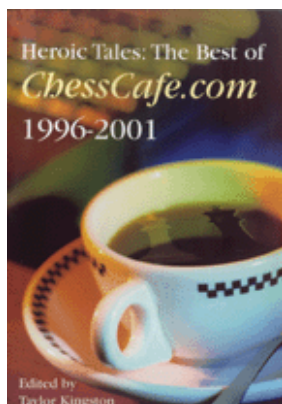




BOOK
REVIEWS



Two Very Different Champions, Two Very Different Books

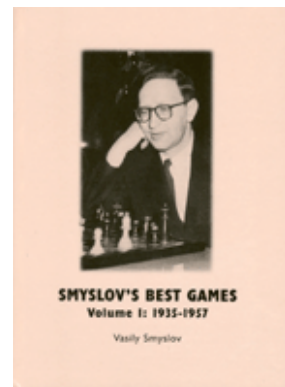
Taylor Kingston

Smyslov's Best Games, Volume I: 1935-1957, by Vasily Smyslov, 2003 Publishing House Moravian Chess, Olomouc, Czech Republic, hardcover, 348 pages, figurine algebraic notation, \$39.00

Bobby Fischer: From Chess Genius to Legend, various authors, 2003 Thinker's Press, Davenport, Iowa, USA, paperback, 192 pages, mixed figurine and English algebraic notation, \$18.95

This review features books about two very different world chess champions, Vasily Smyslov and Robert Fischer. The latter's career, characterized by consistent greatness at the board and unpredictable, controversial, and more lately even notorious behavior away from it, is so well known to most ChessCafe readers that we need not detail it here.

Smyslov, the seventh world champion, whose chess career peaked just as Fischer's was starting, is probably a dimmer figure to the current generation. Born in 1921, he has been characterized by a quietly powerful persistence. Though described by historian Ken Whyld as perhaps "the most forgettable world champion" (a comment on his short reign and mild personality, not a disparagement of his play), very few players have exceeded his playing strength and even fewer his longevity. Emerging as one of the top Soviet players around 1940, Smyslov by 1948 was arguably #2 in the world, as evinced by his second place behind Mikhail Botvinnik at the World Championship tournament Hague-Moscow 1948. Smyslov peaked in the 1950s, winning major tournaments and playing Botvinnik for the world title three times, drawing their 1954 match, challenging again and winning in April 1957, and losing the title back to him in May 1958, with an overall plus score for the three matches (+18 -17 =34). Though he never again rose quite so high, Smyslov has remained a frequent and strong player for decades, playing in countless tournaments, including 19 USSR Championships. In his sixties he became the oldest FIDE Candidate in history and gave Kasparov a tough time in their 1984 Candidates Match, the last Garry played before taking the title Smyslov had held nearly three decades earlier. Described by *The Oxford Companion to Chess* as "good-natured, cheerful, with a placid disposition ... [making] few enemies and few close friends," Smyslov has now become one of the game's dignified elder statesmen.



Smyslov's Best Games, Volume I: 1935-1957 is a good, even archetypical example of its genre. It contains 140 full games annotated by him, an 11-page autobiographical introduction, some game fragments, several of his endgame studies, crosstables of all events he played in 1939-1957, and a table of his tournament and match results. There are the usual indexes of opponents, and openings (both by name and ECO code). Physically it is very similar to the same publisher's recent 3-volume Botvinnik collection (see the archives for reviews).

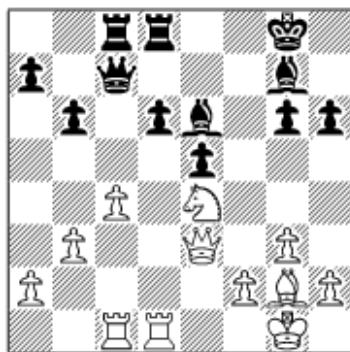
This Moravian edition is not an entirely new book. It is at least the third major collection by Smyslov himself to appear in English, and has much in common with its predecessors. The first, *My Best Games of Chess 1935-1957*, was published in hardcover, with descriptive notation, by

Routledge & Keegan Paul Ltd. (London) in 1958, and reprinted in paperback by Dover Publications (New York) in 1972. Though its title is very similar, compared to the new edition it is less than half the book. 154 pages long, it contains 67 games, all but six of which are in the new collection. Its annotations are usually very like the new edition's, though they sometimes differ. It has two biographical introductions not in the new edition, one lengthy and insightful (if a bit chauvinistic) by Soviet master Peter Romanovsky, the other a brief update by the translator, Peter H. Clarke, but the preface by Smyslov himself is only three pages compared to the new book's eleven. It has no crosstables or tournament records.

