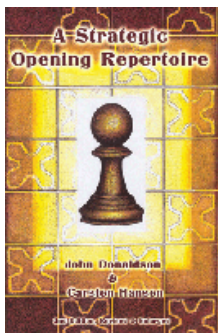




COLUMNISTS

Checkpoint

Carsten Hansen



Rating Chart

- ♦ – A poor book
- ♦♦ – Not very good
- ♦♦♦ – A useful book
- ♦♦♦♦ – A good book
- ♦♦♦♦♦ – An excellent book

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**Reviewed this month:**

*Starting Out: The Scandinavian*  
by Jovanka Houska

*Play the Alekhine*  
by Valentin Bogdanov

*Dismantling the Sicilian*  
by Jesus de la Villa

**En Passant**

*Chess Vibes Openings*  
by Merijn van Delft & Robert Ris

Ten Short Years

It seems like just a short time ago that I wrote my first column for [ChessCafe.com](#), but this month's column marks my tenth anniversary as a columnist on this website. In the years since I started reviewing books, the publishing market has changed dramatically. Back then there were more small publishers; now there are fewer, larger ones. This has resulted in an overall higher quality in the market for opening books. Whereas the quality of the books varied widely back then, and one- or two-star reviews were somewhat common, those kinds of books are quite rare today. While it can be fun to write (and read) a review that dooms a book to oblivion, it isn't all that productive, other than to perhaps open the eyes of the author and publisher to put in a better effort next time.

The more consistent quality nowadays fortunately means that prospective buyers are less likely to go wrong when looking for new books. Therefore, today's reviews are more about confirming whether a book is either average, very good, or truly outstanding, and who the book's intended audience is, because that can be difficult to discern when you are relying on the publisher's blurbs. Publishers are notoriously good at making their books sound right for everyone, when in fact most are written either for those rated below 1900 or those rated above 2200, with some blurry territory in between.

The newcomer on the market is the DVD format, where the playing time is often quadruple that of an old VHS release. The publishing pace of this type of product has increased to the point where a separate column is devoted to it. The quality of the DVDs is often very respectable and occasionally even excellent. There are some releases that deserve to be studied carefully; however, as with books, not every product lives up to the hype.

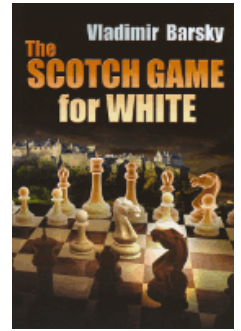
I hope you enjoy reading my articles as much as I enjoy writing them, and that you will continue to do so as I enter the next decade as a columnist on this great website.

*Starting Out: The Scandinavian* by Jovanka Houska, Everyman Chess 2009, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 320pp., \$25.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$19.95)

Only a few years back the Scandinavian was not fully accepted as an accurate reply to 1 e4, and only a small



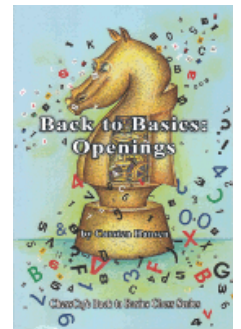
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*Dangerous Weapons: The Dutch*  
by Palliser, Williams, & Vigus



*Back to Basics: Openings*  
by Carsten Hansen

number of grandmasters occasionally employed it. However, in the current Wijk aan Zee tournament, the Melts Variation with 3...Qd6 was used by both Tiviakov and Ivanchuk. Even more noteworthy is the fact that Kramnik used it as his main weapon against 1 e4 during the Tal Memorial blitz tournament in Moscow last year. Thus, the Scandinavian Defense has never been as popular as it is right now.



In this volume, English international master and Women's grandmaster Jovanka Houska presents coverage of all of the various lines of the Scandinavian Defense. This spans quite a lot of territory: from the solid 3...Qa5, to the provocative 3...Qd6, to the sharp and occasionally dubious lines after 2...Nf6, such as the Icelandic Gambit and the Portuguese Variation.

