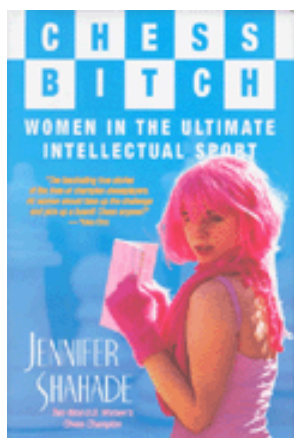




SKITTLES  
ROOM



## A Conversation with Jennifer Shahade, Author of *Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport*

by Howard Goldowsky

Nobody knows for sure why large gender gaps exist in certain professions – like why, for example, 73% of all computer scientists, 90% of all physicists, and 91% of all aerospace engineers are male, or why 91% of all speech therapists and 98% of all kindergarten teachers are female. These numbers come from the latest online reports by the U.S. Department of Labor and Statistics and the American Physical Society, and show the latest raw data in a long history of gender research. So it was a curious incident when, in January 2005, Harvard University president, Lawrence Summers, ignited public controversy after he suggested disparities like these could originate from innate biological differences, not just social factors. “These are things that need to be studied,” he said.

Two-time U.S. women’s chess champion, Jennifer Shahade, the author of the new book, *Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport* (Siles Press, 2005), believes that neither men nor women come into this world with any innate chess-playing advantage. According to her book, only 3% of adult tournament chess players in the United States and only 6% of FIDE rated players are female. She thinks that people too often confuse this low rate of female participation in chess with proof of low levels of performance. Shahade argues, instead, that ostensible biological obstacles, such as menstruation or tendencies to lack killer instinct, turn out to be self-fulfilling prophecies.

In her first chapter, Shahade writes:

*Playing a highly focused board game for four to six hours is difficult, and neither men nor women are born with the concentration and motivation to excel at it. For that reason, I find the emphasis on women’s biological inferiority absurd: when it comes to chess, we are all born inept.*

Combine this thought with her belief that female biological processes should not prove a general handicap, and Shahade posits that there is no reason why women cannot play chess as well as men. After all, in professions like medicine and law the gender gap used to be as wide as it currently is in chess, and now there is none.

But Shahade only engages the gender gap debate, menstruation, and other controversial topics (such as what the queen and bitch have in common, whether it's right to stereotype women's playing styles, and others), in chapter one; it's the lengthy profiles written after chapter one, which show the real impetus of her writing. The majority of the book is a mixture of well-written autobiography and third-person profiles of familiar (and not so familiar) past and current female chess champions, demonstrating why chess, a game historically dominated by men, is becoming more and more a sport excelled at and enjoyed by women. By profiling female chess champions, Shahade supports the bold assertions of her first chapter with strong empirical evidence and focuses on the positive aspects of being female. In their own way, all of these female chess stars ask the same famous question the Boston Red Sox asked themselves before going on to overcome perennial obstacles to win their first World Series in 86 years: "Why not us?" If successful, *Chess Bitch* will encourage female chess players everywhere to adopt this question as their mantra.

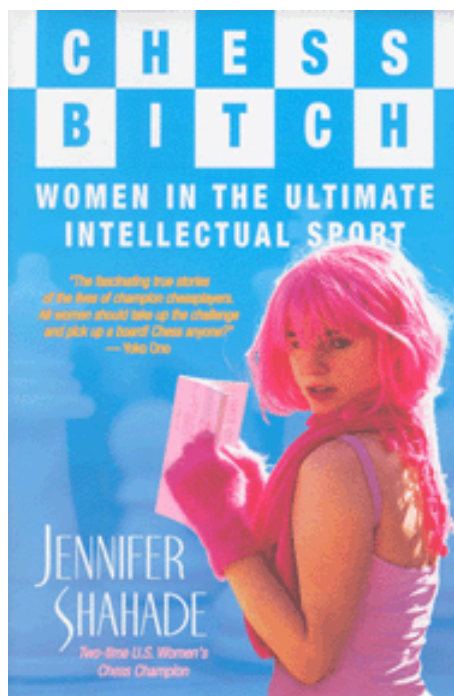
Women's chess has always fascinated me. So when I learned, almost a year ago, that Shahade was writing a book to celebrate the achievements of women chess players, I jumped at the opportunity to interview her, to share her thoughts with others. For more than six months, we exchanged emails, and questions and answers about her work. It was a long process. What follows is an edited and condensed version of that email conversation.

