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## A Dissonant Coda

Taylor Kingston

*A Chess Explorer*, by Hugh Myers, 2002 The Myers Openings Bulletins, Davenport, Iowa USA, paperback, 239 pages, English algebraic notation, \$25.00.

In the chess world, the place of Hugh Myers (born 1930, Decatur, Illinois, USA) is a bit hard to peg. He is hardly a household name, but neither is he an unknown or minor fringe figure. A good but not great player (peak strength probably around Elo 2300), he began to get some national recognition in the 1950s when some of his games appeared in *Chess Review*. By an odd set of circumstances he played for the Dominican Republic in two FIDE Olympiads (1968 and 1976). Over the years he has faced many IM- and GM-class players, including Gligoric, Pomar, R. Byrne, O'Kelly, Mariotti, Chandler, and Suttles, and beaten some of them, such as Nicolas Rossolimo and William Lombardy. He befriended the young Bobby Fischer in the 1950s and may have had some influence on his chess development. He has remained a strong player into his later years, evinced by his leading





the winning team in the 1994 U.S. Amateur Team Championship, a competition in which many teams have GMs on their top boards. Additionally, he has had some involvement in FIDE administration, working as an assistant to president Florencio Campomanes in 1986, and editing bulletins for that year's Olympiad.



However, Myers' fame derives more from his writing. He has written several books, notably *Exploring the Chess Openings* (1978) and *The Nimzovich Defense*, which went through several editions circa 1973-1995 and which some regard as the definitive work on 1.e4 Nc6. He is best known probably for the *Myers Openings Bulletin*, which ultimately ran to more than 50 issues, self-published over the years 1979-1996. The *MOB* (known after 1991 as *The New MOB*) was an un-stylish but tightly packed booklet-type magazine, dealing primarily with opening theory, especially unorthodox and out-of-fashion lines, on which Myers has been called "undoubtedly the world's leading authority" (Michael Macdonald-Ross, quoted in *Chess Notes* #269). An example is this game.



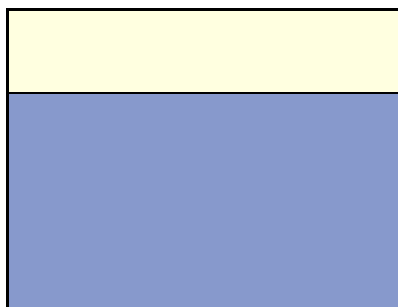
**Myers – Gustavo Peña, Dominican**  
 Championship, Santo Domingo 1966: **1.b4 e6**  
**2.Bb2 Nf6 3.b5 d5 4.e3 c5 5.f4**

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Not a position one sees every day. Starting as a Sokolsky (a.k.a. Polish or Orangutan) opening, the text gives the position a Bird-like (1.f4) character. Myers attributes 5.f4 to an

obscure 1953 German book, *Orang-Utan Eröffnung* by Leonhard Schiffler. **5...Nbd7 6.Nf3 Qc7 7.c4 Bd6 8. Na3 0-0 9.cxd5 exd5 10.Bd3 Re8 11.0-0 c4 12.Bf5 Bxa3 13.Bxa3 Qa5 14.Bb2 Qxb5** — Myers considered his last several moves “a good but not conspicuous gambit.” **15.Qc2 Ne4 16.Nd4 Qa6 17.Bxe4 Rxe4** — Myers prefers 17...dxe4, to prevent his forthcoming rook lift. **18.Qc3 Nf6 19.Rf3 Ne8 20.Rg3 f6 21.Ba3 Bd7**



**22.d3! cxd3 23.Qc5 h6 24.Qxd5+ Kh8 25.Bf8! Bc6 26.Qf7, 1-0.**

*MOB* also featured news reports, historical articles, reviews, and editorial comment on chess

events. Though in addition to Myers it had some good contributors (e.g. Stefan Bücken, Gerard Welling, Ian Rogers, René Olthof), *MOB* never enjoyed wide circulation, due partly to its low budget, but also because its focus on irregular

openings helped consign it, at least in public perception, to the margins occupied by *Rand Springer*, *Kaissiber*, *Blackmar-Diemer Gambit World* and other such special-interest periodicals.

