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The Gambler, Cured

John S. Hilbert

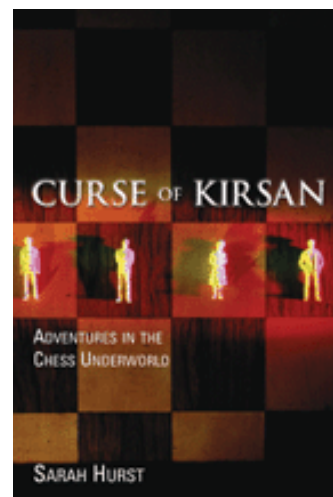
“Chess is an obsession—you play or you don’t play, no half-measures. And, like gambling, you keep on playing even when you lose and lose and lose.” *Curse of Kirsan*, p.7

“I’ve seen chess players at their best and their worst. I’m cured of the infection. I only hope that one day I’ll be as passionate about something else as I was about chess.” *Curse of Kirsan*, p.268



Curse of Kirsan, by Sarah Hurst, 2002 Russell Enterprises, Inc. 2002, Softcover, 285pp., \$19.95

When I first learned of Sarah Hurst’s new book, *Curse of Kirsan*, I wasn’t paying attention. From the title, I thought it was a full-length exposé of Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, controversial FIDE President and ruler of the Russian republic of Kalmykia. It isn’t. Although Hurst does cover Ilyumzhinov in detail, the material devoted to that figure and his activities, both those confirmed and those alleged, occupies only forty pages of text. They cover pages 159 through 198. The first 150 pages of the book, and the last 70, more or less, do not touch on him. Had I been paying more attention, even as much as to consider the book’s back cover, I would have learned the work consisted of “historical articles” that allegedly show “that chess, insanity and politics have always been inextricably connected.



Publisher’s hyperbole aside—for the book as a whole hardly takes as its thesis the intertwining of chess with insanity and politics, though the latter does play a significant role—I quickly learned, having gone to the extreme of actually opening the book, that *Curse* brings together more than thirty of Hurst’s previously published articles, ranging from her first article in *Chess*, in the November 1994 issue, through approximately five years of



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chess writing, and thus to near the end of the millennium. Although the vast bulk of the book is comprised of previously published essays appearing in magazines such as *Chess*, *New in Chess* and *Kingpin*, Hurst includes several new pieces, including materials generated for publication but never finished until *Curse* provided the incentive to do so. Readers will therefore find, for the first time among Hurst's writings, a lengthy essay based on an equally long interview with Raymond Keene, and shorter ones with Bob Wade, Leonard Barden, and George Steiner. Approximately twenty black and white photographs appear throughout the text.

Curse, though, is not merely a collection of chess writings plunked together between covers, interesting as those writings may be. Besides being a very good book, *Curse* also details Hurst's own odyssey, not only through the world of chess, but also in regard to something of her personal life both in and outside the game. The reader

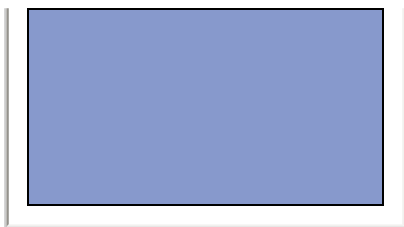
who pays attention to Hurst's own story, interspersed among her previously published writings and new material, will gain a degree of insight into something of the persona behind the pieces, as it were, that makes the whole even more human and, to a degree, intimate. Unlike many chess essay collections, *Curse* also chronicles the life of its author, and thus marks a refreshing departure from the blank wall that so often stands between writer and reader. Here, at least, we are given a chance to consider the author and her adventures as much as the essays themselves. One might well argue that readers not interested in the life behind the essays should not be reading essays about the lives of chessplayers in the first place.



Leonard Barden and Bob Wade

Before turning to the essays themselves, though, a few words about terminology regarding chess writing. Or rather a few words about the lack of precision regarding such terminology. Chessplayers are long accustomed to gauging their playing strength against supposedly objective scales, either national or international in scope. Whether one is a Grandmaster or a novice, such scales suggest playing strength along a continuum, a pecking order associated with the game. To whatever degree such scales are accurate, issues of rating inflation and even the occasional bought game aside, chessplayers assume certain distinctions among themselves more or less based on playing strength as reflected in terms such as "master," "expert," and so on.

Not so for chess writers. I am not referring here so much to rankings based on ability and performance, as so often reflected in discussions of chessplayers, but a simpler set of distinctions that would, were it adhered to, offer at least a starting place for discussions of chess writing. As it



now stands, the term “chess journalist” for chess writers is no more descriptive, and draws no finer distinctions, than does the term “chessplayer” when referring to Kasparov or Joe Jones down at the club.

