



**BOOK
REVIEWS**

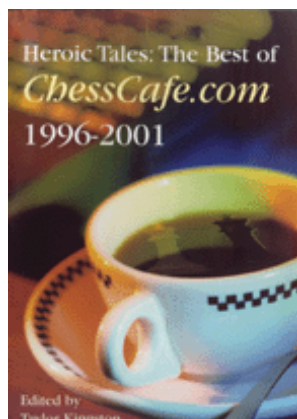
Accidental Tourist among the Addicts, or, Mr. Jones Looks at Chess

Taylor Kingston

The Chess Artist, by J.C. Hallman, 2003 Thomas Dunne Books, English Algebraic Notation, Hardcover, 333pp., \$25.95.

"I apologized and told him I wasn't a scientist — I was a historian, sort of." — *The Chess Artist*, p. 85

"Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is. Do you, Mr. Jones?" — Bob Dylan, "Ballad of a Thin Man"



This book tells the kind of story — an outsider's account of a strange land or culture — that has long been a staple of popular literature, journalism, and film. At their best a few, like the works of Richard Francis Burton or T.E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, qualify as serious history or anthropology, even as literary classics; at their worst they pander to voyeurism and sensation. Most fall in between, like Hunter Thompson's *Hell's Angels* or George Plimpton's *Paper Lion*, dealing with subcultures of topical vogue. Rarely is chess the focus of such a book, Fred Waitzkin's *Searching for Bobby Fischer* being one of the few recent examples.

The events of *The Chess Artist* take place circa 1997-2000. It describes the travels of author J.C. Hallman and Glenn Umstead (the "artist" of the title), a USCF master Hallman met when both worked as dealers at an Atlantic City casino. Together they go through Russia to Kalmykia, home of FIDE President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, to interview him and see his Chess City firsthand. The narrative zigzags between Kalmykia, St. Petersburg, Moscow, and various U.S. locales: Atlantic City, the New York Open, the famous chess corner of New York's Washington Square, a simul at a prison in Michigan. A few games are given in an appendix. Interlaced with bits of ancient and recent chess history, the story is written clearly, skillfully, sometimes even vibrantly, but finally leaves a mixed and unsatisfying impression.

Unlike Waitzkin, whose immersion in chess culture came through his son Josh, now an IM, what drew Hallman to the game is not entirely clear to us, even after reading his book. He admits early on that "I found [chess] intense and frustrating and I didn't really like it," an opinion that does not really change. The USCF web-site shows he's not a serious OTB player; he didn't get his first provisional rating (Elo 1117) until 2001, after most of the events in the book had already occurred, and he's currently rated a very average 1502. Meeting Umstead, who peaked at 2254 in 1997, seems to have increased Hallman's interest. He became a sort of accidental tourist in the

chess world, accompanying Umstead to tournaments and immersing himself in chess history. As near as we can tell, he eventually conceived the book with two purposes in mind: a report on Ilyumzhinov, and a quest to find the secret of chess' mysterious appeal and the hold it keeps on its adherents.

Stylistically, the book is excellent. The cover declares Hallman "a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University." Whatever they teach there, it seems to have worked. Hallman displays a tight, deft prose style with a flair for the apt metaphor, pithy phrase, and telling detail. A few examples:

"St. Petersburg was like a city chopped off at the knees. Down low it was like any other city, but everything stopped at a uniform five stories above the ground as if the entire downtown had been reduced by huge blade passing overhead."

"The anonymous bangs of the road's imperfections came like accurate flak on the underside of a B-17."

"The chess corner of Washington Square Park was a bubble of lawlessness ... The police occasionally made arrests, but the chess corner was like a pet shop fish tank filled with guppies – every once in a while the net came down and snatched someone away, but after the slight turmoil everyone went about their business."

"... we shuffled from board to board, searching not, as one might expect, for decisive moments of subtle drama. Rather, we descended on games where the outcome had been decided ... Our quest was for blood. It was the same instinct that preferred the execution to the trial ... like the silent gawkers who watch a stoning and would participate if they could."