**Howard Goldowsky:** What motivated you to write this book? What kind of message about women's chess are you trying to get out?

**Jennifer Shahade:** I was motivated to write this book for a long time before I got a contract to write it. There haven't been many books on the subject of women's chess – the few that exist are usually narrow in focus (about a particular player for instance) or academic theses. By contrast, there are dozens of books written about women in sports. I saw a gap in literature, and became motivated to fill it. Then, at the closing party of the 2003 U.S Women's Championship (just hours after I lost a three way playoff for the women's title), Jeremy Silman complimented my writing in *Chess Life* and asked if I would consider writing a book. We talked about it, and I forgot about it till a month later, when I went to a reading in New York City for the book, *Catfight: Women and Competition*. This book was filled with negative descriptions of women in petty fights over men, job perks, who looked better. I remember reading it at my kitchen table, with steam coming out of my ears. So I rushed to my computer, to write an email to Jeremy and follow up on our talk. When I saw my inbox, there was, coincidentally, an email

already sitting there from Jeremy, asking me if I was serious about his book proposal. This was a weird coincidence and a good omen.

The message I'm trying to get out is that there are brilliant and interesting women from various backgrounds, time periods, and points of view who play chess and contribute to its culture and its growth. Some are feminist, others scoff at feminism; some like to model and dress up and others are very modest. In all cases, they are role models and champions that should be given more attention, which would motivate more young women to play chess.



**HG:** Why did you choose the title, *Chess Bitch*? Why are you using the word “Bitch” when it clearly has negative connotations?

**JS:** I use the word “Bitch” to reclaim the word from its cultural usage, which is often to malign any woman who yearns for or has power. (For example, *Bitch Magazine – Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, reclaims the word “bitch” in the same way.) Women who are upset at the way the world is set up have every right to be “bitchy” about it. I don’t consider myself bitchy enough actually. I often let people say or do things I despise without saying anything, even though I know that broken plates in the moment are better than years of coiled anger. Having “Chess Bitch” as a working title helped me as a writer, to take risks and not be too soft on viewpoints I disagreed with. A spineless writer is no writer at all. Of course, I knew some people would object to this title prior to reading the book, not excluding certain women I profiled, but I think many will change their mind after reading it. I also like the way “Chess Bitch” sounds, and it might make people pick up the book because they might wonder if I have something to say. The more people who read the book, the better, because the issues I address are vital

and so many of these amazing women do not get enough attention outside or within the chess world.

**HG:** In previous interviews you've acknowledged an interest in writing and literature, and with the publication of *Chess Bitch* you've established yourself as a published author. Do you see yourself as a chess player first and as a writer second or do you now consider yourself a writer equally as much as you consider yourself a chess player?

**JS:** I went to school for literature and writing, and ever since I was a teenager I've rarely been without a notebook and a book. I'm in love with sentences just as much as I am with chess combinations. In fact, I count writing binges as the happiest moments of my life and my greatest desire is to continue to have challenging writing projects in the future. What I really love, however, is digging deeper into the world, particularly when I profile other people, because it makes me stop thinking about myself.

**HG:** You're a role model to many young girls and hope to reach even more young females with the publication of your book. How do you rationalize the inclusion of R-rated content? Will you recommend your book to your young female students, or is your book intended for adults only?

**JS:** I think my book is appropriate for girls past the age of thirteen, although obviously this would differ from case to case. I don't think any girl will be traumatized or negatively influenced by reading my book – to the contrary, I would have loved to read a book like this in my early teens. Nevertheless, I'd be open to writing another book some day, more suited to a younger audience.

**HG:** So, then, what can be done to encourage more participation in chess among women and girls? Both Maurice Ashley (*Chess for Success*) and Susan Polgar (*Breaking Through*) have addressed this topic in their recent books.