A pity, perhaps. The general acceptance of its theoretical views notwithstanding, many aspects of *MOB* and Myers' writing in it were quite worthwhile. Drawing on a very large book collection, Myers showed a strong knowledge of chess literature and history. He kept himself well-informed on events in the chess world, and was never shy in expressing his opinions on controversial subjects. And those opinions were often worth reading. His reviews regularly panned the "work" of plagiarizers and slipshod writers, and his editorials spotlighted mendacity, hypocrisy, and corruption in high places. For example, on an incident at Linares 1994, when Judit Polgar claimed that Garry Kasparov had retracted a move, a claim later proven correct by videotape, Myers wrote:

"On March 11th I heard that Polgar had accused Kasparov of taking back a move in their game on March 1st ... Within a few days the Kasparov propagandists were out in force ... What's most reprehensible is Kasparov's attitude that there's nothing wrong with doing wrong if the umpire doesn't see it — or if it lasts only 1/5 sec.!" (*New MOB* #5, June 1994).

In an earlier issue Myers dealt at length with the 1993 break from FIDE by Kasparov and Short. A brief excerpt:

“The Keene/Kasparov creativity was certainly evident, with the repetition of their untrue and largely irrelevant charges about the 1985 match suspension ... They did not manage to take over FIDE in 1986, so now they are trying to destroy it ... It’s truly weird that Nigel Short would risk his career by letting himself be influenced by such people ... Kasparov and Short, the hilarious new comedy team that’s keenly coached by a keen coach ... have already shown their talent for inspiring laughter from continent to continent.”  
*(New MOB #3, June 1993)*

Myers developed a dislike for Raymond Keene earlier than most, and had a part in defeating Lincoln Lucena, Keene’s candidate for president of FIDE in 1986. Myers’ publication *FIDE Facts*, which he wrote at the FIDE congress in Dubai, was instrumental in pointing out various lies and distortions by the Keene campaign. Other targets of Myers’ scorn have included Eric Schiller, Larry Parr, David Levy and Joel Benjamin.

One of Myers’ most important journalistic contributions was his investigation of the 1985 aborting of the first Karpov-Kasparov world title match. His findings were reported not only in *MOB* but in Edward Winter’s *Chess Notes*, and later were an important part of Winter’s articles on “The Termination” in his books *Chess Explorations* and *Kings, Commoners and Knaves*. In the immediate aftermath of the match, when most of the world was accepting Kasparov’s heated protestations of tampering and favoritism, Myers was one of the first and

the few to point out various falsehoods and inconsistencies put out by the Kasparov camp:

“There is no good reason (no evidence) to believe that immediate termination was for Karpov’s benefit, nor was it requested by Karpov ... It is nonsense to allege that the termination was caused by Kasparov’s winning of two games in a row. Kasparov had requested it before he won game 48 ... The pro-Kasparov propaganda ... has been shameful.” (Myers in *Chess Notes* #1007, 1985). While the full truth on this matter is probably still not known, Myers’ contribution is significant and not to be ignored.

By now the reader may be wondering “OK, but what about the book?”. I will explain. Among the chess community in the American Midwest, subscribers to the *MOB*, and careful readers of Winter’s books, Myers may be well known, but probably not to others, especially the **ChessCafe**’s non-American readers. I have provided this lengthy introduction, before getting to the book itself, to describe some of Myers’ overall contribution to chess, and to make clear both to Myers’ fans and to those who had never heard of him, that I consider it a positive contribution. Fairness requires this before I turn, with definite reluctance, to the book.

*A Chess Explorer* is essentially an autobiography or memoir, mixed with selected games. The narrative begins with Myers’ birth in January 1930, and proceeds in more or less straight chronological fashion through various events in his life, most but by no means all chess-related,

and ends in late 1999. An eleven-page afterword adds a few events and comments through early 2002. The games, 130 in all, are dispersed throughout the book, the earliest from 1952, the last from 2001. A few, mainly from Olympiads and U.S. Opens, are against famous opponents; some other games are from various minor international events. The majority are from either Myers' time in the Caribbean (he was a Peace Corps volunteer in Dominica), or regional American tournaments, state championships and the like.

Of the 70-odd books I've reviewed for [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com), this is one of the oddest. Also one of the most uneven: alternately skillful and inept, perceptive and obtuse, interesting and soporific, critical of sloppiness yet amateurishly self-indulgent, skeptical of pretension yet ultimately pretentious itself. Unfortunately, and unlike Myers' work as a whole, the book's many and varied flaws far outweigh its merits.