Let's look at how the material is divided:

- Bibliography (2 pages)
- Preface (2 pages)
- 1 e4 d5 2 exd5 Qxd5
- Introduction to 2...Qxd5 (10 pages)
- The Main Line: Shirov's 8 Nd5 (29 pages)
- Qe2 and Ne4 Lines (32 pages)
- Ne5 Lines (20 pages)
- Modern Move Orders (22 pages)
- Fourth Move Alternatives for White (19 pages)
- 3...Qd6: Introduction and Main Lines (25 pages)
- 3...Qd6: Sixth Move Alternatives (20 pages)
- 3...Qd6: Fifth Move Alternatives (23 pages)
- Third Move Alternatives (15 pages)
- 1 e4 d5 2 exd5 Nf6
- Introduction to 2...Nf6 (5 pages)
- The Fianchetto Variation (28 pages)
- The 4...Bg4 Variation (27 pages)
- The Portuguese Variation (17 pages)
- 3 c4 and 3 Bb5+ (12 pages)
- Unusual Lines (7 pages)
- Index of Variations (8 pages)
- Index of Players (5 pages)

This tallies up to a very sizable book, which seems a bit excessive for an opening such as the Scandinavian. Moreover, a volume in the *Starting Out* series should rarely have this many pages. The original idea behind the series was to present those who are just "starting out" to get a decent grasp of the fundamental strategies, tactics, pawn structures, and theory of the opening in question. A 320-page book goes way beyond that. In comparison, [Starting Out: the Sicilian](#) has seventeen fewer pages, but covers an opening that is far more expansive. Thick books can be impressive-looking to above-average players who really want to dig into an opening, but scary to those just trying to get a decent grasp of the opening in short order.

However, this is not a criticism of the content of this book. I just find the title to be somewhat of a misnomer. The content is of a very good quality. Houska goes to great lengths to illustrate typical ideas with seventy-one fully annotated main games.

Another indication that the book isn't targeted towards novice players is that after an introduction to the intricacies of the 3...Qa5 variation, Houska goes straight over to discussing the critical line 1 e4 d5 2 exd5 Qxd5 3 Nc3 Qa5 4 d4 Nf6 5 Nf3 c6 6 Bc4 Bf5 7 Bd2 e6, and now Shirov's 8 Nd5




This has caused Black some serious panic. After 8...Qd8, it has been established that 9 Nxf6+ Qxf6 is dangerous for Black, and 9...gxf6 leaves Black with a somewhat inferior pawn structure (though Bent Larsen would undoubtedly disagree). Houska, as is typical in this book, makes several suggestions for both sides, illustrating how Black can improve over the main games, and how White can maximize the pressure on Black's position. However, even with Houska's minimally biased view (for Black), you cannot help feel that Black is barely hanging on by the skin of his teeth in this line.

As mentioned earlier, the 3...Qd6 line is all the rage at the moment, and Houska devotes sixty-eight pages to this popular variation. She accurately describes the typical ideas for each side in this line, but I have always been skeptical of it. The queen just looks too vulnerable; nevertheless, if Tiviakov can play this line consistently against all comers, it can't be entirely unsound.

In the section on the 2...Nf6 lines, after 1 e4 d5 2 exd5 Nf6, Houska gives 3 c4 a dubious move symbol (!), saying "[T]his move isn't bad, as long as it's followed up correctly; in fact White has chances of gaining an advantage." The problem is that she believes White has better chances of obtaining an advantage with the other main lines; e.g., 3 Nf3 or 3 d4, although neither seems particularly convincing based on the material in the book. However, 3 c4 is not a dubious move, it only allows Black the opportunity to enter the Panov-Botvinnik Attack of the Caro-Kann. Incidentally, there is no explanation of symbols in the book.

Still, this is a very good book, with a good balance between theory and explanatory prose that allows players with a wide range of ratings (at least 1700 up to around 2300) to benefit from it. Whether it belongs in the *Starting Out* series is another question, as I think it is considerably more advanced than that. Of the books written on the Scandinavian in general, this book is clearly the best to date. Practitioners of this opening should definitely pick it up, and those playing 1 e4 as white will also benefit from Houska's mostly objective coverage.

**My assessment of this book:** 

**[Order Starting Out: the Scandinavian](#)**

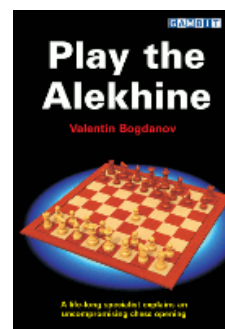
by Jovanka Houska

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*Play the Alekhine* by Valentin Bogdanov, Gambit Publications 2009, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 127pp., \$19.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$16.95)

The author of this book has written two books in the *Chess Explained* series: one on the [French](#) and one on the [Grünfeld](#), both of which were awarded five stars in this column. He is also known for being the coach of grandmasters Moskalenko, Savchenko, and Drozdovsky. He is said to have been a devotee of the Alekhine Defense for more than thirty years.

