

**BOOK  
REVIEWS**

## Better on TV?

Taylor Kingston

*Bobby Fischer, the Wandering King*, by Hans Böhm and Kees Jongkind, 2005 Batsford, Paperback, English Algebraic Notation, 158pp., \$19.95

It's unusual for a chess book to be based on a television show, but this one is. The co-authors, Dutch IM Hans Böhm and TV journalist Kees Jongkind, collaborated on a documentary shown on Dutch TV in January 2003. It consisted largely of interviews with various people who have known Bobby Fischer over the last few decades: chess masters mostly, but also a few non-chessplaying friends, and people who have only observed Fischer but not met him. The book version of *Bobby Fischer, the Wandering King* gives those interviews in print, plus a few added features.



As we have noted here several times, Fischer long ago became the most written-about chess player of all time, yet the flow of books about him shows no sign of stopping. This makes our job easier in one way: there is no need to retell his already familiar story. On the other hand, it requires a conscientious reviewer to compare new releases carefully to the existing Fischer canon. A few recent additions to the pile have been worthwhile, notably *Bobby Fischer Goes to War* (Harper Collins 2004; see the [ChessCafe Archives](#) for our review), which presented some new information about the 1972 Fischer-

Spassky match; on the other side of the ledger are tired, trite rehashes such as *Bobby Fischer: From Chess Genius to Legend* (Thinker's Press 2002; again see archives). *The Wandering King* falls somewhere in between.

The book begins with a 14-page introduction describing the making of the TV documentary, then gives a 15-page biography of Fischer from his childhood through 1972. A competent capsule summary, it draws on various sources: Frank Brady's *Profile of a Prodigy* (1973), John Donaldson's *A Legend on the Road* (1994), Plisetsky and Voronkov's *Russians Versus Fischer* (1994), and the recently disclosed files kept by the FBI on Bobby and his mother Regina. While better than boilerplate, there is nothing particularly new. The closest thing to a scoop, the fact that Fischer's biological father was actually a Hungarian mathematician/engineer named Paul Nemenyi, was already published in *Bobby Fischer Goes to War*.

A second biographical segment on pages 53-67 covers the period from 1972 to 2004. This also is based on already published sources, though some that Fischer fans may not have seen, such as a 1977 booklet *Bobby Fischer Heute (Bobby Fischer Today)* by Yves Kraushaar, and *Bobby Fischer — Wie er wirklich ist (Bobby Fischer — As He Really Is)* by Petra Stadler Dautov (1995). Other sources are more familiar: articles from *New In Chess*, "Bobby Fischer's Pathetic Endgame" by Rene Chun (*Atlantic Monthly*, 12/2002), Fischer's famous pamphlet *I Was Tortured in the Pasadena Jailhouse*, and Fischer's infamous interviews on Philippine radio. Again competently written, but rather superficial — for example we learn the problems Kraushaar had trying to meet Fischer, but very little of what happened once they actually met.

Perhaps this was because Kraushaar offered nothing new or different. The interviews, which take up the bulk of the book, tend to repeat the same themes:

- Fischer was a marvelous chess player, perhaps the best

ever. His march to the World Championship was a monumental achievement.

- He is no longer as good. His 1992 match with Spassky showed a definite decline.
- Fischer was correct that there was collusion at the 1962 Curaçao Candidates Tournament.
- He believes all the Karpov-Kasparov match games were pre-arranged, but has presented no credible evidence.
- Fischer repeatedly complains about the loss of belongings auctioned off to pay their storage costs, claiming this is part of a Jewish conspiracy against him.
- Fischer is a heavy eater.
- Fischer is very secretive, reclusive and suspicious.
- His descent into paranoia, racism, and obsessive anti-Semitism is repulsive and tragic.
- He no longer plays standard chess, only FischerRandom, though he analyzes top players' published games.
- He is living in Japan.