Starting out, the preface looks promising. It includes a glossary with some rather provocative definitions, such as:

“**BCO** – Batsford Chess Openings ... A single volume openings compendium mainly by Schiller and Tisdall, sold as being by Keene and Kasparov.”

“**GMA** – The Grandmasters' Association, an association of professional players. Dominated by Kasparov, and therefore now defunct.”

“**MCO** – Modern Chess Openings ... a one-volume openings compendium called ‘the chessplayer’s Bible’ based on the first five editions ... Then, in 1939, it was taken over by a succession of dogmatic, biased American editors who weren’t qualified to write about openings.”

These acerbities raise expectations that their issues will be dealt with at length, but the reader is disappointed. The misdeeds of Batsford and the short, ineffectual life of the GMA receive only slight coverage, and *MCO* gets scarcely any further mention at all.

Once into the book proper, one is quickly struck by the poor quality of Myers’ writing: ungrammatical, clumsy, jerky and unfocused. Amazingly, he relates on page 202 that during 1988-1990 “Ken Smith paid me to edit and proofread a good number of books ... Chess Digest used to have a bad reputation for ... a universal inadequacy in the correct writing of syntax, punctuation, grammar and spelling.” Chess Digest’s plight must indeed have been dire, because *Explorer* is rife with similar inadequacies. Some examples:

Discussing club team matches, Myers writes on page 9:

“Some of our opponents, with board 1 players who I scored on (at least a draw), were St. Louis (R. Steinmeyer) ...”. Clumsy syntax, and an example of Myers’ ignorance of the word “whom,” which is missing in action throughout the book.

“Not affording a hotel, my last hours in Los Angeles were spent watching Judy Garland — in an all-night movie theater ...” (pp. 33-34). True, most hours cannot afford hotels.

Ill-chosen adjectives sometimes provide unintended humor, e.g. “Another was Curt Brasket ... who was to become the repetitive champion of Minnesota.” (p. 11). Perhaps the repetitive Brasket wrote this: “That section had 75 finalists. The youngest were age five; there were more than one.” (p. 17).

Pages 32-33 attempt to explain the tie-break for 1st prize at the 1955 U.S. Open, a famous incident in which Nicolas Rossolimo won a new car and an angry Sam Reshevsky did not. The narrative is a jumbled mess, changing direction more often than a pinball. The editor of my high school newspaper would have sent this back for rewriting:

“A young player, S. Y. of New Jersey, had been following all of this closely, and he gave me an indignant explanation of the tie-break. That would have been the end of it, but Donald Byrne (Gone too soon. In my opinion he was a stronger player and better person than his GM brother!) and I, after going to a night club that was featuring Billie Holiday (We didn’t even know that until she started to sing!), went over to Herman Steiner’s chess club. He had known me since the 40’s (In Decatur, he had taught me what I believe is the best way to calculate a space advantage; see old MOB # 29 for my

modification of it.). I was almost out of money; he bought my chess clock so I could eat before catching my plane the next day. And I gave \$5 to Jim Schroeder so *he* could eat while hitch-hiking back to Cleveland; considering that this was after the roller coaster experience and before seeing 40 years of his printed insults, I wonder if I ... . It was a personal loss when Steiner died just two months later.”

I trust the tie-break situation is clear to everyone now. The above paragraph reminds me of Winston Churchill’s comment to an especially talkative woman: “Madam, have you no unexpressed thoughts?”

A sentence about Myers’ college days encapsulates many of the ills besetting the book: “An admirable school in some ways, but my undistinguished four years there would have been truly boring, while well-behaved (no drugs, sex or alcohol), except for: (1) We never even had a conversation (I was in awe of him.), but Scott Steagall was there for the same four years.” (p. 8)

A syntactical train wreck, this sentence is practically incomprehensible without careful deconstruction. Its relevance to chess is nil; it turns out Mr. Steagall was a basketball player Myers liked to watch. It turns out in fact to have no relevance to any other person, event, or theme in the book. It’s merely a random detail plopped on the page like an errant drop from the brush of an inattentive painter.

