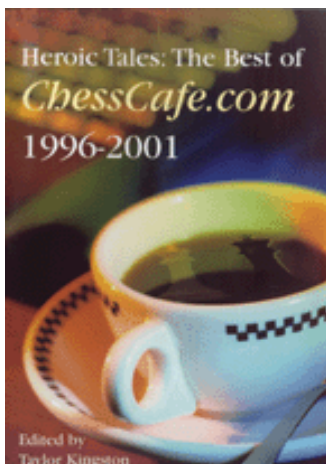




## BOOK REVIEWS



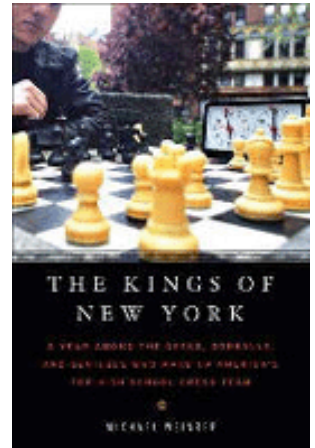
## Masterful Portrait

### Steve Goldberg

*The Kings of New York*, by Michael Weinreb, 2007 Gotham Books, Hardcover, 289pp. \$26.00

Wander over to the book and equipment stall of any national chess tournament and you'll find hundreds of books and DVDs on every conceivable opening, on tactics and puzzles ad infinitum, on mastering the endgame, on game collections and so on. It's enough to keep the chess junkie browsing until his clock starts for the next round.

However, it is rarer to find books that investigate chess culture itself. True, there are plenty of biographies and portraits of well-known players past and present, such as the Kasparov series of *My Great Predecessors* books and the earlier *Profile of a Prodigy*. Yet in *The Kings of New York*, author Michael Weinreb paints a masterful portrait of the vibrant scholastic chess world as it exists in the twenty-first century.



The subtitle of the book, *A Year Among the Geeks, Oddballs, and Geniuses Who Make Up America's Top High School Chess Team*, explains the contents better than the title itself. Weinreb actually spent over two years shadowing the Edward R. Murrow High School chess team, following coach Eliot Weiss and his diverse band of players throughout New York, to Nashville for the 2005 Supnationals and through rural Tennessee for what must have seemed like a trip into another world to the streetwise kids from Brooklyn.

*The Kings of New York* is a visually attractive book, with the cover sporting a close-up view of an outdoor chess game in progress, with an adjacent analog chess clock. There are several photos scattered among the nearly three hundred pages, as well as a number of chess diagrams and brief explanations using algebraic notation, although the diagrams aren't really necessary.

After a brief prologue in which the team's characters are introduced, the book is divided into three parts: Opening, Middle Game and Endgame, with each "section" containing multiple chapters. The text follows a roughly chronological sequence from fall 2004 through spring 2006, although Weinreb takes occasional detours to delve into issues of interest, such as the unique history of Edward R. Murrow High School, the home environment of a number of the team's players, coverage of the Chess in Schools and Right Move programs, and the dearth of female chess players in the United States.

The author is a sportswriter, not a chess historian or even an active player, and he describes how he came across this story as follows:

"A math teacher at Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn had faxed a press release to every newspaper and television station in the metro area, trumpeting his team's most recent national high-school chess championship. This is something he does virtually every spring, since, most years, his team manages to win a championship of one kind or another, at the local or the state or the national level."

These faxes came across Weinreb's sports desk at *Newsday* and he eventually decided to explore the matter. He has also written for such media outlets as the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *ESPN*.

Weinreb has an intriguing knack for immersing the reader into the scenes he describes, as if the reader were the proverbial "fly on the wall." Even when he's not presenting comedic dialogue or specific action, the text flows easily. Weinreb manages to describe a world where players sit for hours with little movement and only hushed whispers, and manages to do so in such a manner that the reader anxiously awaits the next turn of events. One prominent chess coach told me he picked up the book and didn't put it down until he finished it six hours later. Personally, I was sorry to reach the final pages, knowing the end of the story was at hand.



*The Murrow team at the White House*

Here are some examples of Weinreb's mastery:

Regarding one of the team's top players, Weinreb writes that a fellow student:

"Can't figure if he's ever serious with anyone, and she can't determine if his constant wise-cracking reeks of self-importance or self-flagellation or some improbable combination of the two. It takes time to realize that most chess players, like many artists, are constantly bounding between these opposing poles."

"There is a certain underlying paranoia present at most chess tournaments: There are fears of elaborate cheating schemes involving laptop computers and listening devices, fears of extraneous noise, fears of directors and organizers conspiring to affect the results, fears of attractive women, fears of opponents' diet soft drinks encroaching upon the board, and ... there are fears of adults morphing into the overbearing beasts who have succeeded in wringing all the pleasure out of competitive youth sports."

Regarding chess ratings:

"It is impossible to ignore the numbers, or to attend a chess tournament without hearing the numbers bandied back and forth. In time, your number becomes your defining trait."

Weinreb further elaborates:

"It is impossible to escape the tyranny of the ratings system in chess. It is a measure of one's intelligence, one's self-worth, one's identity, and one's importance within the societal hierarchy."

Here is his description of the team's foray into rural Tennessee during the Supernationals:

“The van careens southward on Interstate 24, past Smyrna and Murfreesboro and Gossburg and Beechgrove and Hoodoo, through a torrential rainstorm, past the Jack Daniel Distillery and the Busy Corner Truck Stop and a Wal-Mart and billboards for Big Daddy’s Outdoors and Davy Crockett’s Roadhouse, just shy of the northern border of Alabama, before it reverses course, heading north onto State Route 28, past a trailer park and a roadhouse saloon and then . . . well, where did Whitwell go, exactly? How did they miss it? Was that the whole town? So back goes the van one more time, this time making a right onto Spring Street, and a right onto Main Street, and here they are, at Whitwell Middle School, a low-slung building located across the street from three separate churches, in the middle of — in the middle of nothing. No security guards at the front door. No bodegas at the end of the block. And Mr. Weiss expects them to actually get out of this van? Right here? ‘They’re gonna get a police escort to walk us around,’ Shawn says.”

