



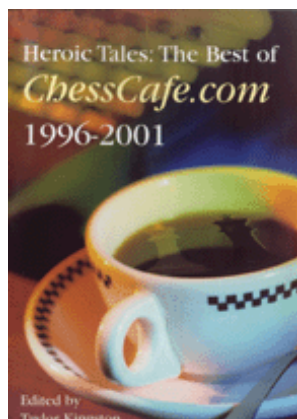
BOOK REVIEWS

Great Predecessors ... Great Book?

Taylor Kingston

Garry Kasparov on My Great Predecessors Part II, by Garry Kasparov (with Dmitry Plisetski), 2003 Everyman Chess, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Hardcover, 480pp., \$35.00.

I would call it a significant book, perhaps even one of this year's best. But for some reason we have been led to believe that Predecessors is a masterpiece, belonging to the class of great books if not transcending them. In reality it is something less grandiose... — IM John Watson, on My Great Predecessors, Part I



This second volume of Garry Kasparov's survey of his fellow chess greats deals with world champions five through eight: Max Euwe, Mikhail Botvinnik, Vasily Smyslov, and Mikhail Tal, who (with Alekhine, covered in volume one) held the title over the period 1935-1963. They are profiled along with their most important contemporaries, such as Keres, Bronstein, and Geller. The book continues on the same lines as volume one: biographical sketches and historical narrative, interspersed with extensively annotated games featuring Kasparov's own computer-assisted analysis.



The first volume provoked a wide array of remarkably strong responses. The publisher modestly declared the book a “magnificent compilation” and “definitive history,” and many readers and critics seemed to agree, according it instant masterpiece status. A history-minded minority, including Edward Winter and Richard Forster, took a negative view, citing factual errors and calling it trite and derivative, perhaps even plagiaristic for unattributed borrowing from earlier writings. An analytically-minded minority, including Mark Dvoretzky, found annotational errors missed by most. Other critics, such as Watson at *The Week In Chess* or GM Patrick Wolff on this site, considered it a valuable work but saw various, sometimes systemic flaws that left it short of masterpiece rank. An extensive, sometimes heated exchange of views on the ChessCafe bulletin board highlighted just how varied and intense opinions ran. Thus when *MGP2* came to this reviewer, the prospect of further impassioned controversy gave us some pause, but in the end only increased our determination to review it objectively.

The book's content falls into two main categories: history/biography, and games/analysis. These are for the most part distinct, and will be evaluated separately. The difference in quality between the two is substantial.

MGP2 as History

This is the lesser part of the book, making up perhaps 25% of its content, and clearly less effort has gone into it than into analysis. Like *Lord of the Rings* moviegoers who have not read the trilogy, readers not well versed in chess history may be dazzled, while serious chess history buffs, like hard-core Tolkien fans who chafe at discrepancies between book and film, may be less impressed.

We are mercifully spared a repeat of volume one's embarrassing introduction, where Kasparov made contrived attempts to portray the champions as avatars of their respective *Zeitgeist*. Instead there are straightforward biographical sketches and career accounts of the champions and their main rivals. It's hard to be sure of sources, since few are named and no bibliography is provided, but these seem to be drawn mainly from the players' own game collections and autobiographies, such as *Smyslov's Best Games* and Botvinnik's *Achieving the Aim*, plus a few more recent works such as Sosonko's *Russian Silhouettes*. Compared to volume one, factual accuracy seems to have improved. This may be due to the fact that Kasparov and Plisetsky used mainly Russian sources, and unlike volume one, here all but one (Euwe) of their main subjects are Russian and/or Soviet. Compared to Winter's for volume one (see *Chess Notes* 2972), our list of noteworthy errors for volume two is shorter:

- Terms for the 1935 Alekhine-Euwe match are not given accurately.
- The section on Keres does a good job showing how unavoidable postwar hardships hurt his chances for the 1948 world championship, but neglects evidence and testimony that official coercion also played a role (see for example "The Keres-Botvinnik Case Revisited" in the ChessCafe archives).
- The account of the 1950 Candidates Tournament (pp. 171-172) fails to note the important fact that Boleslavsky, on the advice of Boris Vainstein, eased off in the late rounds to allow Bronstein to catch up and tie him for first place (see Bronstein, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, p. 107).
- Page 214 gives the impression that Bronstein did not play in the 1948 Interzonal.
- Page 269 gives the impression Arnold Denker was put on first board in the 1945 USA-USSR radio match as a "sacrificial lamb" to Botvinnik, so that Reshevsky might have an easier time against Smyslov on board 2. In fact Denker got top board because he was reigning US champion.
- The account of the 1953 Candidates Tournament, in particular page 331, neglects recent charges by Bronstein of official tampering (see Soltis' "Treachery in Zürich" in the ChessCafe archives).
- Page 323 says that in Geller-Karpov, USSR Ch 1976, Karpov "risked playing the French Defence for the first time in his life." Our databases indicate that Karpov played the French as early as 1961, against Timoschenko in the Russian junior championship.

Rather than small factual quibbles, our main disappointment is that a book by two former Soviet citizens deals inadequately with one of the most enduring and problematic issues of this era, the question of possible Soviet

chicanery. When the book does bring it up, too often it is handled carelessly and inconsistently. For example, when the idea of coercion at the 1948 Hague-Moscow World Championship is first raised, it gets short shrift:

“This crushing score [*Botvinnik's 4-1 vs. Keres*] gave rise to numerous rumors and suggestions. Typical of these is the statement of the English historian Leonard Barden: ‘It would appear that, for his return to chess, Keres paid the price of giving an undertaking to the Soviet authorities that he would not interfere in Botvinnik’s battle for the world championship.’ However, [Keres’] widow Maria and his biographer Walter Heuer reject the existence of any such arrangements...” (p. 141)

There are several problems here. One, the Barden passage appears to be misquoted, perhaps altered by English-to-Russian-to-English translation. The probable original source, a 1990 column in *The Guardian*, read “Yet apparently the price for Keres’s return was just a vague agreement with Soviet officials not to hinder Botvinnik’s campaign and perhaps a year’s exile in the Caucasus (not the Arctic) in 1945-46.” Two, as Barden himself agrees, a better British source on this subject is Bernard Cafferty. Three, by “Botvinnik’s campaign” Barden referred only to a potential 1946 Botvinnik-Alekhine match, not the 1948 tournament. To our knowledge, neither Heuer nor Maria Keres has ever denied a 1946 arrangement; they denied only a 1948 fix. Four, Heuer wrote that opinion in 1995 (*New in Chess* #4). When we last heard from him, in late 2001, he seemed to have changed his mind, perhaps persuaded by recent evidence. All this indicates that Kasparov’s (and/or Plisetsky’s) grasp of these matters is incomplete.

Whether with good basis or bad, the above Kasparov paragraph is obviously skeptical, or at least inconclusive, about the notion of interference. Yet later Kasparov clearly endorses a claim that it occurred:

“Those times [*1948*] are also remembered in this account by grandmaster Alburt: ‘Reshevsky delicately remarked that the Russians always play “as one team”. But how could it have been any different, if on top board of this team the authorities were always playing? ... The authorities played their game in excellent style.’ (In my opinion, a similar style was also in fashion during Karpov’s time.)” (p. 161)

Which way does Kasparov want it? Either way, specific support is required, yet he gives little. Why cite Lev Alburt, who was two years old at the time of Hague-Moscow 1948, but neglect testimony from Keres and Botvinnik themselves? Or from Bronstein, who alleges chicanery as far back as the 1933 Flohr match (see *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, p. 83). And might Kasparov, with his influence in Russia, have gotten some access to relevant KGB/NKVD archives, as Heuer has sought in vain for years? Did Kasparov try, or even think of it? Plisetsky did a good job of digging into archival material for *Russians versus Fischer* (1994); why not here?

Even easily available Russian sources are overlooked. A case in point is Kasparov’s take on Keres-Smyslov, Zürich Candidates 1953. In one of the most dramatic games of the tournament,

“At that time life was difficult for me and my mother, and Mikhail Moiseevich did what he could to support us: he procured (with the help of Yakov Gerasimovich Rokhlin) food coupons, and then a small stipend from my native ‘Spartak’ sports society. He followed my performances and gave valuable advice. When late in 1977 it was time for me to become a master, Botvinnik phoned Minsk and with difficulty persuaded the organisers to include me, a 14-year-old boy ...” (p. 257).