Today the term “chess journalist” is as loosely used as would be the term “chessplayer,” were that term used to lump together club players, problemists, and endgame composers. There are many more categories for chess writing and chess writers than are commonly used. Examples include the chess interviewer, the chess journalist, and the chess essayist, to name but a few. Such categories will never be as clearly distinctive as those for chessplayer or endgame composer, but thinking in those terms might help focus discussion, both here and in general.



Laszlo Szabo

Hurst, in *Curse*, is by and large not a chess interviewer, although most of her writings clearly have evolved from extensive interviews conducted with a broad range of chess personalities, ranging from Mikhail Botvinnik to Tony Gillam to Laszlo Polgar. One will find very few pure interviews, with he-said-she-said identifiers, in the book.

Nor is Hurst a chess journalist, aside from her pieces on Kirsan Ilyumzhinov and the brutal murder of Kalmykia opposition newspaper editor Larisa Yudina, if by that term one means the reporter of late breaking news in the chess world and its implications for current events. Hurst very much is a chess essayist, one who uses the raw material of her trade—the interview, coupled with personal research—to present an evocative picture, or portrait if you will, of her subjects. And her subjects for the most part are not chess tournaments, chess games, or even, finally, chess politics. Her subject is people.

No chess games appear in *Curse*, and readers looking for material on the playing of the chess greats of this age or another should turn elsewhere. *Curse* is very much a book, and a very good book, devoted to people who, for one reason or another—passionate love of the game, long habit, or money—have devoted themselves to chess. As was Hurst herself, after a fashion, between 1994 and 1999. The writing appearing in *Curse* after 1999 is largely devoted to updating earlier materials, and in particular to letting readers know what has become of the individuals discussed. Including Hurst herself.

Hurst enjoys wordplay, and she is often very good at it. Even when discussing the FIDE president and serious issues regarding him, some of her titles are pure fun: “Elista Law,” for example, with its suggestion of the TV series *LA Law*. Or an earlier one on Ilyumzhinov entitled “The Steppe-

Father of Chess” (aside from the play on “step” and “steppe,” and its suggestion of a not quite true-running bloodline, perhaps a mere skip and jump from The God-Father of Chess?) The very title of the book suggests, if one lets it resonate for a while in one’s mind, and one is in a playful mood, images ranging from mummies to Montezuma, and back.

Hurst informs us in the Introduction as to why she selected the title she did, *Curse of Kirsan*, for a book largely devoted, ostensibly, to other topics. She believed it appropriate, as it is “a metaphor for the same dilemmas that chess players face time and time again, in pursuit of their beautiful game” (p.6). As do chess writers, one might add, especially when they shift from being chess essayists to being chess journalists.

And what, precisely, is the dilemma facing chessplayers “time and time again”? Power, in a word. The power to follow your chosen path. The power to follow an ethical course regardless of figures and forces aligned against you. The power to avoid temptations to compromise your art, or sport, or science, depending on your current metaphor for the game called chess. And while the broader aspects of power frequently manifest themselves in political terms, as with the Soviet Union’s appropriation of chess as a vehicle of cultural worth bent to more prosaic, political ends, the narrower, all-too-human aspects of power often come down to another, simpler word. Money.

Money, or rather the lack of it, and the struggle for it, runs through *Curse* like ... a curse. An early interview with future international master Susan Lalic and her grandmaster husband, Bogdan, makes the case explicitly. “Being a professional chess player,” Hurst writes, “has to be one of the most insecure careers in Britain, something like being a jazz musician. It means that Susan and Bogdan have to avoid going for a mortgage or getting into any kind of debt” (p.15). The sad truth of the financial lot of most professional chessplayers is chronicled throughout *Curse*. Sergi Movsesian, for example, an Armenian who emigrated to the Czech Republic in 1994, did so in large part because “In Armenia and Georgia there are no tournaments, and it’s more important to earn money just to survive, not to play chess. Also you have to have an Elo of 2600 to live well in Armenia and when I emigrated I had only 2400” (p.61). Laszlo Nagy, a Hungarian army officer turned tournament director, laments the Hungarian Chess Federation’s lack of money, not only because it keeps native Hungarian stars such as Judit Polgar and Peter Leko playing outside their home country, but for its impact on chess in general, and tournament play in particular: “We can’t find this big sponsor in Hungary and a big tournament is big money. There aren’t many rich men in Hungary. We can organize only little tournaments or big opens. Closed tournaments are very dear” (p.84). So it goes, as Hurst relates, essay after essay, the price chess costs in terms of those seeking careers in the field, from Bulgaria’s Antoaneta Stefanova, who could obtain no funding from her federation, but could, to a degree, from the Johnnie Walker company, to Tony Gillam’s difficulties finding resources to continue his wonderful publishing business, *The Chess Player*.