**JS:** One of the reasons I wrote *Chess Bitch* was to increase the exposure of women's chess and to represent it for what it is, a hip and exciting sport for women and girls. A movie about girls or women in chess or even a hip character on a TV show would probably be the quickest route to a female chess boom in America. Things like the high profile simul Susan gave in Florida and the Irina Krush-Zhu Chen match in Times Square also help. A steady stream of such exposure would make it clear that women play chess professionally, not as an occasional talent show.

**HG:** Why are there so few women interested in chess in the first place? Assuming that an equal number of boys and girls learn chess at an early age, why do girls drop out at a higher rate than boys? Can extra funding for women's chess reverse this trend?

**JS:** There are many cultural reasons that women don't stay with chess. It is not as culturally acceptable for women to engage in obsessive behaviors, like locking themselves up with stacks of chess books. Also, there are fewer role models for female chess players. If the exposure of women's chess increases, more women would flock to the game. I do think extra funding for women's chess would help, especially to fund things like the Girls' Academy I taught, as part of the Chess In The Schools program in New York. A couple dozen of the most talented girls, (aged eight to fifteen), from CIS, (a non profit which teaches inner city New York kids chess), came to monthly daylong training seminars at the midtown office. It was a great program – the girls really responded to it – they became friendly but there was also a strong air of competition.

**HG:** It would be a spectacular achievement if the male/female ratio in professional chess becomes more equal, like it has become in some other historically male dominated professions, like physician and attorney. When would be an appropriate time to eliminate separate “women only” events, if ever?

**JS:** Well, the world is still set up in a way where men have most of the power; their voices are louder and better listened to. So even if the male to female ratio in chess were closer to even, I would still support the occasional separate women's tournament.

There is a different energy to any event in which only females are participating. Women are forced to compete on equal terms with each other, not at all distracted by what the men in the room think of them.

**HG:** Do you think that having a separate prize fund for women or having a separate US Women's Championship is a good thing? On one hand, separating the sexes concedes that women are not as skilled as men, perpetuating the belief that women can't play chess as well; on the other hand, dangling carrots provide an incentive for women to compete, providing an opportunity to perhaps some day perform equally.

**JS:** Separating the sexes, in my opinion, does not concede anything. A women's tournament is just a tournament in which women play. Until the women participants sign a contract that says playing means they have inherently weaker chess minds than men, no such assumption can be made. I do think that it's preferable for women to play together with men for the majority of tournaments, but occasional separate tournaments and financial incentives are good, because it will help even out the disturbing gender disparity in our sport.

**HG:** At the latest National Open (June, 2005), there were two qualifying spots available for women for the US Championship, but only one woman (class B player, Kelly Cottrell) registered to qualify, and she won the spot.

Why do you think this happened? What can be done about this lack of interest in US women's chess?

**JS:** First of all, I don't think it's such a big problem that Kelly Cottrell qualified. Maybe that will encourage her to study like mad for the next year and get her to the expert level. It's always good to get another female to that level. I guess some people would argue that there are more "deserving" players, but I think it's OK to mix it up once in a while.

I think the America's Foundation for Chess is doing a great job considering the state of American chess, but they can't make miracles. To qualify for the championship a woman has to spend a thousand dollars and then more money to go to San Diego, not to mention time off work. If a woman player believes she's likely to win one of the lowest (\$2,200) cash prizes, it's kind of a labor of love to play in the tournament, and after a few years of this she might get discouraged. If this tournament were on TV prizes would naturally go up. I think if the U.S. Chess Championship were on TV and the first prize was \$50,000 we'd see an influx of women vying for those qualifying spots. Also, if there was more sponsorship for chess, there could be a separate qualifying tournament, which would make everything more fair and easy.

**HG:** Let's talk more about the book. In your chapter on Georgian women's chess, you actually quote Rusudan Goletiani lamenting about the lack of former Soviet sponsorship:

*Ever since the break-up of the Soviet Union, there has been no government support for chess players. So if you want any money to play in tournaments, you have to go to private sponsors and you have to self-promote, and this is not for me.*

Duif Calvin, who has written about chess sponsorship for ChessBase.com, has argued that attitudes of former Soviet players, like Goletiani, just don't cut it here in the United States, where private sponsorship is imperative if one wants chess to become as lucrative as other niche sports. What do you think about this?