The other comparable work is *125 Selected Games* (Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1983). A translation of the Russian *V Piskakh Garmonii* (In Search of Harmony), that book surveyed Smyslov's full career up to 1982. Both it and the Moravian Chess volume were translated by Ken Neat, and major portions of each are virtually identical, including most of the autobiographical introduction and the annotations for games they have in common. Where the Moravian edition mainly differs is that, one, it of course stops at 1957, and two, it has many more games from its period (140 vs. 52). So compared to the two earlier collections, the new book offers more than twice the content for its time frame.

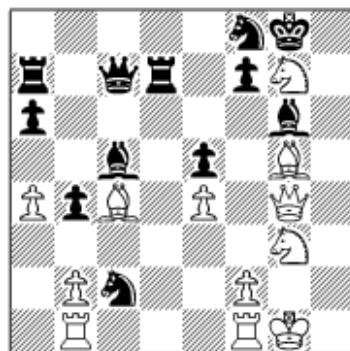
The assessment of a game collection depends mainly on the quality of the games and their annotations. Other than a few of the early efforts, these games are from the highest levels of competition: Moscow championships (which were sometimes stronger than many international tournaments), Soviet championships (which usually were), major international tournaments, Olympiads and other important team matches, FIDE Candidates tournaments, and world championship matches.

The annotations are quite good, both from a strategic and tactical standpoint. An example of an instructive positional note is this from Smyslov-Denker, USSR-USA match, 1946.



Explaining **24.Nc3**, Smyslov writes "White is aiming to exchange the light-square bishops and obtain a centralised knight against Black's dark-square bishop, cramped by its own pawns. From the strategic point of view Black could of course have played **24...Kh7**, avoiding the exchange of bishops, but after **25.Be4!** followed by **h2-h4-h5** or **26.Nb5** and **27.Qd2** White would have exerted very strong pressure on the opponent's position."

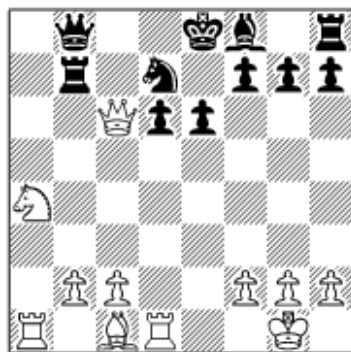
And we see detailed, concrete tactical analysis in this position from Smyslov-König, USSR-Britain match, 1946, after **31.Nf5xg7!**:



Smyslov writes "The culminating point of this tense struggle. The picturesque arrangement of the pieces on the g-file is curious. Now Black could have taken the offered knight, but in this case he would have ended up in a difficult position. For example, **31...Kxg7 32.Nf5+ Bxf5** (**32...Kg8 33.Bf6 Rd6 34.Nh6+! Kh7 35.Qh4 Rxf6 36.Ng4+ Kg8 37.Nxf6+ Kg7 38.Ne8+**) **33.exf5 Rd4** (**33...Ng6 34.Qh5!**) **34.f6+! Kh7 35.Bf4! Ne6** (**35...Ng6 36.Qh5+ Kg8 37.Qxg6+**) **36.Qh5+ Kg8 37.Kh2!**, and White's attack is irresistible." In fact *Fritz* shows a forced mate in five at that point, and could find no serious flaw in the above analysis. Lest the reader think the old-schooler Smyslov may have availed himself of modern

technology here, we note that the same analysis was given in the 1958 book.