The interviews with the chess professionals: GMs Viktor Korchnoi, Pal Benko, Hans Ree, Anatoly Karpov, Jan Timman, Lothar Schmid, and Yasser Seirawan, IM Böhm, WGM Zsofia Polgar, and *NIC* editor Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam, tend to follow this outline, varying only when each describes his personal encounters with Fischer. The other interviews are a bit different:

- Athletic trainer Harry Sneider, a non-chessplaying friend of Fischer, recalls their time in the Worldwide Church of God, laments Fischer's rabid anti-Americanism, and begs him to return to chess.
- GM Nigel Short explains why he thinks one of his recent online opponents may have been Fischer using a pseudonym (which Fischer emphatically denies).
- GM Eugenio Torre, who was filmed and recorded without his knowledge, refuses either to arrange an interview with Fischer or be interviewed himself.
- Philippine radio announcer Pablo Mercado briefly discusses the live interviews he conducted with Fischer

during 1999-2001.

- Wealthy German industrialist and chess patron Arnfried Pagel describes meetings he claims to have had with Fischer in 1980, at which among other things Fischer expressed the belief that time machines exist, and that Jews can live to be a thousand years old. All physical evidence of these meetings has been lost.
- David Barnouw, of the Netherlands Institute of War Documentation, briefly discusses some of the anti-Semitic literature Fischer endorses, such as *The Secret World Government* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

The interviews do have their moments, such as this from Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam, describing Fischer in 1992:

“One moment he was the angry man who saw conspiracies everywhere, and then really within half a second he switched and was at once interested, then you saw a smile that was attractive. But at the moment that you thought he was relaxed and you played along with that mood, he appeared to have jumped back into the other personality, the angry Bobby Fischer. I am convinced he is a split personality, in which the angry side is gaining all the time.” (p. 97)

The authors tried to contact Fischer through an intermediary. Surprisingly, they received an email from Fischer himself in reply, but rather than consent to be interviewed he merely sent an irrelevant and derogatory remark about U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. So in lieu of new material, they present excerpts from his radio interviews. Some of the quotes seem to support Ten Geuzendam’s diagnosis: “Jews use Christian children. They murder them and use the blood for their black magic ceremonies. They mix blood through those crusts, the matzos.”

While revulsion is the most likely reaction to Fischer’s statements, one’s opinion of the other interviews will probably

depend on the reader's knowledge of him. For us they were sporadically interesting, but overall not especially so, whether one is looking for serious history or just gossip. They are aimed more at the general public who know relatively little about Fischer; serious chess fans who have followed him for years will find most of it too familiar. Much of what is said is common knowledge even outside the chess community, and other matters have been covered better elsewhere. For example the substance of the Seirawan interview has already appeared in his book *No Regrets* (ICE, 1992), and Ree's views already on this web-site and in his book *The Human Comedy of Chess* (1999). Schmid's stories from his role as chief arbiter at Reykjavik 1972 have already appeared in several books on the match. Pagel's tale was discussed at much greater length by Lev Alburt and Al Lawrence in their article "Three Days with Bobby Fischer" on this site (5/2000) and in their book of that name (2003).

The TV-style superficiality is annoying at some points. We would have liked to see more from Barnouw debunking the *Protocols of Zion* and its ilk; amazingly there are people who still swear by these long-discredited hoaxes. Also, Böhm and Jongkind rack up an alarming number of minor and major factual errors:

- On page 26, what purports to be a passage from a 1958 article by Jan Hein Donner is neither an accurate quote nor a good translation.
- "Bobby got airline tickets from the TV programme *I Have A Secret* to enable him to attend a chess tournament in Russia." (p. 27) — The program was *I've Got a Secret*.
- "Someone proposed a psychiatrist [to help Fischer in 1958]. Another wanted to involve the help of a prominent chess player, the endgame specialist Reuben Fine." (p. 28) — While GM Fine did write *Basic Chess Endings*, he can hardly be characterized as an "endgame specialist."
- "Mikhail Botvinnik, the great champion of 1950 through

1963.” (p. 29) — Botvinnik became world champion in 1948.

