

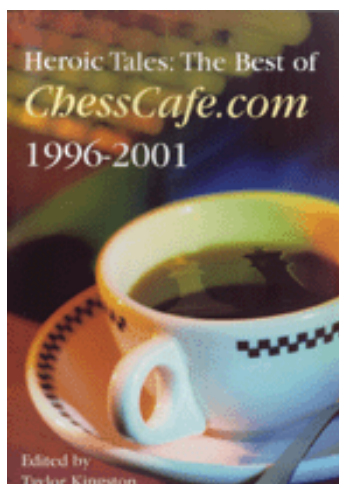


**BOOK
REVIEWS**

Fine Food on Paper Plates or Old Pro Gets Amateurish Tribute

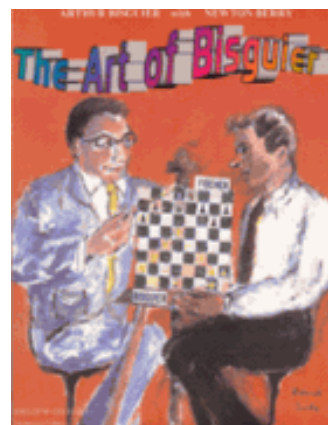
Taylor Kingston

The Art of Bisguier, by Arthur Bisguier with Newton Berry, 2003 3rd Millennium Press, Mixed Figurine and Algebraic Notation, Large Format Paperback, 208pp., \$22.95.



In his youth, Arthur Bisguier was considered something of a latter-day Morphy: his games featured classical openings and rapid piece play, often capped by brilliant tactics and sacrificial combinations.

However in terms of longevity Bisguier (born 1929) has greatly outdone Morphy: while Morphy's career lasted only a short time, GM Bisguier has been an important figure on the American and international scene for over half a century.



Bisguier first drew notice in the late 1940s, when he won the US Junior Championship and the championship of the very strong Manhattan Chess Club of New York. Improving rapidly, he went on a tear in the 1950s, winning several international tournaments, the US Open three times, and the official US Championship in 1954. He played in the 1955 Göteborg Interzonal and on the US Olympiad team, and gained the GM title in 1957. Overall he has played in sixteen US Championships, five

Olympiads, two FIDE Interzonals, innumerable American and international tournaments, and his big-name victims include Fischer, Spassky, Reshevsky, Gligoric, Larsen, Benko, Denker, both Byrne brothers, Donner, Evans, Kashdan, Barcza, Ivkov and many others. He holds the rare distinction of winning the Closed, Open, Junior *and* Senior US Championships. Additionally, Bisguier has worked as a FIDE delegate, chess magazine editor, newspaper columnist, USCF staff member, and tournament director. Though now well into his seventies, he has never really retired from chess, and he continues to play and lecture frequently. Practically a whole American chess generation has grown up listening to him analyze their games in his brusque Bronx accent at major open tournaments all over the country. It's therefore entirely fitting and proper that a game collection and biography should be published now.

The Art of Bisguier is an unpretentious book, a mix of good, entertaining, perhaps occasionally great games, with light notes and amusing anecdotes. In contrast to some GMs, the author does not take himself too seriously, and the heavy scrutiny we sometimes give more ambitious works would be inappropriate. However, some glaring flaws, mostly physical and typographical, are noticeable from the start.

The first and most obvious is the cover, which features a crude, hideous painting apparently the work of an untrained child. The title is superimposed in comic-book-style letters with garishly clashing day-glow colors. Inside, the typesetting is sloppy and unattractive, with uneven line spacing and a right-hand margin as jagged as a dragon's dentition. The one exception is the introductory biographical sketch, which uses the full justification the rest of the book should have.