Smyslov has the reputation of being mostly a positional player and endgame technician, yet the book abounds in combinations like that. A few more examples:



Smyslov-Kottnauer, Groningen 1946: **18.Nc5!! dxc5** (18...Rc7 19.Nxd7 Rxd7 20.Ra8) **19.Bf4! Bd6** (19...Qxf4 20.Qc8+ Ke7 21.Qxb7 Kf6 22.Rxd7 Kg6 23.g3 Qf5 24.Ra7) **20.Bxd6 Rb6 21.Qxd7+!, 1-0.**



Smyslov-Kotov, Moscow Championship 1943: **34.f6! Nxf6 35.Qxe5+ Kc6 36.Rhxg7! Kb5 37.Nxd4+ Kb6 38.b4 Rc8 39.Rxf7 Qxf7 40.Qd6+ Rc6 41.Nxc6 Nxe4 42.bxc5+ 1-0.**



Smyslov-Botvinnik, World Championship match, 1954, 9th game: **19.Qxe4!! dxe4 20.Rb8+ Bc8 21.Bb5+ Qxb5** (21...Nd7 22.Rxc8+ Qd8 23.Rxd8#) **22.Rxb5 Ne6 23.Bf6 Rxd6 24.h5 Ba6 25.h6 1-0.**

However, the book is not lacking in good endgames, such as this from Smyslov-Szabo, Hastings 1954/55:



Smyslov writes "It now transpires that 33...Ke6 is refuted by 34.c6 Kd6 (or 34...bxc6 35.bxc6 Kd6 36.Nb5+ and 37.c7) 35.b6! Nxc6 36.Bxc6 and White wins. Black's next move also proves inadequate." **33...e5 34.Ne4+ Ke6 36.c6!** "This breakthrough, based on a little combination, is the logical culmination of White's activity on the queenside." **35...exf4+ 36.Kxf4 bxc6 37.Nc5+ Kd6 38.Nxb3 cxb5 39.h4 Nc6 40.Bxc6 Kxc6 41.Kg4! b4 42.axb4 Kb5 43.Nd4+ 1-0.**

Smyslov's most frequent opponents in the book are well known: Botvinnik (11 games), Boleslavsky, Euwe and Lilienthal (5 each), Bondarevsky, Keres, Kotov, Reshevsky and Tolush (4 each), and Bronstein, Geller, and Ragozin (3 each). Other famous players appear, such as Benko, Donner, Evans, Ivkov, Najdorf, Petrosian, Stahlberg, Szabo, Taimanov, Unzicker, and Vidmar, but there are also some obscure names: Byvshev, Gerstenfeld, Milev, Pytlakowski, Randviir. The most frequent openings are the Ruy López (26 games), Sicilian (17), Grünfeld (12), and the Queen's Gambit, English, French, and Nimzo-Indian (10 each).

What shortcomings we see in this book stem mainly from comparison to the Botvinnik collection. Botvinnik gave relatively little about his opponents or the background of a game, but Smyslov here gives almost nothing at all, sticking strictly to objective examination of the game *per se*. Other than in the introduction, there are no anecdotes or personal reminiscences, no discussion of personalities, history, or politics. Readers looking for juicy revelations like Bronstein's recent allegations of political interference at the 1953 Candidates tournament will find nothing

comparable, and serious historians will have to be content with the crosstables, some of which are hard to find elsewhere.

As an annotator, Smyslov is perhaps not quite at Botvinnik's level. He tends to go somewhat less deeply. Readers of our review of *Botvinnik's Best Games, Volume 2* may recall a comparison between Botvinnik's notes and Reuben Fine's (from *Chess Marches On!*, 1945), in which Fine came out decidedly worse. That was not the case in the two games where we could compare Fine and Smyslov. Take this position from Smyslov-Boleslavsky, USSR Absolute Championship 1941:



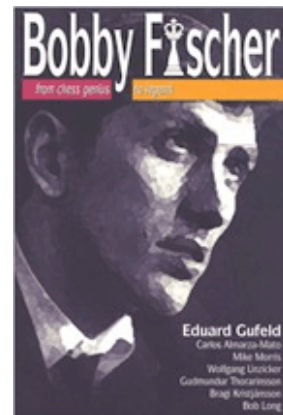
19.c5 — Fine: “Unnecessarily giving Black a chance. After 19.Rac1 the attack rolls along just as smoothly.” **Smyslov:** “The attack develops swiftly. In the event of 19...Bxe4 20.Qxe4 Qxb5 21.Qa8! White’s threats on the h1-a8 diagonal are extremely dangerous. For example, 21...Rd5 22.Bf1 Qc6 (or 22...Qa5 23.c6) 23.Ba6+ Kd7 24.Bb7, and Black’s barrier on the d5 square is destroyed. — **19...Bd5 — Fine:** “Allows the complete immobilization of his knight – tantamount to resignation. After 19...Bxe4 20.Qxe4 Qxb5 21.Rfc1 or 21.cxb6 White would probably win in the long run, but Black would have had something to say about his fate.”