**JS:** I agree with Duif. It's very difficult. But in order to popularize chess, players need to play and market themselves simultaneously. Hopefully, someday chess players will be able to afford publicists and managers, to do promotions for them.

**HG:** Early on in *Chess Bitch* you talk about your psychological weaknesses, at one point comparing your psychological weaknesses to those of Vera Menchik. How does it feel to be candid about your emotional and psychological make-up as a chess player?

**JS:** Well, in early drafts of my book I included far less personal anecdotes,

but more and more I realized that since I analyze other women's personalities and styles, it was only fair to subject myself to the same sort of scrutiny. Also, I realized it would make the book much more readable to use my own experiences as a narrative thread. It is a little weird that people who know nothing about me will suddenly know so many intimate details about my feelings, childhood, and desires. But it's also very exciting and cleansing. I figure if someone likes me after reading this book, I have a friend.

**HG:** On a guest post at Mig Greengard's ChessNinja message board, you said that you didn't think you would be playing chess at all right now if you were not a woman. Can you elaborate on this?

**JS:** When I was a teenager I always studied with the goal of becoming a strong player, not a female champion. Of course I wanted to win the U.S Women's Championship for the money and the exposure, but when I was most addicted to chess the first thing I wanted to use the money on would have been training and tournaments, to improve my standard among men. If I weren't female, it wouldn't have been practical for me to pursue chess to the extent that I did. I was always very serious about my studies, never had a lot of money, and got serious about the game too late (13) to consider delaying college. And of course, it made it easier because as a female I didn't have to compare myself directly with my brother, who has so much talent for games. I think different types of brains can succeed in chess – most important, however, is motivation. My own motivation to follow through and go for the third IM norm, and perhaps beyond, did dip when I got my book contract for *Chess Bitch*. Following through and producing a great book became my primary goal. Therefore, in the two years writing *Chess Bitch*, (2003-2004), I stopped studying chess seriously, with the exceptions of study cram weeks before big tournaments and of course the wonderful training sessions for the 2004 Women's Olympic team.

**HG:** In *Chess Bitch*, you mention your affinity for Marcel Duchamp, even admitting on page 65 that you keep a picture of him in your wallet. In an interview for the Philadelphia Independent, you said, "Duchamp was a great chess player. He was fanatically interested in it. He was obsessed with movement, and thought that the movement of the pieces in the minds of the chess players was pure and beautiful." Could you please elaborate more with respect to your ideas about chess as art and chess as drama?

**JS:** When I played Irina Krush in the Viewing Room Art Gallery, we dressed in all black and all white. The idea was for the game to be a performance art as well as a competition. Chess is more psychologically dramatic than anything I know. What can compare to the feeling of losing a chess game? Unfortunately, for the popularity of chess, the soaring and crushing extremes of winning, losing, playing brilliantly, blundering, are hard to translate, but in my opinion not impossible. I hoped to achieve that in writing about certain matches in my book. As for Duchamp's arguments, I

do agree that chessplayers create movement, painting in their minds. Chess is transcendent. Looking at a great combination, even as a kid, made me lose my sense of time and sent tingles up my spine; it made my heart pound. It was my first experience of artistic beauty – I was able to recognize it more easily later in life because of chess.

**HG:** A number of the women you profiled, such as Almira Skripchenko and Viji Submarayan, have been influenced by the Objectivist philosophy of Ayn Rand. In Almira's case, Rand's ideas helped develop in her an anti-empathy state of mind, often beneficial to chess players. How do you feel about the benefits of Ayn Rand's works? Do you think having too much empathy hurts a chess player? When you play a tournament game against one of your friends, how do you transform your state of mind from friend to foe?

**JS:** I never had a problem with feeling pity for my opponent so I was fascinated that Almira and Viji both responded to Ayn Rand so positively. When I play a tournament game against a friend, I'm often happy because I feel like the stakes are raised and the game becomes more interesting. The biggest danger is if I play a friend who just won a blitz match against me. I might lose confidence and assume I'm the weaker player. I don't like Ayn Rand's philosophy, but that's a subject for another interview!