Typesetting is worst of all in the games. Actual game moves are in an unattractive figurine font, while for no

good reason note variations switch to non-figurine English algebraic. Notes are not separated from text moves, and they are tightly spaced, inexplicably (though inconsistently) italicized, and surrounded by superfluous, sometimes redundant parentheses and/or brackets. Invalid hyphenations (e.g. “wors-ens” “cramp-ed” “Assuring”) abound, with the hyphens too large. “Black” and “White” are not capitalized when used as nouns. A sample passage, scanned directly from the book:

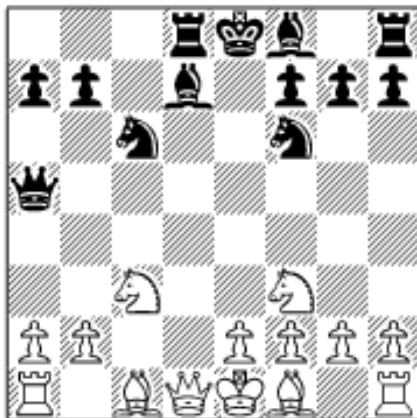
PUT Bisguier1.jpg HERE

As one can see, all this makes the games hard to read. Yet it is explained on a special introductory page, prominently titled “**Readability**”, that it was actually done *on purpose*. Large-format books (this is 8½ x 11 inches, 21 x 27.5 cm) are supposed to be more readable, but technical editor Sheldon Gelbart has somehow managed the opposite.

Games are prolifically littered with pointless pull-quote boxes which sometimes pull into absurdity, e.g. “[My king] dominated the endgame we were entering from e5.” Diagrams are consistently preceded or followed by a redundant “See Diagram,” which in some cases only adds to the confusion, as when diagram 209 is immediately followed by “See Diagram 210.” A few diagrams have 64 light squares and no dark:

PUT Bisguier2.jpg HERE.

At other points the diagrams are badly misplaced, as with this position,



which is followed by the note “If 19 Qxf3, a possible continuation might be 19...Qb4 20 Qe2 (Or 20 Rb1 Rxd2 ...)”. The impossible moves are explained by the fact that the diagram actually represents the position at move 11, not 19. Several diagrams show later positions

that do not arise *until the next page*. In some cases this unfortunate layout has been forced by the useless pull-quotes needlessly taking up space.

Diacritical marks are missing, giving us such misspellings as “Grunfeld,” “Samisch” and “Goteburg” (though that does not explain “Blackburn”). The lack of an accent in the Spanish word “está” turns a sentence intended to mean “Morphy is alive” into “Morphy this alive.” The aspect ratio of several photographs has been altered, deforming them like fun-house mirrors.

So, in its physical appearance and the quality of its editing, the book gives the impression of being produced by a high-school yearbook staff on a low budget. It is a pity that the work of a veteran professional has been so amateurishly bungled. It’s like serving fine food by a gourmet chef on a paper plate with plastic cutlery.

What value the book has is therefore not in its form but in its content, which unlike the layout derives mostly from Bisguier himself. After a stock four-page biographical sketch by Newton Berry, Bisguier’s part of the book begins. There are 82 games, covering the years 1945-1960. Each year gets a bit of historical background, mainly describing major tournaments and matches, especially Interzonal and Candidate tournaments and world and US championships. Each game has an introduction, usually telling something about Bisguier’s

opponent, why the game was significant, some interesting or amusing story connected with it, etc., followed by the annotated game itself.

Bisguier peppers his game notes with lively asides and anecdotes. For example in introducing the game Mengarini-Bisguier, US Open, Baltimore 1948, he writes:

“The day before I’d witnessed Dr. [Ariel] Mengarini, a noted psychiatrist with a reputation for playing mind games with opponents, psyche out Walter Shipman. The good doctor had sat at the board reading a magazine throughout that encounter ... Mengarini moved instantaneously, making one strong move after another while hardly even glancing at the board. Disconcerted by the doctor’s disdainful attitude, Shipman lost badly. Determined not to let Ariel repeat that performance with me, I played him move on move. After ten moves, he had to pause to think, and I knew I had him.”

This is followed by the game that gave rise to Bisguier’s reputation as a reincarnation of Morphy, a tactical sacrifice in fine 19th-century style. Of another game he writes:

“When US Junior Champion Saul Yarmak faced me across the board in round 13 [*at Hollywood 1954*], we had an instantaneous personality clash ... He impressed me as being an egomaniac braggart who liked to criticize other players. So I offered him a side bet at 20-to-1 odds. I also gave him draw odds – that is, we’d count it as a win for him if he even drew me.”