Neither annotator entirely satisfies here; the position is fairly complex but neither goes into much detail. In the variation 19...Bxe4 20.Qxe4 Qxb5, Fine does not mention Smyslov’s 21.Qa8, but the only reply to it that Smyslov considers, 21...Rd5, is a rather bad move, probably not even the 10th-best available; better alternatives such as 21...Qa6 are not even mentioned.

However, such instances are relatively rare in this volume, and even if Smyslov’s notes are sometimes too light, he still outweighs 90% of other annotators. Buyers of *Smyslov's Best Games 1935-1957* will be getting an excellent collection, both instructive and aesthetically pleasing, featuring the best years of a player who quietly carved out one of the best careers in chess history.

What buyers of *Bobby Fischer: From Chess Genius to Legend* get is something entirely different. Of Smyslov it might be said that there have not been enough books about him; of Fischer it can definitely be said that there are too many. This book practically gives off the sound of a blunt spoon scraping the bottom of a barrel.

Since the 1970s, and especially since 1992, Fischer has become an increasingly irrelevant and repugnant figure, almost completely abandoning the game (he now calls chess “mental masturbation”), making wild accusations against top players (e.g. that every single move was pre-arranged in the five Karpov-Kasparov matches), and evincing frequent paranoia, racism, anti-Semitism, and other irrational hatreds, all expressed with coarse vulgarity. His achievements as a player are never to be forgotten, but the world is already overdosed with books about him, more than about any other player. Adding another should be done only with good reason. The last one we saw, *Fischer World Champion!* (New In Chess, 2002), a translation of *De tweekamp Spasski-Fischer 1972* by Euwe and Timman, was justified since that excellent book had appeared only in Dutch. Before that, *The Unknown Bobby Fischer* by Donaldson & Tangborn (ICE, 1999) at least included a large amount of original research, but still we could not muster much enthusiasm. Yet it was a masterpiece compared to this dog’s breakfast from Thinker’s Press, a motley pastiche assembled with virtually no regard for quality.



Of the book’s 192 pages, the first 100 are taken up by the late GM Eduard Gufeld, who posthumously cements further his reputation as master of the trite rehash, presenting an account of Fischer’s career which is not only unoriginal, but also remarkably superficial, disorganized, and inept. According to the publisher’s blurb it is drawn mainly from the Ukrainian book *Bobby Fischer: Legends and the Truth*. The same familiar stories, events and quotes used by countless

other authors appear; what Gufeld mainly adds are comments, usually neither interesting nor relevant, by himself or someone he knows, e.g. Nona Gaprindashvili wondering aloud why Fischer did not play Karpov in 1975.

Gufeld's story is told in his peculiar brand of English, viz.:

“Fischer correctly evaluated the game, having taken the game to an few pieces ending.”

“Fischer's scandalous flee from the tournament caused lots of talk and conjecture.”

“The widely-spread opinion that Fischer was nothing more than a narrow-minded, though brilliant chess expert, whose only preoccupation were the chess pieces ...”

We might be more tolerant of the inept English if Gufeld offered some worthwhile insights about Fischer's chess, but few if any are to be found, and even opportunities to present others' insights are skipped. For example, Gufeld says “The first game of the Larsen-Fischer match [*i.e. the 1971 Candidates semi-final*] was the most creative. Specialists suggest studying Fischer's style by examining this game.” This is followed by the game score with — no annotations! Not the least noesis from the unnamed specialists, nor even the slightest comment from Gufeld himself. We dare say the average reader will gain little understanding of Fischer's creativity from this. Raymond Keene on his slickest day would envy this level of superficiality.

