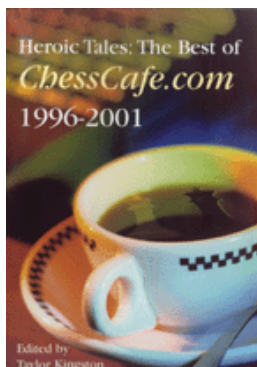




## BOOK REVIEWS



## An Unhealthy Game?

Steve Goldberg

*King's Gambit*, by Paul Hoffman, 2007 Hyperion, Hardcover, 424pp. \$24.95

The book *King's Gambit* is subtitled, "A Son, a Father, and the World's Most Dangerous Game." From the title and subtitle, I surmised that perhaps *King's Gambit* tells the story of some type of international espionage and intrigue, with shady characters and complex family issues.

I wasn't far off.

This is a difficult book to read. The author is an accomplished writer, with numerous published books and articles to his credit. He is a Harvard graduate, former editor-in-chief of *Discover*, and former president of Encyclopedia Britannica. The text is well written and extremely well researched and documented. Yet, the subject matter is troubling.



### Two Story Lines

There are two primary story lines to the book – Paul Hoffman's rocky relationship with his father, and the deceitful, possibly psychotic, sometimes homicidal or suicidal chess players throughout the history of the game he loves deeply. This is not a feel-good story.

Hoffman has a pained heart, with unresolved issues regarding his relationship with his late father. He shares his dysfunctional childhood and his misplaced trust in his father, and the reader can't help but feel compassion for the boy, and later the man, who only wanted love, respect and trustworthiness from his own father.

The author learned the game of chess at an early age, became quite involved, and then stepped away from it in his later high school years. Some twenty-five years later, having gone through difficult personal and professional issues, he returned to the game, hobnobbing with some of the most prominent names in the chess world. A good portion of the book is spent relating the less-than-stellar character traits of players past and present. Hoffman is pleased to find a few top-level players with a primarily healthy psychological makeup, but he states unequivocally, "I believe that madness is rampant in championship chess, particularly in the tier of players just below the top."

The book's organization is as follows:

- Acknowledgments
- Ch. 1: The Insanity Defense
- Ch. 2: Fathers and Sons
- Ch. 3: The Pandolfini Variation
- Ch. 4: Russian Domination
- Ch. 5: An American in Moscow
- Ch. 6: Anatomy of a Hustler
- Ch. 7: Female Counterplay
- Ch. 8: "I'm Not the World's Biggest Geek"
- Ch. 9: Gadhafi's Gambit and Mr. Paul
- Ch. 10: Praying for the Pseudo Trompowsky
- Ch. 11: "I Stuck It to Him Real Good, Way Up Him"
- Ch. 12: Endgame: Your Finger Beats Kasparov!
- Annotations
- Source Notes
- Index

Hoffman consulted with a number of prominent chess players in the production of his book, among them Pascal Charbonneau (now his closest chess friend), Jennifer Shahade, Greg Shahade, Garry Kasparov, Irina Krush, Joel Lautier, Bruce Pandolfini and Nigel Short.



*Paul Hoffman*

### **A Somber Beginning**

For the first seventeen pages of the book, the reader is regaled with stories that could have graced the covers of supermarket tabloids. The author relates that GM Nicholas Rossolimo died by falling down a flight of stairs, presumably following a night of excessive drinking. Hoffman describes that he was nearly struck with a chess clock hurled by a distraught loser at a tournament, and provides examples of rude behavior by Garry Kasparov. He discusses the alleged paranoia of Paul Morphy and Bobby Fischer, and reviews a litany of chess suicides: GM Lembit Oll in 1999, IM Alvis Vitolins in 1997, IM Karen Grigorian in 1989, IM Georgy Ilivitsky in 1989, and Curt von Bardeleben back in 1924. The most recent example Hoffman cites is the sad case of nineteen-year-old Jessie Gilbert, a member of the English women's chess team. In June 2006 she jumped from an eighth-floor hotel window to her death.

By this point, I was ready to put the book down, but then Hoffman changes gears and reviews some of his own personal and professional highlights and lowlights. I thought perhaps if the reader can survive the first dozen and a half pages, the book becomes much more readable.

In reality, though, through much of the text, Hoffman continues to relate story after story illustrating the darker side of prominent chess players, alternately returning to episodes of his own family's shortcomings. Many of his tales are based on events he personally witnessed, or that were personally witnessed by those he interviewed.

The entire book is not depressing, however. In chapter three, Hoffman relates the fascinating story of how Bruce Pandolfini came to partner with Shelby Lyman in the now-famous live coverage of the 1972 Fischer-Spassky world championship match.

### **Bruce Pandolfini and Fischer-Spassky**

Some time prior to the title match, Pandolfini ran into Shelby Lyman, an old friend, who told Pandolfini that he would be covering the upcoming Fischer-Spassky match on PBS, providing five hours of live coverage daily. A few days later Lyman's producer called Pandolfini to ask if he'd be interested in working as a backup analyst on the show. They weren't able to pay Pandolfini or even provide him a hotel room in Albany, New York, where the studio was located. The producer did say, however, that they would cover his train fare between Manhattan and Albany (Pandolfini would have to make the three-hour trip each way every other day). Pandolfini had to give up a job working at Strand's Bookstore, which he enjoyed, but he immediately agreed, even though he had little expectation for the program. As it turned out, the show was a big success, garnering record ratings for PBS, seen by millions of viewers. Hoffman relates that at one point, executives at the television station told Pandolfini that three hundred viewers had called requesting chess lessons from him.