The following excerpt from that game is typical of the book’s breezy, somewhat melodramatic annotation style:



“**20...b5** Material is even, but this ice-pick thrust decimates the last of Yarmak’s once-imposing pawn mass ... A cold draft will soon blow through the white K’s shattered igloo. **21.Ne5 bxc4** **22.Qg3** If **22.Nxc4 Nxc4** **23.Qxc4**, Qc7 threatens **24...Ba3+**. **22...Qa5**

23.Rdf1? Making a bad position worse. **23.a4** offers more resistance. **23...Qxa2** **24.Kd1 Rfe8** **25.d4** ‘Luft!’ cries the K, shoving a faithful bodyguard into the frosty void. **25...cxd3** **26.Nxd3 Ne4** Death arrives on horseback. To claim Q or K? **27.Qc7** The lady flees to warmer climes, leaving her husband to a wintry fate. **27...Nc3+ 0-1.**”

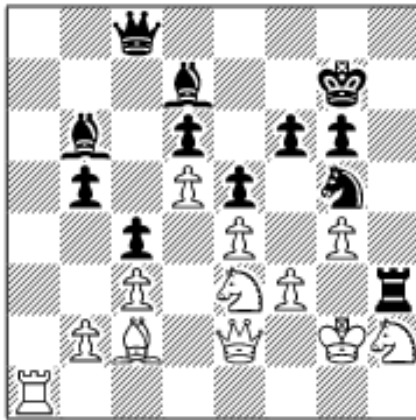
As the above example shows, the notes are generally on the light side, with Bisguier preferring to pen peppy prose rather than plumb the depths. At times a bit more seems called for, as here



in the aforementioned Mengarini game, Bisguier makes only the briefest comment on White’s **11.a4**. In contrast Hans Kmoch, in the August 1948 *Chess Review*, explained at very instructive length why the move is a serious strategic error. And in some of the

more complex games, the lack of detailed tactical analysis may leave some readers puzzled.

We suspect the games have not been computer-checked; for example at this point in Ivkov-Bisguier, Yugoslavia-USA Radio Match 1950,



Bisguier makes little comment on the game continuation **37...Rxb2+ 38.Kxh2 Qh8+ 39.Kg2 Nh3 40.Kg3 Nf4**. While that line is good enough and did eventually win in 60 moves, Black had several notably stronger moves, such as

37...Qh8!, viz. 38.Rh1 Qh4 39.Qf2 Qxf2 40.Kxf2 Nxf3—+, or 38. Nef1 Rxf3 39.Qxf3 (39.Nxf3 Qh3#) 39...Nxf3 40.Nxf3 Bxg4 41.Ng1 Qh4—+, none of which is mentioned.

On occasion, Bisguier goes into some detail, as with this position from Bisguier-Sliwa, Göteborg Interzonal, 1955:



“The Diagram-234 position is loaded with possibilities. Black treads a dangerous path. Most of his reasonable moves have one or more drawbacks. (1) If 21...Ng6? 22 Nxf7! Kxf7 23.Bxe6+, and white’s Q and two pawns prevail against three minors,

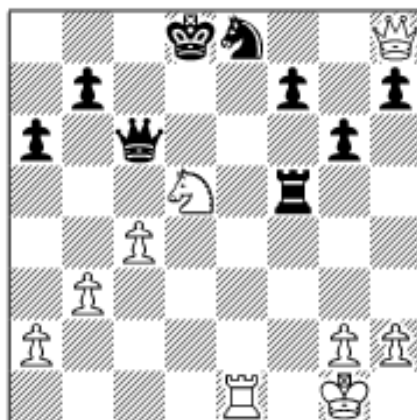
which without support of a heavy piece lack counterattacking chances. (2) If 21...N6d7? (a) 22 Nxf7! Kxf7 23 Nxe6! with a winning attack: 23...Nxe6 24 Qh5+ Kg8 25 Bxe6 Kh8 26 Bf5 Nf6 27 Bxc8 Nxh5 28 Bxb7 or (b) 22 Nf5! ... Of course, 22...ef5 is prohibited as, after 23 Nxf7, black lacks the necessary 23...Bd5. (3) If 21...Bd5? 22 Bxd5 Nxd5 23 Nec6, when white secures a fine ingress into black’s position.”