In organization Gufeld the writer ranks with the grammarian and annotator. His chronology is jerky; for example in the midst of discussing Fischer's activities in 1978 he jumps back to an unrelated story from 1966. His sense of relevance is equally shaky, as the following passage, referring to events in 1979, illustrates:

“Fischer stayed in West Berlin on his way back from Belgrade to the U.S. The reader knows already that non-official negotiations were being held between Bobby and Gligoric in Belgrade concerning an unofficial match.

“Bobby visited several antique shops. In one he noticed a chess computer.

“Fischer gave an interview to his friend Alfred Sheppelt. ‘Would you like to meet the world champion Anatoly Karpov?’ was one of the questions.”

Readers able to divine the relevance of the middle paragraph (or the distinction between “non-official” and unofficial) are urged to contact this web-site and enlighten us.

Gufeld's factuality is suspect; for example he refers to Dmitre Bjelica as “Bobby's second” at the 1967 Interzonal. The idea of the hack journalist Bjelica, who never got much past Elo 2300, as Fischer's chess second, is

only slightly more plausible than Saddam Hussein as Pope.

Bad as Gufeld's contribution is, it towers above the book's next section, "Bobby Fischer: An Attempt at Analysis", by one Carlos Almarza-Mato. This bloated travesty first appeared in the *Scottish Correspondence Chess Association Magazine* in 1999. That it was plucked from this relative obscurity smacks of a desperate attempt by Thinker's Press to fill pages regardless of quality. It is immediately evident that the author has even less command of English than Gufeld, and had no competent editor, as these samples from the first page show:

"May Caissa illuminate all of us in our chess initiatic paths so as we will be able to understand, discern, and learn."

"... the only aim I pursue is that of making the reader start thinking by him/herself, simply attempting to offer what I would like to be a new light or a different reference point to look at."

"Chess conforms a vast cultural empire and sometimes it is impossible to couch in words everything one has read or every conclusion one has reached, so falling in a sort of Wittgensteinian paradox ..."

We only wish Almarza-Mato had fallen immediately into the Wittgensteinian paradox, sparing us the increasingly dense yet vacuous 34 pages that follow. Ludicrous excerpts from this Heavy Rap could fill several pages here, but as a mercy to our readers, we will limit ourselves to just a few more examples:

"If the game is annotated, we can use the notes as a guide, although we will have to do a move-by-move job on the game. That consists of the study of chess games: the attempt to apprehend the METHOD by dissecting the games for chess is the vivid manifestation of THOUGHT." (Capitals in original)

Thus consists one of the duties of the reviewer: to apprehend the METHODS by which a bad writer produces a vivid manifestation of PRETENTIOUS RUBBISH.

In between his orotundities, Almarza-Mato attempts, as his title says, to analyze Fischer's chess style. He combines tautologies ("Everything starts with the opening") and commonplaces ("Fischer mainly played 1.e4" — Whoa, shall we stop the presses?) with inscrutable "insights":

"Fischer's style shows a two-fold feature: on the one hand a deep purity ... and on the other hand, the display of tactical blows in which every move both belongs to the system and also conforms to the system he is developing."

We are put in mind of a passage from Donald Barthelme's *Paraguay*:

"Rather than re-create the former physics, a new physics based on the golden section (proliferation of golden sections) was constructed. As a system of explanation almost certain to be incorrect it enjoys enormous prestige here."

Almarza-Mato commits some dumbfounding factual errors. For example a list of other "Western hopes" of the Fischer era includes Larsen, Reshevsky, Gligoric and Uhlmann. We suppose Gligoric, a citizen of Yugoslavia's maverick Tito regime, might at a stretch be considered "Western," but Wolfgang Uhlmann, from East Germany, probably the most oppressed of Soviet satellites? Next we will hear that Botvinnik was a symbol of *glasnost*. He also states "In my opinion, Fischer was the first in developing the concept of dynamic strategy." This is like saying "In my opinion, the B-52 was the first airplane to achieve powered flight."