“When Gorbachev’s *perestroika* began in the country, my relations with Mikhail Moiseevich, alas, showed signs of a rift, which no longer proved possible to patch up ... Botvinnik was a fervent supporter of the old FIDE system ... [and] a staunch communist, a child of the Stalin regime ... In one of the lessons ... Botvinnik suddenly began teaching the lads some basic politics, and in particular he declared: ‘But, you know, Stalin won the war!’ Here I couldn’t restrain myself and I retorted ‘Mikhail Moiseevich, I have a completely different opinion, but let’s not discuss it in front of the children!’ Of course, Botvinnik flew into a rage: it wasn’t enough that I was encroaching on FIDE — I was also an enemy of the Soviet system!” (p. 260)

“[Botvinnik] rapped out: ‘Rapid chess will be the death of our game!’ ... I said to him, ‘Mikhail Moiseevich, but this form of the game is one that will make it more popular...’ And he replied: ‘This will do enormous damage, colossal damage...’ I tried again: ‘This is how everyone is playing – hundreds of grandmasters, even [Smyslov]’ ... And he in reply: ‘I don’t give a damn about the opinion of the majority! I am used to thinking with my own mind!’” (pp. 261-262)

And while Kasparov is usually at pains to elevate himself and disparage Karpov, he allows Botvinnik to knock both:

“With whom would I like to remain on a desert island, Karpov or Kasparov? If I had to choose between Karpov of the time when he was champion and Kasparov the champion, I would prefer to remain alone on the island...” (p. 209).

Kasparov and Plisetsky of course have also known Tal and Smyslov, but for whatever reason those portraits lack the color and life of Botvinnik’s; like Euwe’s they are the more or less standard package with perhaps a few extras. And that is the main shortcoming in this book’s handling of history: too much recycled, standard, easy-to-find material, too little effort to go beyond.

As with the first volume, scholars will be dissatisfied. There is no general index, no bibliography, very little naming of sources; as Winter put it, the book has “a lackadaisical attitude to basic academic standards.” Kasparov is clearly aiming for the wider audience, not serious academics. Probably many readers will find *MGP2*’s history quite interesting and enjoyable, and in our opinion it will do them little harm. However those already well versed in chess history will find important questions left unresolved, and little that is new.

Games and Analysis

These comprise the bulk of the book. About 150 full and partial games are presented, many annotated at length. Evaluating them also requires going on at some length, comparing the first and second volumes, and examining Kasparov's game selection, his analysis, and his non-analytical comments.

Reviews of volume one noted the preponderance of overly familiar games. Volume two does better, but one should still not expect rare long-lost gems to be unearthed. To non-Russian readers, the selections are probably on the whole not as familiar as volume one's, but they are still well known. For example, in the chapter on Botvinnik, all but five of the 40 games involving him are in the three-volume *Botvinnik's Best Games* collection, and those five have been included in other works such as Keres' collections or books of the 1951 world title match. The iconic status of some makes them almost obligatory for a book of this type despite their familiarity, e.g. Botvinnik-Capablanca, AVRO 1938 (the famous 30.Ba3!!), Keres-Botvinnik, USSR Absolute Championship 1941, Denker-Botvinnik, USA-USSR radio match 1945, Bronstein-Botvinnik, World Championship Match, 6th game 1951 (the famous 57.Kc2??), Botvinnik-Fischer, Varna Olympiad 1962, etc.

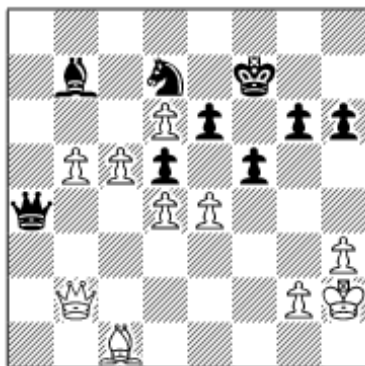
Also noteworthy in volume one was the poor quality of some analysis, as shown for example by Dvoretzky on this site (see "Classical Immersion" in the archives). It is likely that some, perhaps much, of volume one's analysis was not done by Kasparov himself, but was delegated to others (e.g. Plisetsky, who is not even FIDE-rated). That situation seems to have improved, partly because Dvoretzky and Alexander Nikitin were brought in for volume two.

