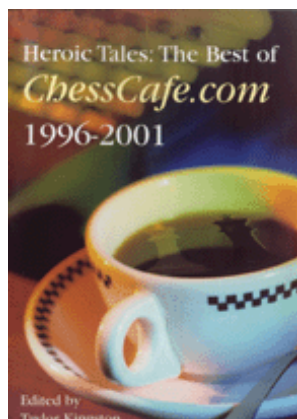




BOOK REVIEWS



Survivor: 64 Squares

Dan Heisman

Survival Guide for Chess Parents by Tanya Jones, Everyman 2004, Softcover, 174pp., 18.95

Question: What is the British meaning of the term “Exchange”?

- a) To trade in a gift for a something you need
- b) To trade pieces
- c) A name for what Americans call Bughouse
- d) Winning “The Exchange” is trading a Bishop or Knight for a Rook

Answer: It could be any, but *Survival Guide for Chess Parents* clearly states “c”.

Survival Guide for Chess Parents is, in a very basic way, a British version of what I did two years ago with *A Parent's Guide to Chess*. And, as would be expected, there are some strong differences as well as strong similarities between the two books. Author Tanya Jones' son Gawain is now 16 and FIDE rated 2387, which is more than *twice* the rating (literally!) of 94% of US scholastic members. So her views are not just those of a mother of the typical 900-rated scholastic player – most 2387 players pass the 900 phase rather more quickly than the average scholastic player, so I assume Gawain did as well. The seriousness of her involvement provides mostly pros for potential readers, but a few cautionary cons, as will be discussed later. (Note: In 2003 Gawain Jones tied for 13th at the FIDE World Junior Chess Championship Boys Under-16 Division, so he is certainly not a typical player, but that is not to say that his and his mother's experiences, in many cases, are not typical of those of lesser mortals; in fact, many times they are very typical).



While I believe that any book review should primarily be concerned about content, it is impossible to review this book without noting two very important points of which the reader should be aware, and which are quickly noticeable:

1. Author Jones often uses lo-o-ong sentences (it gets a little better in parts as the book progresses), and
2. Much of the book contains wry British humor. For the most part this humor is very good, but if you are looking for a strictly serious down-to-the-facts text, you may be quite surprised at the tone.

The author likes to throw in metaphors and descriptive phrases not often found in chess books. For example, suppose we choose her subject of whether a parent should become involved in their child's scholastic chess club. An author could straightforwardly state that "this would involve a commitment that might involve more time than expected", or could mention that "you might be stuck in an uncomfortable small room with just a few kids – or too many noisy, hard-to control ones". Here's how Jones approaches the same subject (Alice is her fictional child):

“...In the first rush of heady excitement and gratitude that Alice has indeed chosen chess instead of lapdancing or the bobsleigh you may even be tempted to agree. This could be an excellent move, allowing you simultaneously to develop your own understanding of the game, see Alice in her school environment, take an unauthorized scoop around the staff room and assuage your guild at not having made a single fairy cake for the past seven Summer Fetes. Alternatively, you may find yourself, every Wednesday teatime, from now until eternity, wedged into a broken child's chair in a draughty classroom. Either no one at all will turn up, so that you and Alice will play against each other, just as you would at home, only without the benefit of the usual large whiskey, or twenty teenagers will crash through the door, throw chairs (including the one attached to your anatomy) at one another for twenty minutes and leave, having taken careful note of every peculiarity of your figure, clothes and accent, news of which will be transmitted across the entire school by the entire days morning break...”

In my *Parent's Guide* I don't mention lapdancing or whiskey, but doing so undeniably does provide color! This excerpt is sufficient to heed potential readers. It is, to say the least, quite different experience than reading *My Sixty Memorable Games* or even *Searching for Bobby Fischer*. It seems like in some chapters the editor decided to reign her in, while in others they decided to just let her rip, somewhat reminiscent of first watching Robin Williams in *Insomnia* or *One Hour Photo* and then seeing him set loose in *Good Morning Vietnam* or *Aladdin*.

I think it is important to discuss both the type of humor and the impact it may have on the reader. Both Ms. Jones and I are insiders in the chess world – I am an insider as a player, TD, etc. while she is obviously a clever writer as well as observant, experienced chess parent. My opinion is that her choosing to write some of this book in the style of “Dave Barry turns 50 and Becomes a Chess Parent” is potentially misleading to the intended audience: the uninitiated parents of a child new to the chess world. While the humorous style obviously is intended to make the book –and its normally staid subject – more “ingestible” and even newbie parents will recognize her British irony for what it is, it also mocks the very world they are trying to get into more seriously, making her message a somewhat dangerous two-way street.

