



ChessCafe.com

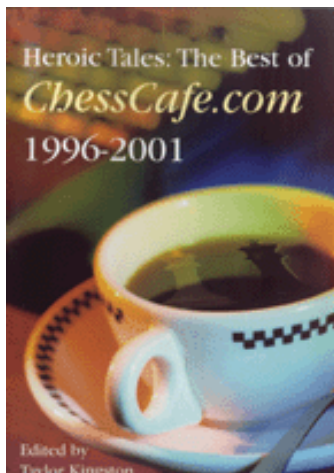
BOOK
REVIEWS

Girls Just Want to Have Fun (and crush you at the board)

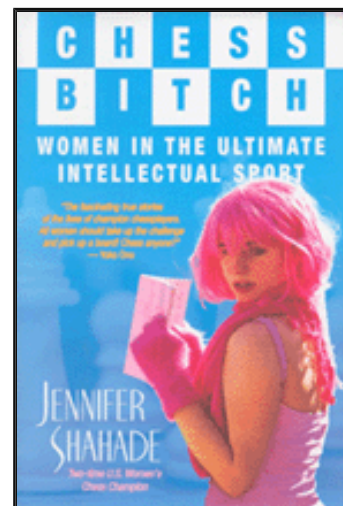
Taylor Kingston

Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport, by Jennifer Shahade, 2005 Siles Press, English Algebraic Notation, Hardcover, 320pp., \$24.00.

“Great chess moves can pierce me with a momentary but intense pleasure like a smile in a dream.”



Jennifer Shahade (born 1980) is one of America's most promising young chess masters. Currently rated 2332 (FIDE), she holds the Women's Grandmaster title, and has twice won the US Women's Championship (2002, 2004). A frequent contributor to *Chess Life* and other magazines, she has now produced her first book.



The early omens we saw on the cover of *Chess Bitch* seemed particularly dire: the dubious title, the silly photo of the author in a day-glo pink fright wig with matching fuzzy mittens, and the quote from Yoko Ono (place mental image of finger on epiglottis here), all induced a deep pessimism. Still, having been warned long ago against hasty superficial judgments (of which “a book by its cover” is the relevant subset), and knowing Siles Press to produce generally good work, we decided that our review would benefit from actually reading it.

This proved a good choice. Belying external indications, *CB* turns out to be an interesting and well-written book. It has three main themes: (1) an examination of gender inequality in chess, (2) a general survey of women in chess, both historical and current, and (3) Miss Shahade's personal odyssey in the chess world.

The first chapter, "Playing Like a Girl," jumps right into thorny gender questions: are women innately inferior to men as chessplayers? If so, for biological, psychological, or social reasons? Is there a real stylistic difference in their play? Why do relatively few women play? Do separate women-only titles and tournaments help or hinder their chess progress?

Shahade tends to view feminine inferiority as a myth, noting that the percentage of females in FIDE's top ranks corresponds to that of FIDE-registered females overall (about 6%), and finds claims of a feminine versus masculine chess style to be mostly conjectural and anecdotal with no statistical basis. She



Vera Menchik

debunks some of the rubbish offered to explain women's alleged inferiority, such as Reuben Fine's Freudian hypothesis. Amusing is the contradiction between GM William Lombardy saying "Women are not as good at chess as men because they are more interested in men than in chess," and several-time US Champion Alexander Shabalov's admitting that "In most games, I am thinking about girls for about fifty to seventy-five percent of the time."

Chapter two, "War-Torn Pioneers," is one of the most interesting, sketching the first two women to make any real dent in the male chess establishment, Vera Menchik and Sonia Graf.

The two best female players ever prior to World War II, they played the first official match for the women's world title in 1937. Shahade portrays them as polar opposites: the alluring, assertive Graf had many love affairs and played in attacking style, while the plain, reserved Menchik played careful, positional chess and lived a life of quiet domesticity. Menchik won the match decisively, $+9 -2 =5$.