Not all chessplayers, of course, have constantly to make hard choices between paying the rent and pursuing their art. Hurst's essay's capture, too, that all-to-rare beast, the wealthy chessplayer. Kasparov appears, although briefly. The Polgars are considered as well. Hurst's writing makes use of the revealing detail to punctuate the wide chasm that separates the great majority of struggling players from the likes of Anatoly Karpov, who when asked the highest price he has ever paid for a postage stamp for his collection, can respond by saying "I think, \$60,000," and then add, as almost an afterthought, "No, it was \$90,000." Hurst's talent shows through in such moments, as she allows her subjects to speak for themselves. This one detail about Karpov and his stamp collection needs no further comment. Nor does it receive it in the book. It would be redundant, and indeed insulting to the reader, to add that Karpov is clearly a very wealthy man.

In addition to her essays about the current chess scene, Hurst includes in *Curse* a number of pieces on great players of a bygone era. Her essay on Alekhine, appearing in three successive numbers of *Chess* early in 1997, is included in the volume, and is well worth the reading. Her meeting with Botvinnik is given as well, and readers will find it interesting to contrast Botvinnik's praise of the first chairman of the Soviet Chess Federation (and Commissar for Justice in the 1930s) Nikolai Krylenko, who often helped Botvinnik, with the way Krylenko handled Alekhine's casual remarks on the Bolsheviks at a banquet in the Russian Chess Club in Paris. Not to mention Hurst's succinct conclusion regarding how Krylenko was himself treated by the government he served: "Krylenko's loyalty was aptly rewarded in 1938, when he was executed" (p.45).

Perhaps the chess personality treated by Hurst with most loving regard in *Curse* is Andor Lilienthal, then 86, when Hurst's essay on him appeared in *Chess* for August 1997. Warmth, too, and good wishes, flow through her treatment of Laszlo Szabo, who she found to be "a lovable, funny and immensely dignified man, restricted to a wheelchair since the recent amputation of his right leg" (p.86). Such pieces are truly fine specimens of the chess essay form. They resonate with the warmth brought forth by her subjects and echoed, in turn, through her treatment of them. They are chess portraiture at its finest, and worthy successors to a long line of interesting pieces, not the least of which are the word portraits rendered over a hundred years earlier, by George Allcock MacDonnell.

Such are the fine results, at times, of Hurst as chess essayist. It is during her coverage of Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, the murder of Larisa Yudina, and her attempt to generate interest in the chess community for boycotting the Elista Olympiad that Hurst switches from chess essayist to chess journalist. It is here, too, that the innocence and vitality that filled her first years in the chess writing business met utter disillusionment in the community to which she had brought her passion. And the results, finally, could hardly be more stark: Hurst now lives in Alaska, her passion for chess dead; Ilyumzhinov has been reelected FIDE president, and shows no sign of slowing down his connection with the game. And, as Hurst sees it, "the

sycophancy towards Ilyumzhinov continues unabated” (p.193).

Hurst provides a detailed picture of the complex, and indeed compelling, clash of politics, personalities, and economics that, ultimately, led to her loss of passion for chess. But the loss did not come without a struggle. Increasingly, though, Hurst found herself at odds with the very community of chess editors, promoters and players that had in large measure been the source of her intense interest in writing on the game. Having taken on, for example, the job of editing the British Chess Federation’s monthly newsletter, *ChessMoves*, Hurst soon enough found herself at odds with her employers, the center of controversy because of the material she presented.

In addition to her disillusionment over the state of chess and politics, Hurst was not immune to the economic pressures that face not only the professional players and promoters of the game, but also the writers who seek to eek out a living by writing about chess. *Curse of Kirsan* is also in part the story of Hurst’s own struggle to make ends meet. Unlike many chessplayers who have devoted years to perfecting their game, and who have little or no other direction to turn, Hurst’s training and skills as a writer have allowed her to find another career, this time in Alaska. She herself announces her passion for chess is gone. She has been “cured of the infection” (p.263), as she calls it. But her writings remain for readers interested in something other than the mere moves of pieces over the board.

Readers can decide for themselves whether they find compelling Hurst’s view of chess, politics and money, the underlying themes of *Curse of Kirsan* that infuse many of the essays collected here. This reader, however, can think of few contemporary accounts of chess and the personalities through which it lives that offer better entertainment, argument and insight for the time required to read them.

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by Sarah Hurst

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