Yes, we chess players know that our habitation, like any other one inhabited by zealots, is often strange – and even funny-looking to outsiders. But to have a certified insider tell the new parent that the chess world is weird and humorous as their first glance into it is akin to incessantly joking around with someone the first time you meet them – it creates a possibly false negative impression, no matter how sincere or clever you may be.

In a sense I liken some parts of *Survival Guide for Chess Parents* to only one other chess book I have ever read – Brad Darrach’s hilarious account of the 1972 Fischer-Spassky match, *Bobby Fischer vs. the Rest of the World*. But there are real differences. Darrach was an outsider whose strong pen made all the inhabitants of the match seem crazy and buffoonish (well, Fischer often seems easy to parody that way), but Darrach was an outsider writing for outsiders. Even us insiders can laugh even when his humor becomes almost condescendingly bitter or outlandishly unbelievable. Jones, to her credit, never becomes bitter, but her humor sometimes obscures rather than enhances her excellent observations and gives the reader a possibly slanted viewpoint that can color their family’s attempt to progress in their brave new world. Funny, yes. More readable, sometimes. More helpful in the long run – debatable. Out of fairness I should note that, during the “factual” parts of the book - for example the descriptions of how tournaments are run or how the grading (rating) system works - the humor is toned down appreciably.

Now onto content, for which *Survival Guide* gets generally excellent marks. As stated earlier, *Parent’s Guide* was written for the North American audience – primarily for the United States, but with Canadian information included. Similarly, *Survival Guide* is written primarily for the British audience, but with US information included. That makes sense and was a wise choice. This brings up a major difference between the recommendations found in the two books: In Britain, youth chess strongly revolves around junior (and eventually senior) club play and league matches between (or among) the clubs. This is in strong contrast to the United States, where there are some excellent junior clubs, but most areas scholastic clubs are run via the schools, and the king is scholastic tournaments. *Survival Guide* starts with emphasis on participation in club and match play but later tournaments are, of course, included, and in some depth. Nevertheless, in Chapter One you can see Jones’ feelings about tournaments for young kids when she discusses what (in this case her hypothetical Charlie) might encounter if he started out in tournaments instead of a junior club:

“...This is sometimes done, but it is difficult to see what good it really serves. Chess tournaments are, on the whole, silent and intense affairs, often held in uncomfortable halls, either too hot or too cold, full of silent and intent men hunched over their boards.”

From this description I will assume this is true more in Britain, but a far cry from the large – and seemingly fun for the participants – scholastic tournaments that predominate in the US. In these popular and sometimes monstrously sized US events, there are no old men hunched over their boards to beat Charlie – just other young Charlies and Alices with whom he can have fun and split the points. This is not at all a criticism of the book – just an observation of the kind of differences one might expect. Therefore it certainly makes sense that prospective readers be aware of these rather large cultural differences and take this into account when deciding for themselves which evolution through chess their child should take.

This echoes another major difference in the books: *Parent’s Guide* takes a rather neutral view (my son did play seriously in tournaments, but I am the chess professional in the family), with a needed “Mom’s view” Appendix from a couple of experienced chess moms, while *Survival Guide* is entirely parental. Since the intended reading audience of both is a newbie chess parent, this provides both an objective and subjective choice in helping them understand the chess world.

When attempting to take the culture difference into account, the author sometimes makes minor mistakes. For example, she graciously tries to provide an overview of the USCF rating system along with the British. But she describes the USCF rating system as it existed before the changes in 2000, for example stating that, except for high rated players, when a player beats an equal player they gain 16 rating points and their opponent loses the same. This was true, but since 2000 the coefficient that would allow this would only be for players rated around 1400; much more likely a low rated scholastic player beating an equal would get many more points than 16 now. Since *Survival* was written in 2003, this presumably gave someone three years to either learn about the new USCF system or catch this error. A minor point, to be sure, but when ratings are involved, as the author correctly points out, intense parent and child scrutiny often become involved, so US parents be aware.

Both books, as would be expected, cover much the same ground, but on some subjects where I provided a chapter, Jones provides a sentence or paragraph, and vice versa. That is both to be expected and a bonus for prospective readers. Interestingly, even though Jones' book came out over a year after mine, she apparently was unaware of *Parent's Guide* and did not include it in her bibliography, although such specialized chess works like *Nunn's Chess Openings*, *My System*, and *Rate Your Endgame* made the list.

Another difference between the works is that I provided a chapter on tips for better play as an inclusion to provide completeness, whereas Jones sprinkles many of her son's games throughout her work, which almost makes this two books in one: *Mom's Parental Advice* and *Precocious Son's Games*. His annotations are quite acceptable to my master level eyes. However, I would think a parent of a new young chess player might find lots of competent games with Najdorf Sicilians rather perplexing (which is why I chose not to mix those two subjects) and somewhat outside the scope of the book – they could survive without them.

