



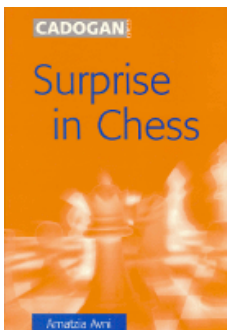
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Predicting the Unexpected?

Taylor Kingston

"I distinguish between the picturesque and the beautiful, and I add to them, in the laying out of the grounds, a third and distinct character, which I call unexpectedness." — from *Headlong Hall* (1816), by Thomas Love Peacock.

Surprise in Chess by Amatzia Avni, 1998 Cadogan Books, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 112pp., \$17.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$14.95)

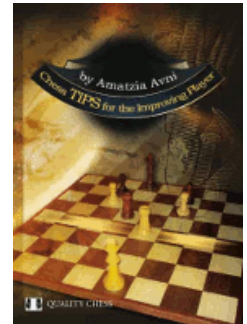
As both a FIDE master and psychologist, Amatzia Avni of Israel has shown a penchant for writing serious books about various psychological aspects of chess, notably *Creative Chess* (1991) and *Danger in Chess* (1994). Now *Surprise in Chess* continues along these lines.

The value of surprise moves has long been appreciated, but in Avni's opinion, serious study of this aspect of chess has been lacking. To be sure, in the field of opening theory the search for novelty has preoccupied grandmasters for at least a hundred years, but in the middle game, where it has equal or greater value, no coherent theory of surprise nor even much understanding of its elements has been attempted, according to Avni. He notes that some books such as Spielmann's *The Art of Sacrifice* (1935) touch on surprise, but seem to consider it something mercurial and purely situational, not subject to generalization or analysis. Avni attempts such analysis, with mixed results.

The cover of *Surprise in Chess* promises "a detailed understanding of the many ways of surprising the opponent ... a whole theory of surprise, which the reader can absorb and make a fundamental part of his approach to chess." This is a degree of exaggeration unusual even for cover blurbs. As Avni makes clear in his introduction, he does not presume to have devised a comprehensive theory of surprise; rather his less ambitious aim is "to outline a chess body of knowledge on the subject." After first presenting a discussion on surprise from various military sources, ranging from Clausewitz to Pentagon and Red Army studies, he presents his outline in the chapter "The Five Faces of Surprise in Chess." These five faces are as follows:

(1) "Surprise in intention"; e.g., a player who spurns a draw offer despite having no special incentive to win, or a move which appears directed toward one goal but is actually aimed at another, an example being **B. Lalic - Hoi**, Manila Olympiad, 1992

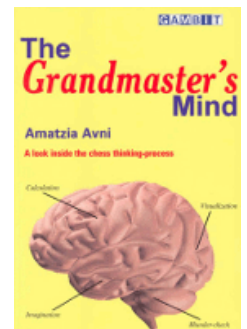
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[FEN "r2q1rk1/p4pbp/2ppbnp1/8/3BP3/2N2P2/PPPQ2PP/2KR1B1R w - - 0 13"]

In this position, White played **13.h4**, apparently a common kingside attacking thrust, and Black replied with a stock counter on the other wing, **13...Qa5**. However, this was a mistake met by **14.Qg5!**, when Black had nothing better than the embarrassing double tempo loss **14...Qd8**, since if **14...Qxg5?** **15.hg5** the weakness at h7 is serious. The standard appearance of **13.h4** obscured its non-standard intent, which was all along to enable **Qd2-g5** in the event of a black queen sortie.

(2) "Surprise in location," such as winning by moving backwards or towards the rim, as in **Pritchett - Ristoja**, European Junior Championship, 1969-70: **1. e4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Nc3 c6 4.Bc4 d5 5.ed5 b5 6.Bb3 b4 7.Nce2 cd5 8.Bd2! Na6 9.a3 ba3 10.Rxa3 Nc7 11.Qa1! a6 12.Ba5! Nf6 13.Ba4+!**



[FEN "r1bqk2r/2n1ppbp/p4np1/B2p4/B2P4/R7/1PP1NPPP/Q3K1NR b Kkq - 0 13"]

By the unusual maneuver of moving half his pieces to the a-file White gained a distinct advantage and won in thirty-two moves.

(3) "Surprise in timing," such as delaying an offensive even when the position seems ready for it (a characteristic of Salo Flohr's play), or striking before it appears feasible (*a la* Tal).