The Kalmykia interlude, which takes up about half the book, is by far its most interesting part. Hallman describes the desolate, dust-swept Caspian steppe, the weed-choked, ghost-town quality of the capital Elista, the Kalmyk people's tragic history. He gets drunk on local vodka, befriends stray dogs, and meets some colorful characters: a gruff old intellectual, an amazing singer of epic poems, Russian agents of the FSB (successor to the KGB), pretty female translators whose main ambition is to get out of the country, a Buddhist monk who was to found a major Kalmyk temple but whose funding was cut in favor of Chess City. Something like McDonnell and Labourdonnais, Umstead and the Kalmyk national champion, a young boy, play a long series of games, the boy winning the majority, to Umstead's great chagrin. And Hallman meets Ilyumzhinov:

"Up close, Kirsan had the air of a celebrity with a lost sense of himself. The whole of Chess Palace focused on our landing as Ilyumzhinov shook hands with Glenn, then with me. For a moment he seemed as confused and distracted by the hubbub as we were. He seemed to glow, as with the knowledge that he might be assassinated at any moment ... He looked up ... then nodded and moved on as if we were a pleasing but forgettable exhibit in a museum open for him alone."

In interviews and speeches, Ilyumzhinov describes the role chess is to play in his grandiose plans:

“FIDE and Kalmykia will get a boost from each other, and this will create an explosion of interest for both ... For me, chess is a philosophy of life ... Our goal has been to become an Olympic sport ... But again, this is a very small step on the road to making chess the philosophy of people around the world, the philosophy of life and religion ... Humankind will meet other civilizations in the future. Not earth civilizations ... Everything that happens is in one way or another connected to chess ... Chess is a game for chess players, for chess amateurs. This is one side. The second side is to provide decent conditions for chess players ... These two parts have one thing in common, and when there is harmony between them, then chess will become a religion.”

“He announced he had offered to host a tournament of Fischer’s recently invented chess variant ... Kirsan was optimistic about Fischer Random ... ‘Fischer is a god of chess ... One hundred thousand centuries may pass, but people will still talk about Bobby Fischer.’”

Hallman is not persuaded, and repeatedly notes the contrast between Ilyumzhinov’s soaring rhetoric and the country’s depressing reality:

“I thought it was ridiculous. Kirsan had first said he wanted to make chess into a religion, and now he had said Fischer was a god ... his speech now made him seem like a cultist, the high priest of an order that would worship Fischer. Fischer *was* a god of chess, but he was Old Testament, cranky and vengeful ... Kirsan had bragged of millions for tournaments while the Kalmyks starved. He had promised them airports and submarines and subdivisions when they didn’t even have toilets.”

Hallman’s portrait strongly indicates that Ilyumzhinov is either a madman carried away by his own propaganda, or a cynical, amoral demagogue. Either way it provides more ammunition to the anti-Ilyumzhinov camp in world chess, and bodes ill for FIDE’s future.

Less successful are Hallman’s inquiries into the 1998 murder of dissident journalist Larisa Yudina, and into a possible Kalmyk role centuries ago in the evolution of chess rules toward their modern form. On the murder, he mainly asks anyone he meets if they think Ilyumzhinov was behind it, unsurprisingly getting nowhere. (For a better treatment, we recommend Sarah Hurst’s *The Curse of Kirsan*.) His talk with Kalmyk university professors on the historical question has the unreal, disconnected, what-am-I-doing-here feel of the lecture a dazed Joseph Cotten gives in the film *The Third Man*. But then much of the sojourn in Kalmykia has that surreal quality:

“‘What is your IQ?’ Galzanov asked me at dinner, suddenly ... I told him that I had never been formally tested, and turned to Glenn to ask if he knew what his IQ was. ‘I believe in passed pawns,’ Glenn said.”

So as an investigative journalist in Kalmykia, Hallman falls short of, say, Woodward and Bernstein, and sometimes resembles Bob Dylan's clueless Mr. Jones, but on the whole he does an informative, interesting and creditable job. Back in the USA, in his other role as an observer of chess culture and delver into the essence of the game, he does less well.