A substantial portion of the analysis, perhaps 25% (more like 35% in the Euwe chapter) is recycled from earlier works, again a lesser proportion than volume one. A few reviews of volume one, particularly Richard Forster's, found instances where earlier analysis was used without proper attribution. We don't have Forster's level of erudition, so we can't guarantee it's not happening again, but we don't see much of this in volume two. While Kasparov still does not name specific books, he does credit Euwe, Botvinnik, Keres, Tal et al, as well as more recent sources such as Timman from *New in Chess*, when using their notes.

So with recycled history, recycled games, and recycled notes, is *MGP2* just an unoriginal pastiche? Partly, but by no means fully. The work and originality lie in Kasparov's own notes.

It is difficult to convey a proper impression of the annotations in a short review. Reuben Fine said of Alekhine, "His notes appeal more to the expert than to the layman"; that applies even more strongly to Kasparov. These are not light notes for inexperienced players; they are intended for advanced players willing to trudge and strain and backtrack through complex mazes of variations. Notes range from minor comments to a full page for a single move. Whether through his own skill or computer assistance, Kasparov is often able to improve on earlier analysis.

An example is this from Bronstein-Botvinnik, WCh 1951, 18th game:



Here Botvinnik played **38...f4**, explaining “After 38...dxe4 39.d5! or 38...fxe4 39.Bxh6 the way into the enemy rear would have been opened for the white queen.” Kasparov, however, gives the text a “?” and writes “On the contrary, it was precisely 38...dxe4! 39.d5 e3! (the commentators overlooked this move) that would have enabled Black to save the game: 40.Bxe3 Bxd5 41.Qh8 Qe4 42.Qh7+ Kf6, or 40.c6 Qf4+ 41.Kg1 (41.g3 Qxd6) 41...Qxd6 42.dxe6+ Qxe6 43.cxd7 Qxd7 44.Bxe3 with equality.” Botvinnik was an especially careful and thorough annotator, so it is no small feat to correct him, as Kasparov does on several occasions.

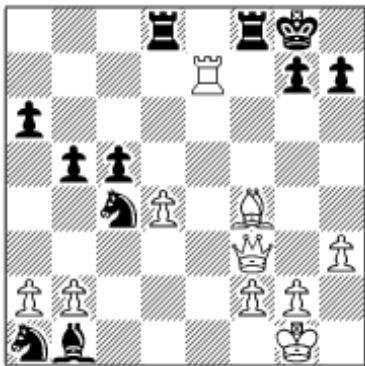
Computer use can lead to over-analysis, and a tendency to confuse quantity with importance; we know of books where annotators have gone to ridiculous lengths merely to conclude that a certain minor alternative made no difference. Kasparov generally avoids this temptation, confining himself to relevant, crucial variations, even with Tal’s games.

Compared to Botvinnik, Tal presents different problems. As an analyst, he often would examine games entirely in his head and dictate his findings to a secretary, resulting in more errors than in Botvinnik’s work. However, the young Latvian’s wild style would often create positions of such complexity as to stump even the best human annotators. It is here that Kasparov, with computer assistance, does probably his best work in *MGP2*. Three games especially stand out. At this point in Tal-Tolush, USSR Ch 1956,



Tolush played **17...gxf6**, and despite brilliant later defense, eventually lost on time at move 31. However, Kasparov examines a line rejected by Tal, Tolush, and other commentators: 17...Qxe4 18.fxg7 Bc5+ 19.Kg3, presenting nearly a full page of analysis indicating that it wins for Black.

Greater complexity is seen in Tal-Panno, a wild game which produced such bizarre positions as this:



Here Kasparov’s six-page verdict is different: despite immense complications, Tal made very few errors and was never theoretically lost (Black resigned at move 57).

The third gem of computer-aided analysis is Tal-Keller, Zürich 1959,



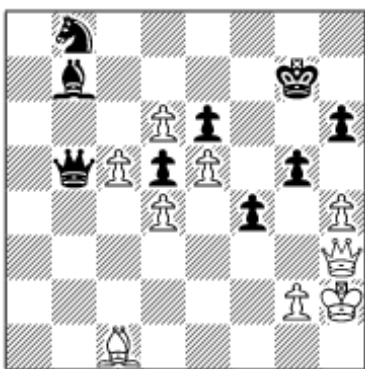
which after the piece sac **14.dxe6!** led to a game “so complicated and mind-boggling, that Mikhail Nekhemevich gave it in his book *The Life and Games of Mikhail Tal* without any notes.”