The simplest chapter is GM Wolfgang Unzicker's "Meeting Bobby Fischer". It is also the shortest, a mere two pages, dealing only with their well-known game at Buenos Aires 1960, one of the rare instances where Fischer made an outright blunder, but in strict and honorable observance of the touch-move rule, made no attempt to retract it. Another short is Mike Morris' "My Game With Fischer", about a simul in 1964. This might have been just a charming bit of local color, yet like Almarza-Mato, Morris found the urge to psychoanalyze irresistible:

"Fischer played rapidly except when he stopped at the board next to me, occupied by a boy 11 years old. Then he would look at the kid before moving. I think Fischer saw something of himself in the youngster and was contemplating his own lost childhood."

The idea of the chess machine Fischer drifting into wistful reverie during a game in progress strikes us as improbable. Some interesting passages are found in "Bobby Fischer — The Troubled Genius" by Gudmundur Thorarinsson. As president of the Icelandic Chess Federation at the time of the 1972 Fischer-Spassky match, Thorarinsson is able to offer some factual details about that occasion not seen elsewhere. For example he describes how Fischer was able to repeat perfectly a conversation in Icelandic, a language he did not understand, indicating that Fischer's remarkable memory processed auditory information with the same facility as chess positions. However, such interesting tidbits are rare.

We said that this book gives off a sound. It also gives off a smell, that of air-freshener sprayed to mask an offensive odor. A minor but disturbing sub-text of the book is that Fischer is an innocent victim, whose decline from the heights of 1972 to his sad state today, is due not to his own mental illness but to sinister outside forces. Consider this bit of gratuitous America-bashing by Thorarinsson:

"No surprise that these 10 years of exile have affected his mental strength and focused his mind against the United States. The historians of the future will not find it easy to understand the conduct of the U.S. ... Will the future not judge the U.S. severely and without sympathy? Is there is [*sic*] something rotten in the State of the dollar?"

Right, Fischer's problems are all the fault of the mean old United States government, capitalist oppressor of chess genius and *bête noire* of conspiracy theorists and left-wing relics everywhere. Thorarinsson might consider that the reason for Fischer's self-imposed exile, the presidential order he knowingly defied (and literally spat upon) in 1992, was issued in support of United Nations sanctions against Serbia, which under the monstrous Slobodan Milosevic was engaged in Nazi-style genocide. Yet the U.S. is the "rotten" state?

Further folly is dished up by Almarza-Mato, who in avoiding Wittgensteinian paradox rushes headlong into fustian psychotwaddle:

"It is very easy to put adjectives before his name and smile in the belief that those who do not accept the world are 'mad' while the sheepish crowd moving in a robot-like fashion, without ideas, are 'right.' I beg to differ ... Fischer's 'sin' was to keep himself aloof from an imperfect world trying to find his own way without accepting the hypocritical decrees of a cynical society. When a single individual does that, he is immediately labelled as 'a loner,' 'mad,' 'unsociable,' etc. The madding crowd will never accept one of its members becoming the voice of its conscience."

To be fair, in 1999 Almarza-Mato could not have known that Fischer would publicly rejoice in the 9/11 atrocity ("This is all wonderful news. I applaud the act ... F—k the U.S. I want to see the U.S. wiped out," he said just hours after thousands died when the World Trade Center was destroyed. For further details see "Bobby Fischer's Pathetic Endgame" by Rene Chun, *Atlantic Monthly* December 2002, online at www.theatlantic.com/issues/2002/12/chun.htm). Yet Fischer's anti-Semitism and other appalling views were already amply evident by 1999, and have only grown more vicious and bizarre since, making this gaseous portrayal of him as a "voice of

conscience” not only absurd, but offensive. The real “sin” here is that the editor let this preposterous bloviation stay in the book.

It is time to put Fischer on the shelf. He will not return to chess; one might as well expect the Beatles to reform. His glory days are long past; since then he has become, arguably, the most distasteful figure among great chess masters, surpassing in infamy Alekhine or whomever one might name, at least in terms of his public statements. His exploits have already been recounted and examined repeatedly in microscopic detail. There seem to be few writers with any new, worthwhile information or insight about him. Books like *Bobby Fischer: From Chess Genius to Legend* merely exploit the dwindling cachet his name still carries, in hopes of cadging a few dollars from the unwary.

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by Vasily Smyslov

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