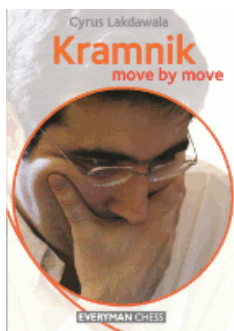




## Book Reviews



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### Rating Chart



## Holy Mother of Alekhine!

by John D. Warth

*Kramnik: Move by Move*, by Cyrus Lakdawala, Everyman Chess 2012, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 408pp. \$29.95 (ChessCafe Price \$23.95)

*Kramnik: Move by Move* features the games of former world champion Vladimir Kramnik, selected for their instructional value and enhanced by the author with annotations, proxy questions, and exercises that challenge readers to speed to victory by finding winning routes at tactical and strategic crossroads.

As with other books of this series, Lakdawala's move by move method is designed to engage readers through interaction. Lakdawala, an international master and trainer, is among the most colorful authors writing in chess today. When he hits his mark, readers are in for a lot of fun with raucous turns of phrase designed to bring chess pieces to life. In Lakdawala's world, bishops dance, rooks rampage, and pawns plunder the board.

With an ear for language, a diabolical wit, and an outrageous imagination, the author instructs and entertains like few others. When his colorful pen is subservient to the lesson at hand, Lakdawala splits the arrow with his own. At other times, his nimble wit overrides the lesson and the author's instructional arrows careen wildly into the darkened depths of his densely-forested imagination. Though these flights of fancy can slay, they can also distract from the learning. Whether the reader is up for all this or not, depends on one's tastes, tolerances, and sense of humor. Certainly, few authors on chess can enhance the game with such clever commentary or Lakdawala's fantastically vivid and unique anthropomorphic embellishments.

Lakdawala's book is comprised of sixty Kramnik games played against thirty-nine opponents in twenty-one openings. The book is divided into six chapters on the following topics: attack, defense, dynamics, imbalances, advantages, and endings. Lakdawala seems particularly opinionated about Kramnik's approach to the latter, indicating that it is to bypass the middlegame and go straight for the endgame. Compared to Lakdawala's *Capablanca: Move by Move*, the author has created a new category for Kramnik's games:

"In my Capablanca book the chapters were ordered the following way: Attack, Defense, Exploiting Imbalances, Accumulating Advantages, and Endings. When researching Kramnik's games, I found that a percentage of his best games failed to fit snugly into any of the above categories. A new category, The Dynamic Element, needed inclusion." [pg. 149]

Lakdawala goes on to explain that with dynamics, players often sacrifice material or take risks to obtain compensation. This can mean trying to win with a number of objectives not necessarily involving material gains. Dynamic goals can create advantageous imbalances on the board, including enabling or creating passed pawns; opening the center for positional advantage; or seizing the power of the initiative. Much of today's chess is dynamic, with players bent on creating advantages in deceptive ways that blend traditional tactical traps with subtle positional strategy, or with stealthy prepared moves that unwary opponents might miss.

The book's format is designed to simulate a chess lesson by posing questions at critical junctures, and explaining positional dynamics and general principles. One of the strengths of the book is Lakdawala's recognition and exploitation of subtle transitional moments in Kramnik's games and

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identifying their underlying themes. The author has a rare gift for simplifying complex positions. For instructional clarity he has few equals. Many authors falter by relying on computer variations and long lists of moves to make their points. Lakdawala's approach neither assumes too much nor too little about what readers might already understand. Lakdawala skillfully breaks down all the parts of a position like a master mechanic disassembling an engine before a class: first explaining how all parts function as a whole, then taking it apart piece by piece. Afterward he directs his acolytes to reassemble each part of the engine in a hands-on exercise. The author's exercises involve positional diagrams that leave problems for readers to solve. Most will test players' combinational, positional, and evaluation skills. But the bulk of the book is based on Lakdawala's own game analysis.

Here are Lakdawala's thoughts couched in some self-inflicted humor. The diagram arises after Black's ninth move ...Bb7 from a Semi-Slav opening. Kramnik plays white in this game against Akopian from Dortmund, 2000. [pg. 97]



[FEN "rn1qkb1r/pb3p2/2p1pn1p/1p4p1/2pPP3/2N2NB1/PP2BPPP/R2QK2R"]

"The tabiya position of the Moscow line, I can't help but think that I would lose effortlessly on either side of the board!"

**Question:** What does White exactly get for the pawn?

**Answer:** 1. Development lead.

2. Strong pawn centre.

3. Loosened pawns in front of Black's king position.

**Conclusion:** The sum of these factors almost always leads to White having some kind of attacking chances.

**Question:** Full compensation for White?

**Answer:** Definitely. Not only does White score a very solid 56%, but the fact that so many top GMs are eager to take on White's position says a lot.

[Note: By "take on" the author means "to play" this position, a point I found confusing at first by wrongly assuming the author meant "to capture."]