Kasparov devotes eight pages to this game. Rarely has the enormous complexity of Tal’s style been examined at such length. Serious labyrinth explorers will enjoy it, though we recommend waiting until one has ample free time. This is probably the most

impressive of Kasparov’s computer-assisted efforts.

We cannot say *MGP2*’s analysis is error-free; to go through it all in detail would require more years than your humble reviewer has left. We can report that spot-checking various games turned up no significant mistakes. We consulted several GMs, IMs, and other qualified analysts, but none reported any flaws comparable to those Dvoretsky found in volume one.

That does not mean that Kasparov’s notes are the final word on these games. Serious analysts can still find bones of contention. For example, at this point



in the aforementioned 18th Bronstein-Botvinnik game, GM Karsten Müller found something interesting. Instead of the text move **44.hxg5**, Kasparov looks at the variation 44.Qxe6 Qd3 45.Qf6+ Kh7 46.Qf7+ Kh8, reaching this position:



Now Kasparov considers only 47.Bd2, concluding eventually that Black constructs a fortress and draws. However, GM Müller proposes smashing the incipient fortress with 47.Bxf4! gxf4 48.Qxf4 Bc6 49.Qxh6+, and whether Black allows the exchange of queens by 49...Qh7 or avoids it with 49...Kg8, White will have excellent winning chances and be in no danger of losing.

A suggestion of a different sort came from Dr. Ingo Althöfer of Jena, Germany. When giving computer analysis, Kasparov usually credits only “the computer,” “my silicon friend,” or “Fritz.” Althöfer says “it would make sense to quote computer findings more concretely by giving the exact program name (for instance “Fritz8” instead of simply Fritz), the PC processor speed, and also the thinking time.” He points out a case where his own computer test did not reproduce Kasparov’s results. At this point in Yurgis-Botvinnik, Leningrad 1931,



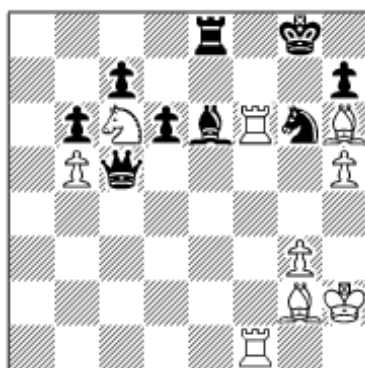
Botvinnik clinched the win nicely with **34...Rc4! 35.bxc4 Bc5 36.Kg2 Bxf2 37.Kxf2 b3 0-1**. Kasparov calls 34...Rc4 “A stunning blow — one of those you don’t see immediately (even Fritz only suggests the tedious 34...Rd3?! ...)” Yet Althöfer reports “But on my PC with (slow) 900 MHz Athlon the programs Fritz6, Fritz8, and Shredder8 all find 34...Rc4 in less than 5 seconds. And even the old-timer Fritz5.32

puts 34...Rc4 on rank 1 after about one minute.” And we found that our even older Fritz4, on an even slower 366 MHz machine, decided on 34...Rc4 in about 30 seconds. So one wonders if Kasparov is running on a still slower machine, or does not always allow enough time, which might lead to hidden errors when he relies too much on his “silicon friend.”

A more puzzling instance is Smyslov-Liberzon, Riga 1968, after **36.Rg5-f5**:



Here Smyslov wrote “Now h4-h5 cannot be averted, and Black has no satisfactory reply,” to which Kasparov replies “But the computer shows that he has!” Instead of **36...Bxb5??**, which lost quickly, “After 36...Be6! 37.Rf6 Kh8 38.Rf1 Qc3 39. h5 Qc5! the position would have remained completely unclear. White has good compensation, but both sides can play for a win.” Again our computer disagrees with Kasparov’s, rating the resulting position



not as unclear but strongly in Black’s favor (between -2.15 and -2.75 in most lines), and recommending that White vary earlier with 37.Ne7+ instead of 37.Rf6. Admittedly, the position is rather messy, and in practical terms Kasparov’s evaluation makes sense, so the truth may lie beyond the horizon of our perhaps overly materialistic machine.