SONIA GRAF
Sonia Graf

Next in Shahade's historical survey are the women of the USSR, who like the Soviet men monopolized their title for decades after WW II. She concentrates on the women of Georgia, in the Caucasus region south of Russia: Nona Gaprindashvili (the first woman to be awarded the full GM title), Nana Alexandria, Maya Chiburdanidze, and Nana Ioselani, who all won or played for the world title in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, as well as younger Georgians such as Tea Bosmoon-Lachava and Rusudan Goletani. The unusual Georgian culture, where a great many women play chess, is described.

A chapter deals with the history of women's chess in America, sketching the wealthy socialites Mona Karff and Gisela Gresser, who along with the "husky peasant" Mary Bain, dominated US women's chess in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. Shahade discusses the mercurial Lisa Lane, 1959 champion, whose press notoriety, eccentricities, and early retirement are likened to Fischer's. Figures from the 1970s and '80s include 7-time champion Diane Savereide, the strong talent Diana Lanni (whose chess progress was affected by drug addiction and prison time), and Rachel Crotto, one of the few woman "chess bums" of the time.

In other chapters the focus shifts more to women currently active in chess. Naturally a good many pages are devoted to the Polgar sisters, especially the youngest, Judit, who is

among the top GMs in the world. Shahade also describes the extensive promotional and training work of Susan Polgar, former women's world champion. Other chapters deal with the currently dominant Chinese women (Xie Jun, Zhu Chen, Xu Yuhua, Xue Zhao et al), European "divas" (Antoaneta Stefanova, Almira Skripchenko, Alexandra Kosteniuk, Pia Cramling), the up-and-coming Indians (Humpy Koneru, Viji Submarayan), émigrés to America (Irina Krush, Anna Zatonskih), Zambia's Linda Nangwale, Ecuador's Martha Fierro, Vietnam's Hoang Trang, Iran's Shadi Paridar, and others. Most of them, and the earlier women, are represented in 57 unannotated games at the end of the book.

Shahade's sketches are quite effective, the stories, personalities, attitudes and chess styles of these women really coming across the page, as in this description of Fierro:

"Martha couldn't get enough of the game. After rounds, she could usually be found playing casual blitz games with friends. She would tease her male opponents relentlessly. 'Oh no, you're going to lose to a girl! Has that ever happened to you before? ... I play better when I'm happy. Going out and having a good time before the game and sleeping till the round time is far better than staying up all night worrying about the openings.'"

Or this, about Irina Krush:

"Over the board, Irina enters another realm, one of deep mental focus, but she also seems to savor the physical process of making moves. After selecting her move, she places her pieces on the square with a determined yet tender touch, as if she is playing adagio piano. In immaculate handwriting, she records her move and then returns her concentrated gaze to the board."

There is a delightful contrast between Shahade's sympathetic, positive portraits of her contemporaries, and comparable writings by male masters. Often, strong chess rivalries between men (e.g. Morphy-Staunton, Tarrasch-Lasker, Capablanca-Alekhine, Karpov-Korchnoi etc.) have generated prose full of slander, hostility and mutual detestation. Instead, a feeling of camaraderie, even sisterhood, permeates Shahade's accounts, as here:

“[In] Armenia, I played against a Chinese girl, Kuang Yinghui ... Although we couldn’t talk to each other, our communication over the chessboard connected us without words. We walked home together ... After a few minutes, Yinghui grabbed my arm and began to sing in Chinese. We skipped together arm-in-arm the whole way back to our hotel.” (p. 141)

It is impossible to imagine, say, Karpov and Kasparov doing anything like that. While sometimes it seems male rivals would just as soon shoot each other, Shahade gives the impression that, as Cindy Lauper put it, “girls just want to have fun.”

That does not mean they lack competitiveness, as Shahade’s description of the infamous touch-move incident between Garry Kasparov and Judit Polgar at Linares 1993 makes clear. Or when Krush says about knocking Zu Chen out of the 2000 world championship, “I was so excited after this game,” Irina told me “that I threw up.” Shahade makes clear that the ladies’ sweet smiles contain fangs — but unlike the men, they generally show only at the board.