As this example indicates, Lakdawala teaches general principles framed within a broader context. Lakdawala has a clear head for analysis and his lucid verbal comments are in sharp contrast to the computational move-crunching methods of computers. His advice is easy to understand and given within a thematic framework. Some guidelines include how to maintain and exploit the power of the bishop-pair; how the power of the initiative can trump material advantages; and why players should avoid confrontation when lagging behind in piece development. The author uses well-chosen examples to illustrate these fundamentals. He is a strong believer in the traditional ways of learning the game, using books and boards and limiting the cold analysis and long continuations generated by computers. The author believes that people have a unique understanding of the game that computers cannot grasp.

Indeed, human superiority at recognizing and exploiting subtle positional finesses over computers is a recurrent theme. Often Lakdawala's disdain for the limitations of computer analysis boils out from his pen. Most biting are his comments on Houdini's move choice from the game Kramnik-Kasparov, Novgorod 1997. The diagram is not from the book, but from the position under discussion after White's **12.bxa5**:



[FEN "r1bq1rk1/1pp1npbp/3p2p1/P2Pp3/2P1Pn2/2N2N2/P4PPP/R1BQRBK1"]

"*Houdini*, currently the strongest program on the market, suggests the rather stupid move 12 b5?, closing off his own strong wing after 12... b6!. If they ever come up with a chess program with any measure of strategic finesse, my guess is they could take over the world and enslave humanity." [pg. 92]

The author has a flair for the dramatic, but his instructive advice is generally sound. His teaching methods will not be in accord with everyone's sensibilities, but may be a welcome alternative to the dry writing typical in many of today's books on chess. Lakdawala's writing is in a class of its own. His offbeat and self-indulgent literary twists litter the pages of these games. His game comments can range from the amusingly lighthearted to the darkly sinister. Let's look at a list of Lakdawala's outrageously allegorical observations and outbursts. Like stories from a children's book, he brings chess to life with all the dangers of a fairy tale:

- "Holy mother of Alekhine!" [pg. 139]
- "The wind unexpectedly changes direction. Kramnik willfully crosses the line between Benoni dogma and open heresy." [pg. 192]
- "A rule of war: never display your strengths to your enemy if you can help it. ... Now all who dare to enter the queen's orbit are vacuumed into her black hole of power. Threats soon begin to rain in staccato percussion." [pg. 328]
- "La la la la White's king daydreams on his pleasant Sunday afternoon stroll in the park." [pg. 197]
- "The bishop, after performing a devotional gesture, shoots to b7, unceremoniously trapping White's knight." [pg. 140]
- "The bishop dances a baroque quadrille to join the party. The number of hostiles swell as attackers seep through the porous defensive perimeter." [pg. 81]
- "The bishop solemnly places his hand upon the h-pawn's head and recites a benediction. The moment has arrived, as Black intensifies the heat from low burn to high." [pg. 67]
- "The slippery canned peach slides down Black's gullet, even before he has a chance to chew." [pg. 147]
- "The impounded king remains locked in the warehouse on h1, hoping to score some much needed Prozac very soon." [pg. 386]
- "White's king claims he isn't crying, citing a lame excuse about just having cut up an onion for the spaghetti sauce." [pg. 386]
- "The pawns swarm the lone bishop like paparazzi giving chase to Kim Kardashian." [pg. 282]


All of these add the human spice of allegory. Occasionally though, the author slips disturbingly into the darker side of our nature. Though too graphic to quote, let's just say that Lakdawala's battle-weary kings often die in scenes of Shakespearean anguish.

Like these kings of old, it is often Kramnik himself who gets lost in the pages of these tactical melees. Though the focus is on games, a little more background on Kramnik and his accomplishments would have added more depth to this volume. Nevertheless, few will quibble when Kramnik's games can prove so fascinating. A simple flip to almost any page reveals dramatic diagrams that depict the dynamic confrontations that are the foundation for the lessons of this book.

Fittingly, we will end with this summary on Kramnik's endgame, perhaps the most distinctive description of the champion's enigmatic style:

"Not since Capablanca has a world champion relied so heavily on his endgame skills as Kramnik. But while the freewheeling Capa basically winged it and just landed in endings, come what may, Kramnik has blurred the traditional boundary of *opening, middlegame and ending* by embracing his bypassed middlegame philosophy one step further. His method is more systematized and home prepared. He is the only world champion who has knowingly schemed to set up a portion of his opening repertoire to circumvent the middlegame completely and plunge immediately into the ending. His opponents – all armed with complex theoretical novelties in the King's Indian on the 25th move – are rendered harmless, suddenly transported in disorienting fashion to a drugged, sedate kingdom in which Kramnik rules. It is as if a wizard casts an incantation which stupefies and puts to sleep the invading – and now loitering! – enemy front line."

At its heart, *Kramnik: Move by Move* is a serious work of first-class instruction. Written for players who want clear advice on planning from a trainer who can help simplify the complexities of chess, Lakdawala gets to the crux of positions without trivializing them. That this book can entertain while it instructs makes it a rare find. This is the only serious book on chess that has ever made me laugh aloud. *Kramnik: Move by Move* is a paradox of chess instruction. Profound, but funny: serious, yet surprising, Lakdawala's delightful book is in a class beyond its own. Though rated R for its verbal depictions of excessively graphic violence.

**My assessment of this book:** 

**Order [Kramnik: Move by Move \(Ebook\)](#)**

by Cyrus Lakdawala

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