**HG:** If female chess players want to flaunt their bodies as well as their talent at the board, then this is their individual decision. Do women like Kosteniuk, who inspire awe with their bodies as well as their minds, promote chess? Do they harm it? In your chapter on European divas, chapter nine, after conceding a few supporting points for women like Kosteniuk, you write:

*I think that chess can do better than imitate the worst aspects of mainstream culture. There are ways to show that chess players can be hip and attractive without stooping to bikini shots and measurements.*

You finish the chapter off with:

*Journalists and fans don't go around commenting on the size of Kasparov's cock. In the chess world, the sexuality of the top male players is private and implied, while a woman's sexuality is open to all.*

These are some pretty provocative words. How strongly do you stand by them?

**JS:** Kosteniuk is a grandmaster chess player who has created a campaign to promote herself. I admire her energy, and what she has done is clearly good for chess; however, in my book I am also interested in the deeper

psychological meanings of this kind of attention. What does it say about how we value women?

By the way, a lot of the press I've gotten in chess and non-chess media has focused on my appearance. But I recognize a lot of danger in this kind of attention, as well, so I think it needs to be carefully watched. For instance, one man from the chess world recently told me, "Well, Jennifer, you have another good ten years..." This is one of the most absurd things anyone has ever said to me, and I'm lucky to have the self-confidence and feminist background to recognize how offensive this comment was. So the danger in focusing too much on appearance is that appearance is fleeting and women have a lot more to offer to the world than fleeting aspects of their being.

**HG:** Recently, a number of websites have emerged, such as [World Chess Beauty Contest](#), pimping the good looks of female chess players. How do you feel about this, with respect to your answer above?

**JS:** I despise this idea to rate women based on their appearances, especially because the judges are prominent male grandmasters. This is potentially humiliating and hurtful to women. Another reason I didn't want to be included in the website was its sloppy style – it looks very thrown together and unprofessional. If it was highly stylized, I might be able to accept the claims of the creators that the goal was to raise money for women's chess.

Women should be competing to be smarter, kinder, and more conversationally adept, just as much as they are competing over who has better bodies or hair. I am sure that many great works of art and great deeds have been dumped because a woman felt pressured to go to the gym or spend all her money on clothes. Obviously, there are positive athletic and artistic components to working out and making yourself beautiful. For women who are really into either of those things, I support them. After all, I go to the gym, and I also like to dress up and go shopping; however, at other times I feel the strain of such activities and realize that I'm not doing it for myself anymore – then I try, not always successfully, to stop. There was one time when I was applying lipstick and Susan Polgar looked at me and said in as if in shock, "You wear makeup?" I was pretty flattered that I was able to create this image of nonchalance.

**HG:** Speaking of Susan Polgar, you paint a colorful and balanced portrait of her in your book, and wonder if she, now recently single again, will celebrate her new independence in other areas of her life. How do you evaluate Susan's attempts to promote chess within the last number of years?

**JS:** Well, I am always surprised by how open Susan is to new ideas and points of view. Even though she is conservative, she is not dogmatic. She listens to other people. That's probably one of the reasons she's such a good chess player. I think Susan's promotions of chess have been successful,

especially recently, like the simultaneous in Florida.

**HG:** Regarding the hardships of menstruation, you claim in the first chapter of *Chess Bitch*, contrary to Susan Polgar, that we should not discuss menstruation and other potential difficulties for women chess players because they can turn into “self-fulfilling prophecies.” For some women menstruation is a problem but for others it’s not. Why can’t women just ignore this issue and win, despite the dialogue?

**JS:** If a woman has a problem because of menstruation, then she can tell me if she wants to, she can post it on the Internet, sky paint it. What bothers me is the declaration that menstruation prevents women from being the players that men are. That’s just ridiculous. When someone talks about women being generally impaired, instead of their particular idiosyncrasies, that’s where as a writer and as a feminist, I feel it appropriate, even necessary, to counter their opinion. By the way, I started my period at a chess tournament (at age 13) and I won the game I was playing!