Also, this and the previous passage illustrate one of the book's most pervasive flaws. The rose-colored lenses of memory seem to endow things, in Myers' mind, with an aura of importance an impartial reader does not see. Myers does not separate the significant from the trivial, nor limit his narrative to the former. Compared to his, my own college days were great fun (sex, drugs, booze *and* better basketball: UCLA was in the middle of winning seven straight national titles, and I *did* talk with some of the players), but I wouldn't dream of wasting my readers' time on such irrelevant personal folderol in a chess-oriented autobiography, in the unlikely event I ever write one.

yet Myers self-indulgently fills page after page with the minutiae of his own life: youthful infatuations, love affairs, failed marriages, drinking habits, a mismanaged professional career and consequent frequent money trouble, etc. Some incidents are so trivial as to defy belief, for example a description of a dart game. Such sections are useful only as a remedy for insomnia. Others are even somewhat repellent, as when Myers discloses his marital infidelities or his medical problems ("January 1988 ... A messy tooth extraction, and the bleeding didn't stop for a week."). Perhaps Myers considers this all fascinating material, but I did not. Perhaps the descriptions of his aimless and fruitless career path, his indigence and marital discord, are intended to portray a romantic image of someone sacrificing all for chess, but the overriding picture that emerges is of a man with badly skewed priorities, who apart from chess has

rather botched his life through neglect.

To be blunt, Myers has simply not led a sufficiently remarkable life to sustain a lengthy memoir. That is not to say there is no interesting material here, or that Myers' views are no longer worthwhile. Out of the mundane milieu come some good vignettes, anecdotes and cameos (e.g., writers John Updike, James Jones, and Thomas Pynchon, the infamous chess master Norman T. Whitaker). Various chess knaves are nailed to the wall, with good reason. Pages 183-196 provide a behind-the-scenes account of the 1986 FIDE elections which is quite intriguing, in both senses of the word. Yet except for a few such clearly focused sections, the good parts are like small, far-apart islands in a sea of extranea. Some other format: a series of essays perhaps, or a *Best of the MOB* anthology, would have served Myers' purpose much better without the continual digressions into personal insignifica.

Comparing the writing in this book to back issues of *MOB*, a definite decline is evident. In the last pages of *Explorer* Myers reveals that he has had at least six heart attacks, four in 1997 alone. His condition eventually required quadruple bypass surgery. Myers writes "one thing that worried me for a year after my heart operation was that oxygen deprivation might have impaired my thinking ability." Perhaps that explains the poor writing.

Yet one area where Myers still writes in a focused manner is in his game annotations. As might be expected, the games feature many

unorthodox openings. Most prominent is the Nimzovich Defense (1.e4 Nc6), with 37 examples. Against 1.d4 Myers likes the Chigorin Defense (1.d4 d5 2.c4 Nc6). There are five Sokolskys (1.b4), but as White Myers tends, like Nimzovich, to play “reversed” systems designed more for Black. Thus there are many Reverse King’s Indians, several Millard’s (the name Myers prefers for what is usually called the Dunst or Heinrichsen Opening, 1.Nc3) and several Mengarini’s Openings (1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.a3, a sort of reverse Scotch). Some lines are truly bizarre (e.g. the Myers Sicilian, 1.e4 c5 2.a4), and for several irregular lines even Myers has no name.

So those looking for the unusual will not be disappointed, viz. **Myers-Alvarez**, offhand, Santo Domingo, 1966: **1.Nh3** — The Amar Opening, named for a Paris player of the 1930s says Myers, and not, as Tim Harding has suggested, an acronym for “absolutely mad and ridiculous.” This being a skittles game, Myers embarks on a gambit that may well merit that description. **1...d5 2.g3 e5 3.f4 Bxh3 4.Bxh3 exf4 5.0-0 fxg3 6.e4 gxh2+ 7.Kh1 dxe4 8.Nc3 Nf6 9.d3 exd3 10.Bg5 dxc2 11.Qf3**



White has gambitted six pawns in eleven moves. **11...Be7**  
**12.Qxb7 Nbd7**  
**13.Bxd7+ Nxd7**  
**14.Bxe7 Kxe7**  
**15.Nd5+ Kf8**  
**16.Nxc7 Nc5**  
**17.Ne6+ Nxe6**  
**18.Qxf7#.**

On occasion Myers' opening expertise has caught out even world-class players, as here where a top GM, himself noted for opening knowledge, finds himself in serious trouble within the first 15 moves.