Hallman continually, if somewhat diffidently, calls himself as a chess historian. A statement early in the book shows that until quite recently he was not: "I wanted organized chess to be a thing that elevated culture, and when I eventually heard of Kirsan Ilyumzhinov's chess movement I wondered if crafty Russians had beaten us to it." Well, yes, they did, but it started in the 1920s with Ilyin-Zhenevsky and Krylenko. Hallman clearly took a crash course to gain the erudition he displays, but minor and not so minor gaffes betray the parvenu.

On the minor side, he strangely calls Murray's *History of Chess* (1913) "the latest definitive work" on chess, uses the absurd phrase "pinning the king," drops the umlaut from Sämisch, erroneously claims that the technique of opposition between lone kings "is still not completely solved," and wrongly says "*shogi* (Japanese chess) ... [is] played with pieces placed on the intersections of lines rather than inside squares." Lexically annoying is his repeated misspelling of Christendom as "Christiandom." On the not-so-minor side, we find:

- "By the '60s, results of FIDE matches began to have political impact outside of chess. Actual governments exerted influence over chess government." — This actually started no later than the 1940s, when the USSR joined FIDE.
- "After the '20s there would be no more major revelations in the game, and refinements in theory were limited to ultrafine tuning and depth of analysis." — Hallman is clearly not familiar with Coles' *Dynamic Chess*, Watson's *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy: Advances since Nimzowitsch*, and other treatises on post-hypermodern chess.
- "The two men [Paul Morphy and Frederick Edge] pursued Howard Staunton for an informal world championship match, but talks disintegrated with Edge engaging in the kind of nasty politics – unreasonable demands and public slander – that has since become common in the game." — Hallman is confused, attributing to Edge the actions of Staunton.
- "Paul Morphy's friends warned him that playing more than eight games [of blindfold chess] at once might lead to brain fever – he dismissed the suggestion, but eventually went insane." — A small train-wreck of fallacies: (1) No evidence is known that Morphy ever did play more than eight boards at once *sans voir*, (2) he *did* heed his friends' advice, canceling a proposed 20-game séance in 1859 (Lawson, p. 181), (3) Louis Paulsen was doing 10- and 15-board sessions about this same time with no ill effects, and the current world record is 52, (4) Morphy's mental illness was temporary and started at least *15 years after* his last major blindfold exhibition, and (5) no causal link between blindfold chess and insanity has ever been established, for Morphy or anyone. Hallman's whole sentence is extremely misleading, and as will be seen this is just one example of his ongoing attempts to link chess and insanity.

Thus Hallman is right to doubt when he says "It was unclear whether I could rightly be called a chess historian." Yet even a mistake-free Hallman would not qualify. History is a secondary focus of his writing, but it is history

repeated from existing, readily available sources. He is a *student* of chess history, a history buff (like your reviewer), not an historian. Unlike, say, John Hilbert, Richard Forster, Gabriel Velasco, Gerald Levitt or Edward Winter, he has not done new research, he has just “been through all of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s books” (Dylan). Elsewhere in the book he is less modest, saying “I was an American chess historian,” a bit like claiming to be a musician because he has a CD-player.

Yet more irritating than any gaffe or pretension is the fact that Hallman, besides disliking chess as a game, clearly dislikes chess players. He seems to have dived into chess with certain preconceived notions, and felt disappointment, even repugnance, when its people and culture did not fit them. He becomes increasingly disenchanted with Umstead as they travel, and he repeatedly describes players, individually and collectively, in unflattering terms:

“The creatures who played chess in this room were troglodytes who posed as men during daylight.”

“As an organization, FIDE was a political entity whose queerness could be extrapolated from the basic psychological profile of any individual attracted to chess. Intelligent, introverted, science-minded, meticulous, prone to depression and insanity.”

“I was approached by an older man in a dirty suit coat. He was short, and his hair grew wild. He spoke no English but showed off his bad teeth and caps of precious metals. Thick tufts of hair strained from his ears, and his eyes expelled great quantities of mucous. It was [the Moscow blitz champion] Chepukaitis.”