(4) "Doctrinal surprise"; i.e., deliberate violations of accepted principles, such as mutilating one's own position, an example being **Bertok-Damjanovic**, Yugoslavia 1966

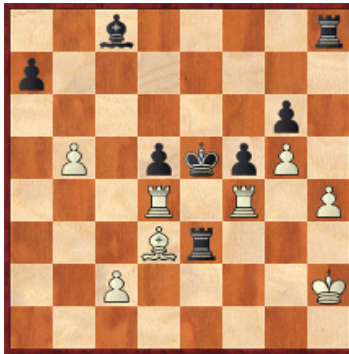


[FEN "1r3bk1/p2q1p1p/2p2p2/2p2p2/Q1P5/1P2R1PB/P2r1P1P/R5K1 w - - 0 22"]

White here, apparently grossly overconfident due to Black's bizarre pawn structure, played the careless **22.Kg2??**, and lost with striking quickness after **22...Qd4! 23.Rae1 Re8! 24.Kg1 f4 25.gf4 Qxf4 26.Rg3+ Kh8 27.Rf1 Re1! 0-1** (28.Rg2 Rxf1+ 29.Kxf1 Qf3).

On a higher level, the whole playing styles of Petrosian and Ulf Andersson are cited as doctrinally surprising, as they are primarily defensive rather than aggressive.

(5) "Surprises in Technology," The least well-defined of Avni's five categories; he seems to use it as a catch-all for anything not fitting in the previous four. In doing so he stretches the term "technology" beyond recognition. He gives examples of rare tactical themes, such as **NN-Mannheimer**, Frankfurt 1921



[FEN "2b4r/p7/6p1/1P1pkpP1/3R1R1P/
3Br3/2P4K/8 B - - 0 1"]

Here Black played **1...Re4!**, winning a piece. However, Avni also includes as "technology" everything from opening innovations to unsportsmanlike behavior, such as showing up late or insulting one's opponent in print!

At this point (about half-way through the book), Avni's attempt at a coherent outline of his subject seems to break down. The two following chapters, "Special Cases of Chess Surprise" and "More About Surprise in Chess", are mostly just a collection of surprising positions. These are accompanied by text that varies from the equivocal - "Is it possible to classify certain chess positions as 'prone to surprise'? Well, yes and no." - to the tautological - "But if, contrary to our expectations, our opponent behaves differently, then surprise occurs." (It is also rumored that the next Pope is likely to be a Catholic).

However, he recovers, in the section "Countering Surprise", to give some useful practical advice on recovering quickly from surprise moves by one's opponent, or even anticipating them in advance. He also unearths some rare examples where surprise is discussed in master game annotations. These are supplemented by contributions from current Israeli GMs Eran Liss, Gad Rechlis, Ronen Har-Zvi, Ilan Manor, Ram Soffer, and IM Artur Kogan, wherein they relate their thought processes during surprise situations in actual games. These give the student some inkling of how to deduce the opponent's intentions, which is a key to devising a surprise counter-blow. The book concludes with eleven exercises involving surprise solutions.

In Avni's opinion, as knowledge of standard chess technique improves and spreads, becoming common property, success will go increasingly to players who can generate surprising moves and plans. Avni apparently believes that a player can train himself to generate surprise, just as he can train himself to master the Lucena position or the strategy of minority attack. An intriguing idea, though historically some of the most imaginative chessplayers, such as Tal, Marshall, or Spielmann, have also been among the most intuitive, their "surprise- generators" powered more by innate talent than any formal process. However, it was once thought that attack and combination flowed purely from individual genius, until Morphy and Steinitz showed that rational preconditions existed and could be attained by intelligent development. Perhaps surprise has similar principles that can be learned and mastered (in which case the net effect will ultimately be to push the threshold of surprise

back to a deeper level, just as now innovation in some lines of the Ruy Lopez has been pushed back beyond the thirtieth move), and in keeping with the reply to our opening epigraph from Thomas Love Peacock: "Pray, sir, by what name do you call this character [unexpectedness], when a person walks around the grounds for the second time?"

In practical terms, I would think that relatively few players can put Avni's ideas to use. For those below, say, national master strength the primary task is to learn chess fundamentals, to grasp the rules rather than the exceptions. To seek the unusual when one does not fully understand the usual seems counterproductive. However, once a certain level of knowledge is attained, one needs to foster imagination and originality to progress. If one is at that point, *Surprise in Chess* could very likely help, if for no other reason than the many examples of imaginative play it provides.

Avni's book is hardly the comprehensive theory promised by its cover, but it does appear to be a small but worthwhile advance of knowledge in a little understood area, and a useful aid for those seeking to put more imagination into their play.

Order [Surprise in Chess](#)
by Amatzia Avni

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