**Myers-Gligoric, Olympiad, Lugano 1968: 1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Bc4 Nc6 4.f4** — A favorite of Weaver Adams, says Myers. **4...Nxe4 5.Nf3 Nd6** — Gligoric is unaware of the correct line, which Myers says is **5...Nxc3! 6.dxc3 Qe7 7.b4 d6 8.0-0 Be6. 6.Bd5 exf4 7.d4 Be7 8.Bxf4 0-0 9.0-0 Ne8 10.Ne5 Nf6 11.Nxf7! Rxf7 12.Bxf7+ Kxf7 13.d5 Nb4 14.a3 Na6 15.d6 cxd6 16.Nd5 Nc5**



Though Black has a pawn and two pieces for a rook, he clearly is in great difficulty, being cramped, undeveloped and exposed. Myers now went awry with **17.Nxe7?** and eventually lost, but

he gives Gligoric's post-mortem opinion that White could have won with 17.Bg5 Ne6 18.Bxf6 Bxf6 19.Qh5+ Kg8 20.Nxf6+ gxf6 21.Rf3 Ng7 22.Rg3



and either 22...Qf8 23.Re1+- or 22...Kh8 23.Qf7 Ne6 24.Re1+-.

This is a particularly good example of the pros and cons of games as presented in *Explorer*. Myers'

openings are interesting, and on the whole probably better than their reputations. His little-known lines can surprise both woodpusher and grandmaster alike. However, the annotations are on the skimpy side. Myers, something of a technophobe, dislikes databases. Using one, though, he could find that the opening goes back well before Adams' day: *Chess Assistant 5.0* has for its earliest instance of 4.f4 the game Orsini-Bronzini, Livorno, 1877, and it gives other interesting examples such as Jaffe-Marshall,

Carlsbad 1911 and Rabinovich-Alekhine, match, Moscow, 1917.

More importantly, the notes often fail to mention key possibilities not played by Myers' opponents. In the above position, for example, Myers does not consider 22...Qe7!, which is much better than either 22...Qf8? or 22...Kh8?, and which seems to allow White no clear immediate win.

Another such omission is seen in Myers-Young, North Central Open, Milwaukee 1964. In this position,



Black has only three legal moves. He played by far the worst of them, **31...Nb6**, and lost in short order. 31...Nb6 is clearly a blunder deserving the punctuation “??”, yet Myers, amazingly,

gives it a mere “?!”. His only other analysis is “Perhaps he didn’t like 31...Rc7 32.b6 Rc8 33.Nb5 Qb8 34.Nc7!”. With only three moves to examine, Myers somehow neglects the third, 31...Qc7!, perhaps because it might have saved the game for Black, e.g., 32.b6 Qc6 33.Nb5 cxd4! 34.Rb1 (34.Nxd4? Qc1+ 35.Kh2 Rc2+!-+) 34...Qc5 35.Nc7 Rxc7 36.bxc7+ Qxc7, or 32.Qxc7+ Rxc7 33.Nc2 cxd4 34.Nxd4 Nc5 35.Rxc7 Kxc7 36.Rc3 Kd6 37.a5 Ra8 38.a6 Nxa6 39.bxa6 Bxa6, in either case Black’s

passed pawns providing serious compensation for the lost material, a material loss much less than after the egregious 31...Nb6??.

And in this position from Myers-Peña, given earlier in this review,



Myers fails to mention 21...Qb6!, which is much better than the actual 21...Bd7 because it forestalls the intended 22.d3 cxd3 23.Qc5 maneuver and may allow Black to consolidate his

pawn plus.

The wild six-pawn gambit in the Amar Opening game might well have failed if here,



instead of 11...Be7, Black had played 11...Nc6, another improvement left unmentioned.