**HG:** You played in the No Limit Hold’Em World Series of Poker ladies event on June 26, 2005; yet, on the first page of *Chess Bitch* you tell the world how you’re not a gambler. Can you please explain this? Have you changed your personal philosophy towards gambling?

**JS:** When I wrote *Chess Bitch* I did not play poker. And to a certain extent, I still don’t consider myself a gambler. Poker has many other sides – a psychological mirror, a game, a social activity. I’m not very emotional about poker – I consider it more of a business opportunity. Trust me, you won’t be seeing me anytime soon at the slots machine or throwing hundreds down on the craps table.

**HG:** Poker or chess, which demands a better memory? Which requires better nerves at critical moments? Which is more artistic? Which is sexier?

**JS:** Chess is more artistic, more consistently intense, and more demanding of sheer brainpower. Poker is more about staying alert and accumulating small edges and having faith that those small edges will make you a long-term winner. Probably poker requires more courage at certain crucial moments, because after all, it’s real money you’re putting on the table. Both chess and poker reward strong memories and intuition developed through years of experience. Although I enjoy poker, I don’t find it spiritually fulfilling in the way that chess can be, and that’s the main difference for me. When I was most into chess, chess was the only thing. I don’t think poker could ever be the only thing.

**HG:** What female chess player do you admire most, and why?

**JS:** There are too many! I just wrote a book full of women I admire, and to

pick one is very difficult. Some of the funniest profiles to write in the book were those on Stefanova, Susan and Judit Polgar, Sasha Kosteniuk, Zhu Chen, and Nona Gaprindiasvili. Also, the weaker players, such as Angela Alston and Linda Nangwale, have great strength and eloquence. I guess if I had to pick one, I would say Stefanova, because she enjoys life, stands her ground, and plays chess very creatively.

**HG:** What have you learned about yourself, as both a chess player and as a person, by profiling all of these women chess champions?

**JS:** I have learned an incredible amount about writing, interviewing, researching, and being organized. For instance, I'm generally rather disorganized, but that's not really an option when writing a book, so I sucked it up and went for the color coded folders!

I realized that having a huge project like this makes me happy, especially in the winter, when it's easier to get sad. I learned that I enjoy writing in the morning, and there is such a thing as too much coffee.

Emotionally, it's also been intense, partly because I reveal so much about myself in *Chess Bitch*. In chess, you are primarily responsible for your success, but in writing your hopes and fears are pinned on the audience. I gained a lot of confidence because the project was so difficult and there were definitely people, including myself at times, who doubted my abilities to complete it in style.

**HG:** Thank you, Jen, for your time, and your graciousness in answering these questions.

**JS:** Thank you.

### **For Further Reading**

Jennifer Shahade's [website](#)

[Black and White match](#) with Irina Krush:

[Website](#) devoted to women in chess.

### **Polgar Sisters**

Susan Polgar and Jacob Shutzman, *Queen of the King's Game*, CompChess, 1997

Tibor Karolyi, *Judit Polgar: The Princess of Chess*, Batsford, 2004

Susan Polgar and Paul Truong, *Breaking Through*, Everyman, 2005

Cathy Forbes, *The Polgar Sisters: Training or Genius*, Holt, 1992

### Other Biography

Alexandra Kosteniuk, *How I Became A Grandmaster at Age 14*, ARCS, 2001

John Graham, *Women in Chess*, McFarland, 1987

Maria Ivanka, [\*Silver Queen: The Glamour and Shadow of Success\*](#), Kinizsi, 2002

### Miscellaneous

Marilyn Yalom, [\*Birth of the Chess Queen\*](#), Harper Collins, 2004

### Gender Studies

Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*, Harper Collins, 1990

Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, Basic Books, 2003

Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, William Morrow, 1991

### Noteworthy Jen Shahade Interviews

Brian Killegrew, "Profiles in Chess: Jennifer Shahade", *Chess Life*, August 2002

Jeremy Silman [interviews](#) Jen Shahade

Nathania Rubin, "Queen of Brooklyn", *Philadelphia Independent*, Late Winter, 2004

Carly Jacobs, "Knight Moves", *Bust*, Spring 2004

Paul Hoffman, "[Chess Queen](#)", *Smithsonian*, August 2003

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by Jennifer Shahade

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