We leave further considerations of such puzzling discrepancies to the hard-core

analysis fanatics for whom *MGP2* is designed. On the whole, we found Kasparov’s annotations both interesting and accurate. He sticks to the concrete and practical, not indulging in nonsense like Jonathan Rowson’s “existential responsibility” hypothesis to explain Tal’s style (see our review of *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins*).

If there is any nonsense, it lies in Kasparov’s occasional tendency toward unwarranted, sweeping generalizations in his chapter on Tal. Of a Tal-Smyslov game he says: “But remember we are talking about the year 1959, when the leading players ... were accustomed to thinking in general categories, and few believed that [Tal’s] ‘excessively’ concrete approach to the game could succeed at the very highest level.” (p. 411). Annotating

another 1959 game, he inflates a mistake by Fischer into “a staggering revelation: the capture of the piece had not even been considered by White — a vivid illustration of how non-concretely they thought in those times.” (p. 414). Such misleading exaggerations make 1959 sound like 1909. While Tal’s success did augment the trend, the primacy of concrete analysis over “general categories” was established among leading players well before 1959.

Besides annotating games, Kasparov surveys several players’ contributions to opening theory, and strategic and tactical themes in their play. For example, he writes “in the 1930s-1940s Botvinnik was the first to develop a deeply thought-out system of opening preparation, aimed at drawing the opponent into thoroughly analysed positions.” He then describes Botvinnik’s work with the French, Dutch, Slav, and Caro-Kann defenses, and certain recurring motifs, such as his “patented advance of the g-pawn” and his dynamic use of a supposedly weak isolated d-pawn.

These segments are worthwhile as far as they go, but they strike us as spotty and incomplete. Botvinnik’s is a reasonable length, but those for Smyslov, Bronstein, and Geller are much shorter, while Euwe, Keres, and Tal get none. The Smyslov segment looks at lines in the Slav, Grünfeld, Bogo-Indian, and Ruy López, but surprisingly not the Closed Sicilian, probably his signature opening. A discussion of the “Kiev School” mentions Bronstein’s innovations in the King’s Indian, but not Boleslavsky’s in the Sicilian. And some important themes, such as the “Soviet exchange sacrifice” (Euwe’s term), or Botvinnik’s work with knight outposts, are not mentioned at all. In his introduction to volume one, Kasparov stated that his goal was “to demonstrate the continuous progress of the game through the play of the world champions,” yet his treatment is hit-or-miss.

Other Considerations

Physically volume two is very like volume one, a handsome, well-bound hardback with paper and type of good quality. Grammatically the book is relatively clean, though the annoying prevalence of ellipses (...) continues, sometimes nonsensically, e.g. “the combination in it was far more complicated, irrational, and, if you lay your hand on... the computer keyboard, incorrect.” (p. 187). Use of the ellipsis must be common in Russian literature; only in books translated from Russian do we see it so often.

The translation, by Ken Neat, is clear and readable; only three real gaffes caught our eye: “The game fully answers to the highest predestination of the game”(p. 191), “a mass of mutual experiences and mistakes still lies ahead” (p. 93), and a reference to Smyslov in the 1970s as “a chess mammal” when surely “fossil” was meant (p. 375). But these few errors are trivial in a book of this size.

Conclusions

Our final assessment of *My Great Predecessors, Part II* is like Watson’s for Part I: “a valuable book with numerous weak spots.” On the positive side are:

§ Excellent and extensive annotations, correcting many long-standing errors and examining many complex games with a thoroughness and level of

detail rarely seen. For readers who enjoy poring over analyzed games, *MGP2* will provide many engrossing hours.

§ Reasonably competent profiles of the players, in particular of Botvinnik.

§ Some insightful surveys of various players' contributions to chess strategy and theory.

§ Except for those maddening ... ellipses, a technically well written book, physically well produced.

On the debit side of the ledger:

§ Superficial, careless handling of important historical questions in Soviet chess, ignoring relevant sources both Russian and Western.

§ Aside from the Botvinnik chapter, little biography or history not already found in commonly available sources.

§ Uneven surveys of strategic and theoretical legacies, missing some important contributions and giving none for some important players. The book thus partly fails in one of its stated goals.

If everything in *My Great Predecessors II* was as good as its annotations, we would recommend it highly. Instead it is a book trying to do several different things, and doing them not at all equally well. Potential buyers will have to decide which of its strengths and weaknesses matter most for them.

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