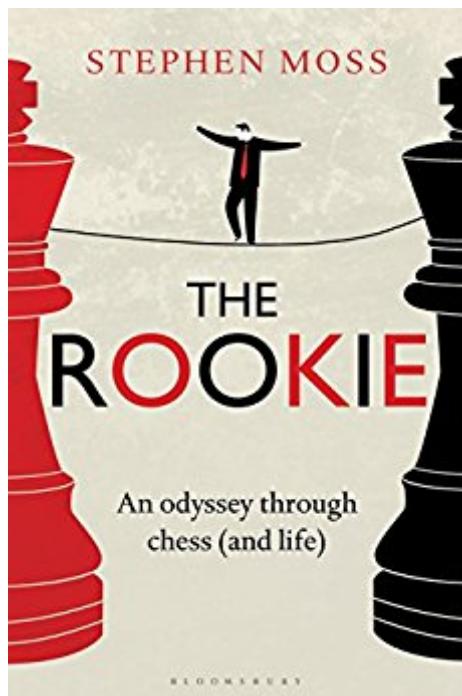


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The Rookie: An Odyssey Through Chess (and Life)



Synopsis

Chess was invented more than 1,500 years ago, and is played in every country in the world. Stephen Moss sets out to master its mysteries, and unlock the secret of its enduring appeal. What, he asks, is the essence of chess? And what will it reveal about his own character along the way? In a witty, accessible style that will delight newcomers and irritate purists, Moss imagines the world as a board and marches across it, offering a mordant report on the world of chess in 64 chapters — 64 of course being the number of squares on the chessboard. He alternates between "black" chapters where he plays, largely uncomprehendingly, in tournaments and "white" chapters, where he seeks advice from the current crop of grandmasters and delves into the lives of great players of the past. It is both a history of the game and a kind of "Zen and the Art of Chess"; a practical guide and a self-help book: Moss's quest to understand chess and become a better player is really an attempt to escape a lifetime of dilettantism. He wants to become an expert at one thing. What will be the consequences when he realises he is doomed to fail? Moss travels to Russia and the US — hotbeds of chess throughout the 20th century; meets people who knew Bobby Fischer when he was growing up and tries to unravel the enigma of that tortured genius who died in 2008 at the inevitable age of 64; meets Garry Kasparov and Magnus Carlsen, world champions past and present; and keeps bumping into Armenian superstar Levon Aronian in the gents at tournaments. He becomes champion of Surrey, wins tournaments in Chester and Bury St Edmunds, and holds his own at the famous event in the Dutch seaside resort of Wijk aan Zee (until a last-round meltdown), but too often he is beaten by precocious 10-year-olds and finds it hard to resist the urge to punch them. He looks for spiritual fulfilment in the game, but mostly finds mental torture.

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Customer Reviews

The author travels around England, Europe, and the US on an odyssey to understand chess and those who play, and challenge himself to become a better player. I know, it sounds as though it might be deadly dull, but it really isn't - at least to other chess players or maybe even those who want to understand us a little bit better. There is a lot about the leagues and tournaments he plays in, but it's also about other players - many of them very well known in our little world - he meets and interviews. Although there is some discussion of how to improve one's play, there are also lots of conversations about why we're drawn to the game. Interesting perspectives from him and others he talks to on his odyssey, sometimes more philosophical than practical. Call it Zen and the Art of Chess Improvement; zen (and the Pirsig book) come up often. The contrasts between some of the best players on the world (past and present) and the hustlers in Washington Square, or between impressive and/or historic chess clubs in New York, Moscow, and St. Louis and dingy playing locations for country leagues, lend depth and color to the book. The author is a journalist and a good writer. I enjoyed it quite a bit. Of course, that may be influenced by the fact that I'm also an older player who never made it to "great," and deal with a lot of the same issues and questions he does. I do think a lot of chess players - or family and friends who don't completely understand us - would enjoy it too. Maybe even those with no connections to chess but in search of an entertaining read; there is less technical chess "stuff" than I anticipated.