- “*My 60 Memorable Games* [has been] translated into all languages that are spoken in the member countries of FIDE (more than 125).” (p. 32) — We suspect this is off by more than a hundred; see Winter’s *Chess Notes* #3575.
- “The always captivating chess confrontation between Russia and the rest of the world was next played out in Belgrade in 1970.” (p. 32) — “Next” is inappropriate, since Belgrade 1970 was the first official Russia (or USSR) vs. Rest of the World match.

Of their match losses to Fischer in 1971, it is said: “Taimanov and Larsen were then finished as chess players ... Petrosian too was incapable of showing anything remarkable on the chess board after this defeat.” (p. 33) — Largely true for Taimanov, but only because his career was forcibly curtailed. One wonders how the supposedly washed-up Larsen managed to win the 1976 Biel Interzonal, Buenos Aires 1979, Buenos Aires 1980 (over Timman, Ljubojevic and Karpov), and other tournaments into the 1990s. And most GMs would envy Petrosian’s “unremarkable” post-1971 record, which included 1st place at San Antonio 1972, Amsterdam 1973, Tallinn 1979, Rio de Janeiro Interzonal 1979, and Las Palmas 1980; 2nd place in the 1976 Biel Interzonal and 1973 Soviet Championship, 3rd in the Soviet Championships of 1976 and 1977, and qualification for the FIDE Candidates Matches of 1974, 1977, and 1980.

“Bronstein alleged in 1951 that he had been prevented from becoming world champion because Botvinnik had better contacts among the party elite.” (p. 59) — We know of no such statement by Bronstein, and it seems especially unlikely that he would have said this in 1951.

The description of FischerRandom Chess on page 60 is incorrect, and directly contradicted elsewhere in the book.

“Once in a while the GMA takes action against FIDE ...” (p.

61) — The GMA, or Grandmasters' Association, is long defunct, and now takes no action against anything.

“*New In Chess*, a highly valuable magazine that comes out six times a year.” (p. 88). — *New In Chess* is indeed valuable, but it comes out eight times a year.

The Dutch title of *Fischer World Champion!* is given as *Fischer Wereldkampioen!* (p. 127). Correct is *De tweekamp Spasski-Fischer 1972*.

“Vladimir Kramnik won the PCA title from Kasparov in 2002.” (p. 132) — No, 2000.

“Bobby too had been well observed [by the FBI]; in particular his trip to Moscow in 1985 started alarm bells ringing.” (p. 135) — For 1985 read 1958.

Capablanca's first name is given several times as Raoul rather than José, and Kasparov's as Gary rather than Garry.

“Redoubtable internet journalist and publisher Sam Sloan ...” (p. 154) — This sentence makes sense only if its first two letters are removed. Perhaps a faulty understanding of English caused the writer, Kaarlo Schepel of Hong Kong, to think that “redoubtable” means especially suspect, dubious, unreliable, etc.

The book concludes with a few brief, unrelated appendices: (1) a discussion of Max Euwe's role in the 1972 match, and his opinion of Fischer, (2) a list of estimated Elo ratings for all world champions from Steinitz to Kasparov, (3) a discussion of computer chess analysis by university professor Jaap van den Herik, (4) game one of the 1992 Fischer-Spassky match with notes by IM Böhm (much less extensive than Seirawan's in *No Regrets*), and (5) a five-page article by Kaarlo Shepel about Fischer's July 2004 arrest in Japan and the possibility of his deportation back to the USA, where he might face criminal prosecution. Apparently a hasty last-minute addition, this article is rather disorganized, long on opinion, speculation,

and irrelevancy, and short on fact.

It is this recent drama surrounding Fischer: his long detention in Japan and its accompanying legal debate, followed by his release to Iceland, that gives *Wandering King* at least a momentary currency it otherwise would not enjoy nor especially merit. While the publisher's blurb says "This book is a must for anyone interested in this remarkable man and his fascinating life," we can recommend it only for people hitherto unfamiliar with Fischer, as a sort of primer or overview. Perhaps it played better on TV, where it reached that kind of audience. Serious chess fans, of the sort who frequent this web-site, will probably find little in the book that they did not already know.

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by Hans Böhm and Kees Jongkind

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