However, in the games the chief attraction is not Bisguier’s skill at either analysis or metaphor, but the

sparkle of his combinations. A representative sample:



Bisguier-Penrose, Southsea
1950: **28.Nxe5! Nf4**
(28...fxe5 29.Qxh5 Rg8
30.Qf7 and wins) **29.Rg8+!,**
1-0.

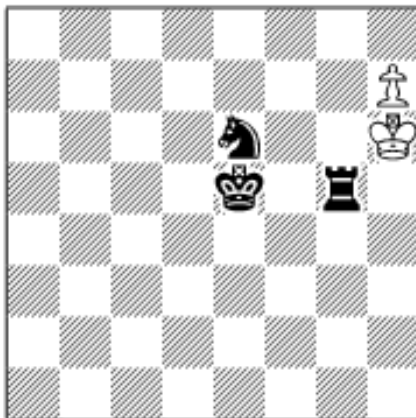


Bisguier-Fischer, Rosenwald
Tournament, New York
1956: **31.Qf8 Qd7 32.Rd1**
Rf6 (32...Re5 33.Nc3 Qxd1+
34.Nxd1 Re1+ 35.Kf2 Rxd1
36.Qxf7 etc.) **33.Qxe8+! 1-0.**



Particularly impressive is
Bisguier-Golz, Leipzig
Olympiad 1960: **21.Bxg6!**
fxg6 22.Nxg6! hxg6 23.Qh6
Qf5 24.Rxg6+ Kf7 25.Rg7+
Ke8 26.Bg5 Nd5 27.Re1 Bc8
28.g4!! Qxf3 29.Qxg6+ Kd7
30.Bxe7 Nxe7 31.Qxe6+
Kc7 32.Rc1+ Kb8 33.Qe5+
Ka7 34.Qxa5+ Ba6 35.Qc5+

1-0. A combination worthy of Tal or Spielmann. Try setting up the diagram position on *Fritz* and see when, if ever, it arrives at 21.Bxg6.



Not everything is flashy middlegame tactics; for example Spassky-Bisguier, Göteborg 1955, features a long, interesting endgame capped by the problem-like **68...Kf5!, 0-1**.

Bisguier's reminiscences are on the whole lively and amusing, featuring many stories about his chess contemporaries. The young Bisguier had a reputation as something of a party animal, which led to a few interesting situations, as when the sleep of his roommate, Catholic priest-in-training William Lombardy, was repeatedly interrupted by phone calls from Bisguier's girlfriends.

A discretionary lack of detail about such occasions is understandable, but sometimes one wishes Bisguier had gone into more depth for the sake of history, writing a proper memoir rather than a patchy collection of anecdotes. He also makes a few mistakes the editors should have caught, e.g. the Benko Gambit and Volga Gambit are not the same opening, nor are the Worrall and Wormald variations of the Spanish, Arturo Pomar was not champion of the "Beatric Islands" but of the Balearics, and Norman Tweed Whitaker neither attended Oxford University, nor held a post anything like Assistant Secretary of the Interior, nor had any part in the Teapot Dome scandal, as was made clear in John Hilbert's recent biography.

Thus *The Art of Bisguier* has definite shortcomings and equally definite virtues. Perhaps out of personal admiration for Bisguier, we tend to weigh the final balance in favor of the virtues. Your reviewer first met him around 1965, at a simul in San Diego. He was suffering from a dreadfully abscessed tooth, one side of

his mouth painfully swollen to the size and shape of a tennis ball. Yet he greeted us amiably, gave a fine lecture, played the simul without so much as a cross word, and crushed everybody. The same spirit and love of chess is in the book, albeit seen murkily through the technical mess.

The publisher states that a second volume is planned, covering Bisguier's career from 1961 on. We hope that volume gets a better cover, layout and typesetting, and a bit more historical and analytical depth. If so, it may then be the sort of tribute its subject deserves.

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