Shahade does bare her teeth on a few occasions, as when discussing the ChessBase website’s penchant for intentionally sexist features (“Ukrainian Chess Babes in Bikinis!”). She is also somewhat critical of some players’ sex-oriented self-promotion, such as Alexandra Kosteniuk and Maria Manakova. As a personal aside, we’ll mention that the one time we saw Miss Shahade in person, at the 2001 USATE, she stood out from the crowd of unkempt and sartorially-challenged male players like a *Vogue* model in a homeless shelter. We feel it’s to her credit that she has had the self-respect to avoid the cheesecake route, despite being quite able to pull it off.

Shahade has a good eye for local color, as when she describes an unsuspecting customer getting charged \$500 for a glass of champagne in a mafia-run Budapest bar. She also comes across as an intelligent and sensitive person, rather than a chess-blinded monomaniac, as when she describes her visceral reaction to poverty in India:



Jennifer Shahade

“I had read ... about impoverished Indians cutting off their limbs to increase their worth as beggars. I thought this had to be an exaggeration, but the frequency of mutilation and bizarre disfigurements cast aside my doubts. An elderly woman with no teeth approached my cab and knelt beside me. I gave her the ten-rupee note I was using as a bookmark in a contemporary, post-modern novel ... I felt my literary pretensions being dwarfed by my embarrassment.” (p. 213)

The book ends with a round-by-round account of Shahade’s victory in the 2004 US Women’s Championship, followed by a glossary of chess terms, the aforementioned 57 games, several pages of endnotes, a bibliography, and an index of names. The glossary is significant, making the book more accessible to non-players. Shahade clearly hopes to interest and inspire more girls and young women to take up chess. We rather think it will.

As might be expected with a young writer’s first book, *CB* is not without flaws. Miss Shahade’s skills are at least head-and-shoulders above most writers her age, but her inexperience shows now and then, as when she uses “mercantilist” for mercenary or “coffee-shop” for coffeehouse. There are too many misspellings (“Jereon” Piket, “Emmanuel” Lasker, “Bessaberia” for Bessarabia), and at least one misquote (yours truly is said to written “chess cake calendar” instead of cheesecake).

There are some historical inaccuracies: Paul Morphy did not die insane and did not drown, the Elo rating system was first devised in the 1950s, not the 1960s, the Kasparov-Kramnik world championship match was in 2000, not 2002. However, with books not intended as scholarly histories, we tend to take a lenient view of such incidental errors (as we do of her misquoting us, though we would advise more care when quoting, say, Edward Winter).

Occasionally there are what some readers may consider lapses

in taste, for example in a chapter on a transsexual hermaphrodite who underwent surgery to become female, the pre- and post-operative quality of his/her orgasms is described. As for the title, which has aroused some controversy, we are ambivalent. Issues of taste aside, it has little relevance to the book's content, and none of the women it describes (with the possible exception of Gaprindashvili) seem to fit the word's usual connotation of hot-tempered irritability. Feminist rhetoric about "reclaiming" the term strikes us as like arguing that men should reclaim, say, "jerk." On the other hand, we can't think of a more tasteful title that would have attracted as much attention.

On the whole, we can't help but like this book. Miss Shahade has a knack for sentences that express the game's fascination, such as our epigraph above, or this: "Losing track of time while immersed in chess fills me with a satisfaction so profound — for me the way being alive is supposed to feel."

That she feels that way about chess, can write like that about it, and play that well, indicates that her future in the game is bright, both as a player and writer. Questions about its title aside, *Chess Bitch* is a promising literary debut.

[Order](#) *Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport*
by Jennifer Shahade

 [TOP OF PAGE](#)

 [HOME](#)

 [COLUMNS](#)

 [LINKS](#)

 [ARCHIVES](#)

 [ABOUT THE
CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)

[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)

[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2006 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"The Chess Cafe®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.