“Epishin, even with his rating of 2667, was the kind of man I felt an instinctive pity for: he was a step beyond plump, his hair was disheveled, his clothes were old and unwashed, and his heavy glasses slid down his nose like wax on a candle.”

“GM Igor Khenkin, a man who looked to be teetering on the edge of an exhaustion-inspired insanity ...”

“Julen Arizmendi, a handsome young international master who somehow seemed to have acquired chess talent without the usual sacrifice of health and hygiene ...”

“Men left their wives for the game. They quit their jobs for the game. They stopped washing, their eyes went bad, they became paranoid, depressed, anxious.”

“The man was looking to buy a piece of chess furniture. He was clean-cut and buttoned-down, and you knew he couldn’t play chess if for no other reason than that he smelled good.”

Hallman all but explicitly asserts an inverse correlation between chess skill on one hand, and personal hygiene, social grace, and sanity, on the other. He seems to imagine the archetypal chess player as an unwashed, ill-dressed, ill-mannered, obsessed, mentally unstable monomaniac. Granted, such do exist,

but the vast majority of players we have known, from patzers to world champions, are not like that. For every unsavory wretch Hallman portrays, innumerable contrary examples (Lasker, Capablanca, Euwe, Spassky, Seirawan, Timman, Anand, Ashley, Donaldson, to name only a few both past and present) go unmentioned. He even overlooks contrary examples from his own pages, such as a delightful Mongolian WIM who whips Umstead in bullet chess and wins a nice NY Open game against GM Joel Benjamin. Like Mr. Jones, Hallman prefers to dwell on “lepers and crooks,” perhaps because they make more colorful copy.

After sprinkling his aversions over nearly 300 pages, Hallman finally tries to find a saving grace in chess, though he articulates it not nearly so well as his distaste:

“Chess sometimes became a medium of communication, I thought, a secular technology of communion ... My distaste for the game and my search for its usefulness had made me forget this. And it was this that was perhaps the finest use of chess ... it was precisely a kind of covenant that chess players sought; and when they found it, a mood surrounded the game that was hypnotic even to those who could not quite fathom its depth or meaning. It was at such moments that chess became literally holy, a religion. Its grand metaphor was something ... beyond that which language was yet able to describe.”

There is some truth behind this inchoate passage, yet we tend to think Hallman has missed an important point, perhaps the main point. As an alternate explanation for chess’ mysterious attraction we offer this from George Steiner:

“The poets lie about orgasm. It is a small, chancy business, its particularities immediately effaced from even the most roseate memories, compared to the crescendo of triumph in chess, to the tide of light and release that races over knotted mind and body as the opponent’s king, inert in the fatal web one has spun, falls on the board.”

We tend to doubt that Hallman has experienced “the crescendo of triumph ... the tide of light,” the wonderful mental sensation of insight and illumination that attends the solving of a difficult chess task, that “I got it!” feeling that can come to anyone, novice or grandmaster. He wants to find the game’s “usefulness,” but seems not to realize that chess is an end in itself, that a game well played, a beautiful combination, a technically precise ending, or a complex study, give reward enough without any further use or purpose. If he did, he would not need to strain and grope for the secret of chess, and he might have less distaste and more empathy for its devotees. Contrary to his title, he sees serious players not as artists, but as addicts in thrall to a harmful drug.

Thus, the book leaves a very mixed impression. We can at least recommend it for the chapters on Ilyumzhinov and Kalmykia. The rest fails both its potential audiences. For non-players, if any should read it, the main effect may well be revulsion, and relief that they’ve never bothered with that crazy game and its crazier adherents. Chess enthusiasts will find some of the book interesting and informative, but otherwise will feel vaguely (or perhaps specifically) insulted. A pity; if Hallman’s perception and understanding of

his subject had equaled his writing talent this could have been a great book. Instead, something is happening, but he doesn't quite know what it is.



[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2003 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"The Chess Cafe®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.