

BOOK
REVIEWS

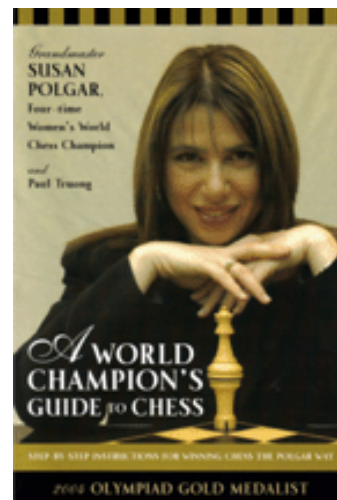
The Queen's Decree

Mark Donlan

A World Champion's Guide to Chess, by Susan Polgar and Paul Truong, 2005 Random House Puzzles and Games, Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 372pp. \$17.95

Susan Polgar has most certainly positioned herself as the queen of American chess, and rightfully so. Her unique situation in the chess world makes her the dominant female chess player in the United States. She tours the country as an ambassador of the game, operates the Polgar Chess Center, has an online column at ChessCafe.com, a chess blog, a series of DVDs, and several books, the latest of which is *A World Champion's Guide to Chess*.

The book was co-authored by her business manager Paul Truong and is subtitled, *Step by Step Instructions for Winning Chess the Polgar Way*. We also learn from the front cover that she is a four-time Women's World Champion and a 2004 Olympiad Gold Medalist. The back cover proclaims:



At age four, Susan Polgar won her first chess tournament with a perfect 10-0 against opponents three times her age. At twelve, she secured her first World Champion title. At twenty-one, she became the first woman ever to earn the Men's Grandmaster title. At twenty-three, she won her second and third World Championships. At twenty-six, Susan won her fourth World Championship and became the first World Champion – male or female – to win the triple crown in chess.

A World Champion's Guide to Chess reveals the step-by-step process that has made Susan Polgar a living legend. For beginner to intermediate players, Susan's exclusive training methods include:

- Chess basics, including checkmate, defense, and pawn promotion
- Hundreds of pattern recognition exercises

- Instruction on how to see up to six moves ahead
- Tips, etiquette, and other helpful advice

The introduction begins with her many accomplishments and then promises to reveal “exclusive training methods” that she has developed “and used to train thousands of students over the years.” She recommends that beginners and intermediate players “work mostly with tactics and endgames” because they are the foundations of chess and that opening study is important only at higher levels. It ends with instructions on how to make the most of the book by working through the problems repeatedly.

Next follows *The Essentials of Chess* which is divided into four tutorials: the board and the pieces, how the pieces move and capture, other rules (castling, en passant, promotion), and the next steps (draw rules, notation, basic principles). Following this the book is divided into four sections. Section one spans about 200 pages and covers the basics in 18 parts. Each part contains twenty problems, except for the first (checkmate in one move with each of the pieces) which has 100 problems, and the last (pattern recognition) which has twenty-four. Other topics include: capturing pieces, getting out of check, forks, pins, skewers, discovered attacks, double check, trapping pieces, stalemate, perpetual check, and more. Occasionally there are some embarrassing gaffes that indicate the book wasn’t well-proofed by the editors at Random House. For instance, in the section “Getting Out of Check,” problem #12 has the heading:

"Black’s bishop is checking the White king.
White is White’s best defense?"



And on page 103 we have, “Eventually, you will develop a sense for finding best solution.”

I found the “Getting Out of Check” section quite enlightening because many beginner books don’t focus on this aspect. Yet, time and again I have seen novices declare a checkmate because they couldn’t move their king out of check from a bishop on b5, when they could actually block the check with ...c6, ...Nc6, ...Nd7, ...Bd7, or ...Qd7. Almost inevitably they choose the latter move, which, of course, should lose the queen – but then white doesn’t take it – which shows why coaches need patience.

Still, after giving a lesson utilizing some of these exercises, the students easily solved the problems but then during the following games would automatically reach out to move their king as soon as they were in check. It goes to show that solving problems and putting ideas into practice are quite separate matters, and that repetition is important.