Another example, of a more strategic sort, is **Pérez-Myers**, Santo Domingo

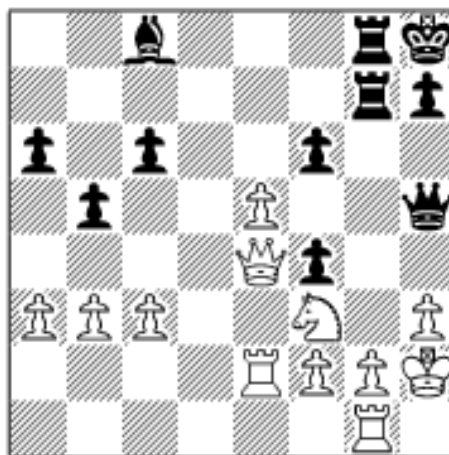
1976: **1.e4 Nc6 2.Nf3 d5 3.exd5 Qxd5 4.Nc3 Qa5 5.Bb5 Bd7 6.d4** — Myers: “The main line in my book ... because Karpov and Hort said it gives White ‘a clear advantage.’ I love opponents who don’t question GM opinions.”

**6...a6 7.Bc4 e6 8.Qe2 Bb4 9.Bd2 Nge7 10.a3 0-0 11.0-0 Bxc3 12.Bxc3 Qh5 13.Rad1 b5 14.Bd3 Nd5 15.Bd2 Rfd8 16.c3 Ra7!!**



The “!!” is Myers’ punctuation. The intent is eventually to shift the rook to an attacking position on g7. This in fact happened in the game: **17.Rfe1 Bc8 18.Qf1 f6 19.Re4 g5 20.h3 Nce7 21.Ree1**

**c6 22.Qe2 Ng6 23.Bxg6 Qxg6 24.Bc1 Rg7 “(aha!)” — Myers. 25.Qd3 Qf7 26.b3 Kh8 27.Re2 Nf4 28.Bxf4 gxf4 29.Qe4 e5 30.Kh2 Qh5 31. Rg1 Rdg8 32.dxe5**

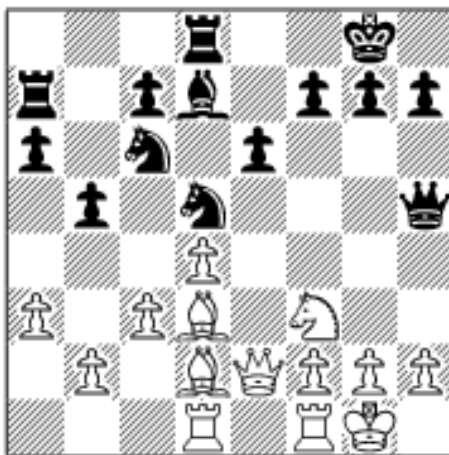


**32...Rgx2+, 0-1.**

Myers’ notes give the impression that he won mainly because of his opponent’s dogmatism in the opening, and the originality of the rook maneuver. Yet he fails to note that

30.Kh2 was a dreadful move (better 30.Rd3), as was 31.Rg1 (better 31.Ng1). More importantly, the Ra8-a7-g7 maneuver, by which Myers sets such great store, succeeds only because from moves 17 to 29 White does little but shift wood aimlessly, at times practically helping Black. Myers mentions White’s passivity, but suggests

nothing better. If instead after 16...Ra7 “!!”



White had organized some counterplay, starting with 17.b3! and 18.c4!, the rook might have stood pointlessly on a7 indefinitely, or been forced back to a8 by Bd2-e3. So on both tactical and strategic grounds, the book's annotations seem too often inadequate or even misleading.

The concluding appendix, written at various times over 2000-2002 after the book proper was done, is an embarrassment. Unlike Myers' earlier broadsides, which usually stayed within his areas of expertise and were aimed at various certified chess cads, the tirades in the appendix show Myers as rather a Luddite and a fogey, grumpily at odds with the 21st century and loudly talking through his hat. Earlier in the book he griped about computerized clocks; now he adds databases to his pet peeves. He dismisses the Internet as “hype” designed “to sell computer equipment to people who don't need it.” He's angry at publishers who rejected his book, or preferred his manuscript on disk rather than paper. He makes the bizarre statement that he wants to “destroy ... the fanatics who worship [modern technology],” a technology about which he shows much ignorance. Out of the blue comes a claim to “understand the situation” of the September 11th terrorist attack. As a final gust in these windy digressions Myers gives stock market advice, rather presumptuous considering his financial track record.

A strange end to a strange book, just as the book itself is a misguided, dismaying, dissonant coda to an otherwise commendable body of work. Those wishing to see Myers in a better light are strongly advised to avoid *A Chess Explorer* in favor of his earlier books and back issues of *MOB*.



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