was playing with the kid next door. Chernev opened another door for me, and once through it I was good and gone!

In 1957 American chess saw two remarkable, apparently unforgettable events: one sporting, the other literary. Bobby Fischer, all of fourteen, won the U.S. Championship; Irving Chernev published *Logical Chess: Move by Move*. Fischer's victory remarkable? Yes, none would downplay that achievement. But what was so special about another chess book, albeit from the hands of the now renowned Mr. Chernev? Something was, for sure, because in the last four decades, chess commentators of all stripes have been almost unanimous in describing this "much loved classic" as "one of the best chess books ever written." Think of the competition! Think of the work of world champions, of their challengers, of great, world-class teachers and trainers. And there, firmly in their company, is Irving Chernev! Talk about virtue rewarded he became what he beheld! All those years of scouting for classic games, of mining for chess gold, of collecting the best of the best, for our sakes, led, so justly, to Chernev becoming a classic in his own right.

Dr. John Nunn and company, at Batsford, have been busy re-releasing a number of older, out-of-print chess gems, converting notation from descriptive to algebraic, and generally tidying and tightening up texts for a global market. It is a tribute to Chernev that *Logical Chess: Move by Move* was selected for a make-over. This new edition should be a treat for both older players who may want to revisit a friend of their youth, and for the younger, digital crowd who apparently perceive descriptive notation as cuneiform. The design of the book remains quite simple: an introduction followed by thirty-three games divided into three sections, each section also headed with a preview.

The sections are entitled

1. The Kingside Attack,
2. The Queen's Pawn Opening, and
3. The Chess Master Explains his Ideas.

The games are presented, for the most part, in order of increasing complexity. They feature such great players as Alekhine, Pillsbury, Tarrasch, Rubinstein, Marshall, Janowsky, Spielmann, and, of course, Capablanca. Naturally, they were selected for the express purpose of Chernev's main instructional agenda, namely to introduce, explain, and illuminate positional play as he, a "solid master" of the 30's and 40's, understood that notion. Other aspects of play are at least touched on as well, and many principles and maxims are disclosed and elaborated. All the phases of a chess game are patiently explored in their natural, organic sequence. In fact, all of the moves are – each and every move of every game is explained! That is the now famous signature of this classic work. Chernev is up close and personal to the reader/student through thick and thin, through everything that occurs in all thirty-three games. That's the kicker, that's the idea that made this book unique, that's Uncle Irving's answer to the prayers of zillions of innocent beginners who, you experts and masters will remember, are in a very wide, very deep sea after they learn the moves and before they reach your level.

With such a deceptively simple idea, with such an artfully chosen game collection, and masterfully rendered explanations of the moves, ideas, and plans therein, Chernev has reached and touched an extremely wide and receptive audience. This book is near-perfect for the tentative, searching beginners of any age who have learned how the pieces and pawns move, have learned their relative values, know about castling, pawn promotion, stalemate, and checkmate, understand some tactics like pins and forks, and have played a handful of games, and, who want to learn what's next. It's also for players who think they know more than they really do, for those who have been playing for a longer time and who have "looked at" some chess books, who think they are losing games only because of a blunder here, an oversight there, for the crowd that thinks positional chess is "defensive" and "slow." It can be for the player who has gotten ahead of himself, who has gone too far too fast, and who therefore needs to retrace his steps and pick up what he jumped over in his rush to attain mastery. Finally, the book is just the thing for the prodigal few who are coming back to the game after a long hiatus, and who need to submit to some painless but profitable remedial work. And, when all these various candidates for the wisdom to be had from this expertly planned, simply rendered book have successfully completed Master Chernev's course, he has a sequel ready and waiting for them. I feel quite safe in further recommending, as a follow-up, advanced course, *The Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played*, a very fine collection of sixty-two "masterpieces of chess strategy" that could also stand very well on its own, in any notation.

Near-perfect is, alas, imperfect. Chernev had his faults and biases; he omitted and erred like any player or writer. He could be quirky, obstinate, naive, and even dead wrong. Pour through his twenty books and you'll find dozens of references to Soultanbeieff, but a very meager four or five to Chigorin. Some of his anecdotes are much more droll and ironic than factual. He was a little over-fond of superlatives and sometimes went on rhapsodical binges. But in these matters he was erring on the side of exuberance, accentuating the positive. You won't find Irving Chernev in a sour mood; he never bad-mouths anyone, or becomes supercilious or condescending or arrogant. We are aware of some chess personalities, past and present, who have at least flirted with this behavior.

More reasonable are the criticisms of the book at hand. Some have pointed out that the principles he put forth are simplistic generalizations, superficial axioms that lead to rote, mechanical play rather than original, creative, and independent thinking. This is more than mere carping, but, I think, less than fair. We crawl before we walk. We must know the "rules" before we break them. For that matter Chernev, himself, has written

qualifying hints throughout his text. He says, as early as Game 1: “I would caution you that this and other maxims are not to be blindly followed. In chess, as in life, rules must often be swept aside.” And later, in Game 15: “If it requires unconventional moves to force weaknesses in [the opponent’s] position, then play these unorthodox moves! Moves are good or bad by one standard only their effect on the position at hand.” This last could have come right out of the latest book on “modern secrets of chess strategy.” So don’t fret; the subtleties, refinements, and nuances can and will come later correctives will be applied in due course. And they will be much more easily comprehended and absorbed after the student has been guided smartly through the bedrock essentials covered here with a light but sure touch.

There are, no doubt, a jaded few who have “outgrown” Chernev, who have gone on to more serious fare and relegate his bright, exuberant books to their “naive” chess past, to the near-forgotten days when chess was more fun than work. They go to the wedding for the ceremony only. These puritans, heavy in black, may well have gone beyond Chernev’s instructional books, especially our current book, but deny themselves great pleasure in remaining aloof from his gourmand creations. (I am not so sure any player is necessarily “beyond” *Capablanca’s Best Chess Endings*.) Fun doesn’t necessarily mean only clowns and balloons. The joy that Chernev feels and cannot help expressing and sharing is, in the last analysis, the inevitable expansion and blossoming of the soul in the total apprehension of beauty. I’m sure he, like all of us, strived to further his chess skill, but never at the expense of his outright sensual attachment to the poetry and mystery of the game.

The French say that you cannot be kind-hearted and play chess. Irving Chernev defies this observation. He, I believe, identified most with players like Tal, who won often because they so loved to play, rather than with players like X who played often only because they so loved to win. When he wasn’t gifting us with anthologies of entertaining lore and marvelous games and incredible endgame compositions, Chernev also found time to lend his talents as a master and a writer to the production of immensely worthwhile instructional manuals. Did he expend this life-long effort so that his readers could beat more opponents, score more points, and validate their existence at the expense of their fellow players? I don’t believe so. Chernev was an aesthete, a lover, and fully realized that the more one understood of art, the more one could see and experience the beautiful, then the more deep, abiding pleasure and joy was to be had. For him that was only logical.

[Order](#) *Logical Chess: Move by Move*
by Irving Chernev

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