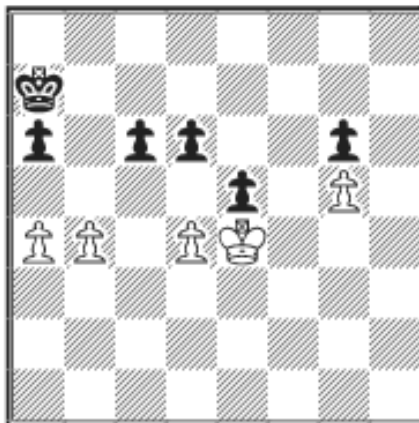
Polgar begins each part with a brief discussion and definition of the theme or motif under consideration. These can be as short as two paragraphs and are seldom longer than one page. Then come the problems centering on that theme in increasing order of difficulty. The problems are given three to a page with a lot of surrounding white space and the answers follow at the end of each section.

Here are some random problems from section one. Each is the last problem from its section, and so is supposed to be the hardest. It shouldn't be necessary to include the answers here:

Capturing Pieces

It is White's turn to move.

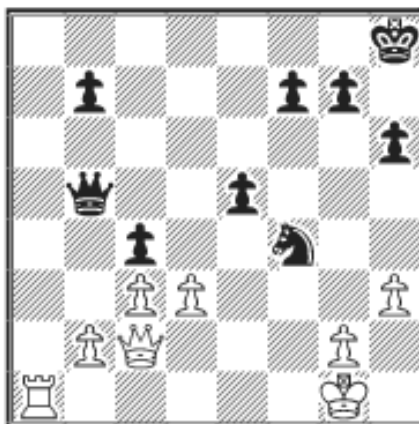
Can you find the best move for White to win material?



Discovered Attacks

White to move.

How can White set up a winning two-move discovered check?



Castling, Underpromotion, En Passant

White to move.

White is ahead material, but Black threatens checkmate.

Is there a defense for White?



Proper Defensive Choices

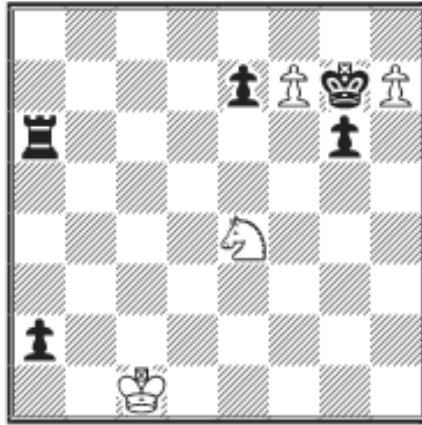
White to move. White is in check.

How should White respond?



Section two has 32 key endgame positions and it is from this point forward that the book could be considered for intermediate players. There is king and queen vs. king; king and rook vs. king; and king and minors pieces vs. king. In the king and pawn vs. king section “the rule of the square” has suddenly become “the square rule.” She also deals with rook endgames; queen endgames; and minor piece endings; as well as king and major piece vs. king and pawn; and king and minor piece vs. pawn, etc. This is all pretty much pedestrian fare for this type of title.

Section three offers 120 checkmate problems. There are 50 mates in one, 50 mates in two, and 20 mates in three. Here we are only told which side is to move and are not given any hint other than knowing there is a mate in a specific amount of moves. Below is the final mate in three:



Section four discusses ‘dos and don’ts’ of chess strategy for all phases of the game, along with some general principles, and provides two instructive games. The two games (Polagr-Larsen, Monte Carlo 1994, 1-0 in 42 moves and Agdestein-Polgar Oslo Rapid 1996, 0-1 in 21 moves) have comments after every move and diagrams after every move pair. The only other complete game is provided in the Next Steps section to illustrate chess notation.

The book finishes with two supplements: tips, etiquette, and helpful advice for players; and advice for parents and coaches. The latter especially is geared more towards tournament play.

This book takes the simple approach that repetitious problem solving ingrains the necessary habits to play chess well and I recommend it for all beginning players or for parents (or others) who wish to introduce chess to their children. It provides a solid foundation of chess knowledge in an accessible manner and one which is likely to be put into action if the user of the book follows the authors’ recommendations. Some books try to “blow the house down” with cutesy characters and graphics cluttering the pages; others sometimes provide too weak of a foundation to build your chess knowledge upon; but this one seems just right.

Order *Order A World Champion’s Guide to Chess*
by Susan Polgar and Paul Truong



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