A rather humorous anecdote appears in chapter four. At the 2003 match between Garry Kasparov and the computer X3D Fritz, Hoffman served as a commentator, along with GM Yasser Seirawan and GM Maurice Ashley, for ESPN2 which was covering the event live. He notes that the restroom was too far from the set for the analysts to be able to run to during breaks. After several hours, with bladders ready to burst, Hoffman, Seirawan and Ashley were told "Try to hold it, guys. You don't want to short-circuit the set!"

### **Bureaucratic Snafus**

Hoffman's sordid tales also include organizational mayhem. He recalls part of the bureaucratic snafu surrounding the makeup of the 2004 U.S. Women's Olympiad team. While Susan Polgar, Irina Krush and Anna Zatonskih were clearly to be on the team, the fourth and final position was up in the air. If player ratings alone were to be the deciding factor, it appeared that Jennifer Shahade would beat out Rusa Goletiani for this spot, but there were those who favored Goletiani and pressed the United States Chess Federation (USCF) to include a 2003 Venezuelan tournament in its ratings, a tournament in which Goletiani took first place. The USCF acquiesced, but this led to objections that this was unfair to Shahade. In the end, a hastily-

arranged seven-person 2004 women's championship was played, to determine the final spot on the team. Shahade won this event, thus securing her Olympiad position.

For unknown reasons, Hoffman left out the equally confounding controversy surrounding Anna Hahn. As the reigning 2003 U.S. Women's champion, it was thought by many that she had qualified for the 2004 Olympiad squad, and was apparently told so by one or more members of the USCF Executive Board. But as with Jennifer Shahade, there were presumably powers-that-be that didn't necessarily want Hahn on the team. She declined to participate in the 2004 women's championship tournament to determine the final spot on the Olympiad team, a spot she had thought she had already earned.

Another organizational embarrassment occurred when FIDE, the world governing body for chess, opted to hold its 2004 world championship in Tripoli, Libya. The fact that the Israeli contingent of grandmasters would not be permitted to participate was of no concern to FIDE.

In an effort to observe how a championship contender prepares for an important tournament, Hoffman accompanied Pascal Charbonneau to Tripoli. It is comedic the way Hoffman describes his treatment by Libyan airport security and later, by intelligence officers monitoring the chess championship. First he is detained for hours at the airport, and repeatedly threatened with being put on a flight to unfriendly destinations without his passport being returned. Then at the site of the championship, he is shadowed by "information officers" who suspect he is a CIA agent.

While in Libya, Hoffman met with Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, the eccentric FIDE president. He asked Ilyumzhinov about the lack of Israeli players in Tripoli and was assured that they had been welcome, but couldn't come possibly because they had sick pets they had to attend to.

Hoffman relates in the book that "I was saddened that the World Chess Championship, which was once an ennobling clash of minds, had become the plaything of a dictator who had no compunctions about holding the competition in a lawless, dangerous place with no chess tradition and virtually no fans. For me the royal game had fallen into the sewer." I can't say I disagree with these sentiments.

Jennifer Shahade was interviewed at length by Hoffman and offers a different, refreshing perspective. "Chess was the first thing I was really passionate about," she is quoted as saying. "After I found passion in chess, it was easier to find passion elsewhere, in relationships, in art, in good writing, in simply being alive."

#### **Extensive Research**

The "Annotations" section of the book should not be overlooked. These are Hoffman's footnotes and provide much in the way of interesting historical information. For example, regarding former world champion Mikhail Tal, Hoffman writes, "Many of Tal's fellow grandmasters could not accept that they were losing to him because they were bamboozled by his chessboard fireworks. Instead they blamed their defeat on his hypnotic stare. At Curacao 1962, the Hungarian-born grandmaster Pal Benko wore dark glasses to avoid being mesmerized, but still expired in only thirty moves. Tal had a sense of humor, and he donned a pair of oversized novelty spectacles when he faced Benko later."

Hoffman's exhaustive research for the book is impressive, although a few errors may have crept in. A chess blogger noted that GM Florin Gheorghiu's name was repeatedly misspelled (as "Gheorgiu"), and he questions a few details about a simultaneous exhibition Hoffman played in against Bent Larsen.

For the most part, however, I take Hoffman's word that the various events he describes are factually correct, and some are in fact well known. Any errors will surely come to light by competent chess historians. Where we may differ is in the extent of the "madness" Hoffman describes. While the chess world is undeniably populated with what seems to be more than its share of oddballs, I think most knowledgeable observers would agree that this is the exception, not the rule. Certainly this has been my experience. Hoffman may be on target, however, when it comes to the organizational foibles that have plagued both FIDE and the USCF.

#### **Chess Psychosis Poll**

In response to *King's Gambit*, I took a very unscientific, informal poll of a number of prominent people in the chess community. I asked very directly if they were of the opinion that psychosis is rampant in top-level chess, as stipulated by Paul Hoffman.

Interestingly, no one specifically denied this assertion, although a couple people were a bit offended, I think, by the question. One astute international master noted that for most people in the working world, a certain semblance of political correctness and human civility is expected, whereas in the realm of world-class players, poor behavior has long been tolerated. Another strong player commented that the isolation and long hours of individual study required to achieve a high degree of success in chess can tend to have its ill effects. More than one person described chess as being quite unhealthy.

So what to make of *King's Gambit*? I found the background information and historical insights to be of interest, particularly the tale of how Bruce Pandolfini teamed with Shelby Lyman to

cover the 1972 Fischer-Spassky match. As for the many character failings Hoffman relates, I would simply echo the sentiments of a chess blogger who was one of the recipients of my informal "chess psychosis" poll. He commented that bad behavior makes the headlines, but he prefers to concentrate on the many positive stories the chess world has to offer.

So I'll finish on a positive note. The most heartwarming part of *King's Gambit*, for me, was the dedication page. It read simply, "To Alexander the Greatest," in honor of the author's son.

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by Paul Hoffman

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