After leaving Whitwell Middle School, the group returns to the Jack Daniels Distillery they saw earlier, the description of which is some of Weinreb’s best work in the book:

“The man standing before them says his name is David but this David is like no man they have ever seen before. This David is a freaking Goliath. He is built like a whiskey barrel, and he is wearing a pair of Dickies overalls and a floppy-brimmed hat. Perhaps what is most noticeable about this David is that he does not have a face. Instead, David has a beard, a gnarly white thicket, an independent organism that long ago swallowed and digested his facial features. Where the hair ceases to grow, somewhere within the cavernous fault lines of David’s neck, a small cluster of moles have sprouted. It is not easy to tell what’s going on with David, whether he’s playing up the redneck persona for the purposes of serving as a proper tour guide at this particular venue, the Jack Daniels whiskey distillery. David speaks often of life down here in the ‘holler,’ this place where the men are men and the liquor flows freely. ‘Is this guy’s accent for real?’ Ilya asks while trying to decipher this strange new language, and when he’s told that yes, it probably is, he nods. ‘All right,’ he says. ‘Because the only American accent I’ve ever heard is a Brooklyn accent.’

‘This guy,’ Nile whispers, ‘He looks like somebody from a video game.’”

Later, Weinreb notes that this tour guide:

“Lifts the lids on the vats so everyone, even the underaged, can catch a whiff. . . They all get their whiffs: Dalphe exhales deeply before breathing in, and Nile inhales twice, and Dalphe starts to giggle and can’t stop. Before he can help it, he’s got tears in his eyes, and this whole odd experiment has gone haywire by now, with the youngest member of the nation’s best chess team drunk on fumes while being led around by a gnome in a Tennessee holler. How’s that for an experiment in diversity?”

The author has clearly done his research. His bibliography consists of twenty-two books and articles, twelve websites of relevance, and his acknowledgement section states:

“I am grateful to the many people who did their best to educate me on the finer points of the game. I start with Eliot Weiss, who, from the beginning, when I was merely a newspaper reporter outlining a nebulous project, did not hesitate to share both his time and his knowledge. From there, I met Elizabeth Vicary, who is not only a deeply committed teacher and an outstanding chess player herself, but is also a wonderful storyteller. Without her help, this book would have been much less interesting. I am also grateful to John Galvin, Jennifer and Greg Shahade, and the administration at I.S. 318; to Fred Goldhirsch, Doug Bellizzi, Kofi and Najee McGreen, John McManus and the other employees and volunteers at the Right Move; to the management and staff of the Chess-in-the-Schools Foundation, including Marley Kaplan and Sarah Pitari; to Josh Waitzkin, Lev Khariton, Robby Adamson, Josh Weinstein, Irina Krush, Marty Grund, and Bruce

Pandolfini, for providing so much background; to Saul Bruckner and the current administration at Murrow High School; to Joan DuBois and the United States Chess Federation; and to all the other tournament directors and organizers and teachers and volunteers and competitors who allowed me to eavesdrop on their events.”

The final paragraph of the book asserts (don't worry – this won't ruin it for you):

“Most of all, I am grateful to the small group of teenagers and their parents who entrusted me with their secrets, both on the board and away from it. I did my best to portray both aspects of their lives as faithfully and compassionately as I could. I may still be a novice, but I will miss those days of peering over their shoulders at those sixty-four squares and attempting to read their minds.”

Veteran chess players will note isolated subtle errors of chess terminology. For example, Weinreb writes, “With his sixth move, Ilya takes a knight with his bishop and briefly puts Weinstein into check, essentially sacrificing his bishop to gain an advantage in position.” The knight-for-bishop swap is not generally referred to as a sacrifice, although I would agree that this is perhaps nit-picking. A few pages later it is noted that “Oscar, playing with white, opens with the Orangutan, pawn to b4. Li answers by moving his knight to f7.” Presumably, the knight actually went to f6. Later in the book Josh Weinstein is labeled a “master level” player, although he was actually rated about 2100 at the time, putting him in the category of “expert level.”

I can easily overlook these minor points, however, since the author has stated that “I tried very hard not to screw up the descriptions of games and positions in Kings—I tried to respect the game as much as possible.”

*The Kings of New York* is a thoroughly enjoyable book that I highly recommend to all chess parents, coaches and teachers, as well as to those even remotely intrigued by the mysterious world of chess. Chessplayers will readily relate to the tension and emotions that Weinreb so carefully presents. However, because of the occasional use of language not suitable for pre-teens, I give the book a “PG-13” rating. Nevertheless, I suspect that most adults will have trouble putting the book down once they have cracked it open.

Years ago, [Searching for Bobby Fischer](#) thrilled the chess world, and in December 2005, the A&E movie [Knights of the South Bronx](#) illustrated some of the wonders that chess offers. With *The Kings of New York*, Michael Weinreb attempts to put chess back on the national radar. If the journalism world offered “norms” based on top-quality work, Michael Weinreb would earn a grandmaster norm for *The Kings of New York*.

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For additional background information about the author, the book and the team, see my April 2007 Scholastic Chess [column](#), as it is entirely devoted to *The Kings of New York*.

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**[Order](#)** *The Kings of New York*  
by Michael Weinreb

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