This book might well have been included in the *Chess Explained* series as it follows a similar format



by providing twenty-six annotated games heavy on explanatory prose and light on game references.

Also, I was very pleased to see that editorial director Graham Burgess, the publisher's residing genius on the Alekhine, edited the original manuscript and added some material of his own, making this volume even more valuable for Alekhine enthusiasts.

The material is divided as follows:

- Symbols (1 page)
- Introduction (2 pages)
- White Does Not Play 2 e5 (21 pages)
- The Chase Variation (14 pages)
- The Four Pawns Attack (20 pages)
- The Old Main Line (20 pages)
- The New Main Line and 4th Move Alternatives (21 pages)
- Exchange Variation (14 pages)
- 2 e5 Nd5: 3 Nc3 and Other Moves (9 pages)
- Index of Variations (2 pages)

The presentation in this volume is to the point. The material is well-chosen, with the right mix of prose and variations. Relevant main games are annotated with an emphasis on the opening and early middlegame, which are two key components in making the resulting positions understandable to the average player.

If you want to understand this opening for either black or white, buy this book. If you play this opening as black and you are rated under 2200, buy this book. If you want to gain understanding of positions from the Semi-Open Game (White plays 1 e4, Black answers something other than 1...e5) with unbalanced and unsymmetrical pawn structures, you should seriously consider buying this book. If you want to improve your overall understanding of chess, this book will definitely help you on your way. What are you waiting for?

**My assessment of this book:** ♦♦♦♦♦

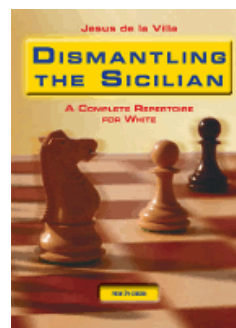
[Order](#) *Play the Alekhine*

by Valentin Bogdanov

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*Dismantling the Sicilian: A Complete Repertoire for White* by Jesus de la Villa, New In Chess 2009, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 336pp., \$26.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$21.95)

In the Introduction, de la Villa, a grandmaster and former two-time champion of Spain, tells us that this is a revised version of a work first released in Spanish, *Desmontando la Siciliana*. He adds, "We can't talk about a second edition as most of the material has been changed rather than merely updated. Furthermore, some chapters are completely new and, in those which keep recommending the same line, many model games are more recent and recommended subvariations have quite often changed as well. Nevertheless, we cannot talk about a new book either, since the structure and base material are the same. In some cases, I have changed my recommendations because some new lines are clearly better or have cast doubts on the old ones. In some cases, I have changed my recommendations because some new lines are clearly better or have cast doubts on the old ones; at other times, the previously recommended line is still equally interesting and the reasons for the change are less conclusive."



This text already highlights why there will always be problems with a book of this magnitude and ambition, because the theory develops quickly, and refutations and ways to equalize are constantly being developed. Yet, this

hasn't stopped writers from pursuing similar projects in the past. Still, works of this nature, when written well, nearly always impress me. The author sticks his neck out and presents his or her best attempt at demonstrating how to get an advantageous position from the opening.

The material is divided as follows:

- Introduction (4 pages)
- Section 1: 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3
- 2...Nf6 Nimzowitsch and other moves (6 pages)
- 2...b6 (4 pages)
- 2...a6 O'Kelly (8 pages)
- Section 2: 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4
- 4...Qb6 (8 pages)
- 4...g6 Accelerated Dragon (24 pages)
- 4...e5 Löwenthal (8 pages)
- 4...e5 5 Nb5 d6 Kalashnikov (13 pages)
- 4...Nf6 5 Nc3 e5 Pelikan (38 pages)
- Section 3: 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 e6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4
- 4...Bc5; 4...Qb6 and 5...Bc5 (8 pages)
- 4...Nf6 5 Nc3 Bb4 Pin Variation (8 pages)
- 4...Nf6 5 Nc3 Nc6 Four Knights (9 pages)
- 4...Nc6 Taimanov (29 pages)
- 4...a6 Paulsen (19 pages)
- Section 4: 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4
- 4...e5; 4...Nf6 5 Nc3 e5 (7 pages)
- 4...Nf6 5 Nc3 Bd7 Kupreichik (5 pages)
- 4...Nf6 5 Nc3 g6 Dragon (32 pages)
- 4...Nf6 5 Nc3 Nc6 Classical (33 pages)
- 4...Nf6 5 Nc3 e6 Scheveningen (29 pages)
- 4...Nf6 5 Nc3 a6 Najdorf (32 pages)
- Index of Main Games (2 pages)
- Index of Variations (4 pages)