This remarkable book should be required reading by everyone involved with the game of chess. It was refreshing to read such honesty when it comes to emotions felt when playing tournament chess. The interviews with chess personalities alone are worth the price of the book. For example, GM Vladimir Trachiev says chess is "...a human activity which is doomed to disappear." This is part

of a thread running throughout the book. WGM Elmira Mirzoeva says, "At the moment we are neither sport nor culture. We don't know who we are. Chess is going down." The author gives statistics from all over the world which, if shown on a graph, would indicate a line moving downward inexorably toward oblivion. A comment by GM Yuri Averakh, "Card games almost killed chess after the invention of printing made cards very cheap in the late 15th century," prompted the author to write, "Chess responded with a new set of rules that made the game more dynamic. Perhaps it could evolve again, though he was far from clear about the nature of that evolution." The stories of many of the people profiled were terribly sad. This made me wonder why anyone in his, or her, right mind would play such a game. For example, "He had had several nervous breakdowns and been forced to give up his job in his thirties. He lived alone, said little, dressed shabbily, clearly did not look after himself, but he still played good chess and took the game very seriously." The author writes, "They had the chess bug. These people were sick." In writing this the author acknowledges he is one of them. The chapter "The Chess Philanthropist," which is about the billionaire Rex Sinquefield, is alone worth the price of the book. Chess has long depended on the extremely wealthy to fund the game of chess. Without those benefactors the author would not have written the book. The author writes, "The rapid rise of St Louis's chess status is all down to the work-and more importantly the money- of one man: chess-loving billionaire Rex Sinquefield, who has ploughed millions into building a plush chess club in an upscale part of St Louis, paid for the transfer of the World Chess Hall of Fame from Miami-it is located just across the street from the club-and puts up serious prize money for the US championships. The following day I got to meet Sinquefield himself, an unassuming man who was then approaching 70...Sinquefield was a hedge-fund pioneer...He co-founded the California-based wealth management company Dimensional Fund Advisors, which has built up an asset base of \$400bn, and retired in 2005 saying he was bored. His father died when Sinquefield was five, leaving the family destitute, and he and his brother spent their early years in a Catholic orphanage in St Louis. He made it; why can't everyone else? The American Dream lives-in the mind of Rex Sinquefield at least. When I asked whether he now saw himself as 'giving something back' he bridled: 'That phrase "giving back" has always bothered me,' he said tartly, 'because it implies that you took something inappropriately and now you're returning it. That certainly isn't the case.' Sinquefield was a little tight-lipped when we met over lunch-maybe my liberal Guardian background disturbed him-but his love for chess was manifest. Sinquefield told me his real interest in founding the club was to teach local children how to play..." The author mentions several times how chess is now played by those over 50 and under 20 and that chess has been "sold" as a wonderful teaching tool for children. This is strange because the German based chess

website Chessbase published an article recently, Chess instruction in schools: A quantitative review, in which the latest word on whether or not chess had any effect on children whatsoever is that there are "...some doubts about the usefulness of chess as an educational tool. In fact, given that the median effect size of interventions in educational contexts is 0.40, there are many (more than 50%) better ways to improve children's skills than chess instruction." The only reason I am giving the book only four stars is the author's, a professional writer, use of "I." At first it was disconcerting, then became infuriating. Was there no editor? I found myself trying to revise his words while reading. Frankly, it stopped the flow of the book.

I read it front to cover in a couple of days... Funny, poignant, and instructive all at the same time, if you are a struggling chess player you will identify with the author and learn from his journey. Will it make you a better chess player? Uh.... well... maybe not. But maybe it will make you a wiser person to know that the person across the board from you is suffering just as much as you!

One of the best chess books I have ever read. The author does an excellent job of tracing his journey as he rediscovers the game of chess in mid-life (which makes this book especially appropriate for anyone who, like me, is wrestling with the frustration of returning to the game of chess after an extended hiatus). In addition, as an American, I especially enjoyed learning about the customs and traditions of British chess clubs and competitions. Buy this book; it will increase your appreciation for the game.

Excellent writing and very entertaining. Mr. Moss' story mirrors my own personal odyssey in chess life, with its ups and downs, success and failures, victories and defeats (though mostly downs, failures and defeats!!). Hugely recommended.

I'm posting just from what I read in the "Look Inside" excerpts, but I want to warn prospective buyers to buy this book for entertainment only if you enjoy the excerpts. The assertions that 11 years old was a late start for someone to become an accomplished player and that you have to study opening theory to get beyond a beginner/journeyman level of play are simply excuses for an author who doesn't want to recognize his own lack of chess talent/passion. I have played enough masters or above who pay no attention to opening theory to disabuse me of the notion, promoted by chess publishers, that familiarity with the latest opening innovations is of use to anyone below GM level.

A wonderful book!

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