Unlike in many repertoire books, de la Villa has consistently chosen critical main lines as his recommended repertoire choices for white. This means taking on sizable chunks of theory in already theory-laden lines such as the Dragon, Najdorf, and Scheveningen variations. For instance, he employs the English and Yugoslav Attacks against the Dragon, and the Richter-Rauzer against the Classical Sicilian. This guy is not kidding around! Obviously, you expose yourself to improvements for black left, right and center. However, for players rated above 2200, there is little choice but to tackle the material. For others, studying a book such as this can increase your general understanding of chess as a whole and of the Sicilian Defense in particular.

At the beginning of each chapter, each line is evaluated from one to five stars, depending on the importance of the line in question. According to the author, the evaluation is entirely subjective, but it is designed to help the reader focus their attention, and not put the wrong emphasis on any given line.

Each chapter ends with a good summation of the lines covered. For example, in the Dragon Variation, he writes as follows about the options after 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 g6 6 Be3 Bg7 7 f3 Nc6 8 Qd2 0-0 9 Bc4 Bd7 10 0-0-0:




- 10...Qc7: one of many attempts to get counterplay. Interesting but insufficient +=
- 10...Qb8: has given some results, but it is quite risky +=
- 10...Rb8: perhaps the most solid line at this moment +=/=
- 10...Na5: as at move 9, little used and not that bad +=
- 10...Rc8 11 Bb3 Nxd4: a modern line, dangerous for both players +=

Despite this being rather brief and crude, I like this. It gives the reader an additional tool for navigating the material.

The recommended lines are well-presented both with variations, whole and partial games, explanatory prose, new ideas and improvements, and much more. While the author is good at quoting the source games, it bothers me that he doesn't have a bibliography, because it would serve the reader well to know which books served as research material. This is a rather small complaint, but it happens with increasingly frequency in opening books these days.

There are some strange typos in the headers for chapters ten through nineteen, in that, instead of having the variations start with 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6, they begin 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6. As a result, the headers quoted impossible moves or moves that simply don't match the contents of the chapter.

That said, this is a very good book. It is well-presented, with well-chosen lines that offer some durability, although the English Attack may have a shorter shelf-life because of its current popularity. The book is for an audience that is rated above 2200, but it can be read with positive results by players in the 2000 range. Anyone fitting this profile who uses the Open Sicilian as white or plays the Sicilian as black should purchase this book. The lines recommended in this volume will be the ground for much debate in the future, and it doesn't pay to show up unprepared unless you are keen on losing.

**My assessment of this book:** 

**Order *Dismantling the Sicilian***


by Jesus de la Villa

*ChessVibes Openings* by Merijn van Delft & Robert Ris, ChessVibes 2009, Figurine Algebraic Notation, eZine + game file, Euro 25.00/year (52 issues)

I have been receiving *ChessVibes Openings* (CVO) for several months. This is a weekly PDF document, roughly four pages long, on a given variation. The update contains one main game that is annotated quite well and often includes interesting suggestions by the authors, both of whom are international masters. Furthermore, there are some notes about interesting developments in topical or popular lines, followed by a couple of quiz positions with the solutions appearing in the next issue. To top it all off, you also get a weekly database of games (including some analysis and comments) that are referenced in the newsletter.

There is obviously no guarantee that the openings you play will be covered, but it does help you stay abreast of the latest developments in top chess and the most important and/or interesting games played at that level.

The target audience is very clearly ambitious players rated 2000 or so. I think it would largely be a waste of money for players rated lower than that threshold. However, it definitely represents an interesting source of material. I find it refreshing to look at their choice of games and their excellent annotations every week and quite often I encounter ideas that I feel compelled to try out in my own games. Click here for a sample [PDF](#) and [database](#).

**My assessment of this Ezine:** 

*ChessVibes Openings*  
by Merijn van Delft & Robert Ris

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