Despite Jones' initial warning about tournaments, in general her description of how tournaments work is excellent. She even goes so far as to differentiate between slowplay, rapidplay, and blitz events, describing not only how they work, but also who attends, strategies for each, and the effect each can have on the developing player. In general her chapters describing how tournaments work, both from the logistic (pairing, etc.) standpoint and the scholastic preparation (and parental duty) aspect are quite excellent and complete.

The level of expertise, as mentioned earlier, sometimes gets overdone. For example, while I briefly mention the advanced software tool ChessBase in *Parent's Guide*, Jones includes quite a bit more detail on how top juniors (and international players) use ChessBase to look up their future opponent's games and prepare openings for their next understands is vital but which, as I have stated in several *Novice Nooks*, has very marginal effect on weak adult players and is even less effective on young, relatively beginning juniors. She properly notes that most readers will rarely, if ever, have to use this information.

Similarly, Jones takes a couple of pages discussing FIDE ratings, another topic that, under the current system, 98% of chess parents will never have to experience, much less during their child's formative years, when they assuredly would most need this type of book.

With his 2387 FIDE rating, Jones' son is closing in on International Master strength, so her experienced observations have the same, comfortable effect as one gets reading Fred Waitzkin (author of *Searching for Bobby Fischer* and father of IM Josh Waitzkin). The typical reader, a parent of the new chess scene, might never have a child on whom all those tournament strategies and affects (much less FIDE rating concerns) are applicable and, if they do, they will appreciate Jones' depth. However, since so few parents ever have children achieve such lofty levels, the inclusion of that material to any depth has to be considered as provided for completeness, but otherwise questionable helpfulness for the intended audience.

Her in-depth description of how the British Junior Championship, British Championship, Hastings, and other British events works will, of course, be mostly of interest to British readers since the US scholastic (and non-scholastic) championships are only somewhat similar. For example, as a minor point British championships are based on age, while US championships are based on grade (out of fairness it should be noted that this information is included in the book), much of British play is not school-sponsored while, while much of US play is based on the teacher/sponsor "represent the school" system. In that sense if you are a US parent of a "loner" chess player – one without a school and no experienced school teacher/sponsor to guide you – as I was so long ago - then *Survivor's Guide* is more fitting than it would be if you are part of an organized school team.

Jones appropriately spends some time dealing with the psychological aspects of being a chess parent: how, when, and where to be supportive, how to deal with losses, tiredness, eating right, and all the other things that parents – and even adults – learn to deal with inside the chess world. Again, I think this issues are dealt with in a manner both inclusive but not too comprehensive, as is appropriate for a work of this type. For example, here is her sharp and witty comment on dealing with overconfidence:

"You could, of course, try carrying out a complete demolition job on your child's character before every tournament, reminding her that she is a mere worm on the compost heap of creation and that she would be lucky to defeat a small and academically challenged stick insect, never mind a hall of over-educated eleven-year-olds. On the other hand, if you prefer not to incur a lifetime of self-loathing and therapy bills, then you may have to accept that this is a lesson she must learn for herself, and make sure you are there to pick up the pieces." I could not have put it better – I think!

In the mundane explanations of the chess world, Jones hits all the bases: pairings, digital and analog clocks, sets, roles of the TD, draws and draw offers, using the analysis (skittles) room, and even some etiquette, as is appropriate. The common issue of learning algebraic (or descriptive) notation and whether a player needs to learn to be proficient in recording their games before their first event are given their proper due.

On the subject of parental (and other) spectator issues, Jones felt it important enough to devote an entire chapter, and indeed this is an important subject for all involved. Often new parents are used to Little League (or British football in this case) "interactive" spectating, which is of course a no-no in the chess world. In general her advice here, like in many of her chapters, agrees with mine, and so is excellent. For example, we both agree that since parents cannot be in attendance at championship events, it sets a bad precedent for the parent to be present at every game for which this is

allowed. It is much better for the parent to teach his/her child to play (and get the TD!) by himself, with the reassurance that mom or dad is waiting just outside in case of emergency and to not depend on their comforting presence at all times. Here is another bit of advice I could not have written better about players receiving advice during a game:

“Zealous officials, and officious zealots have even been known to rebuke parents for asking their offspring, mid-game: ‘Are you all right?’ or ‘Is everything OK?’ It may seem ridiculous that anyone could accuse you, if your playing skills, like mine, are those of a slightly demented guinea-pig, of advising Charlie about his game, but there is no point in attracting controversy.”

Her parental advice on how to deal with adversity (and triumph) is – well, parental, and again quite good. Only a very experienced chess mom would be able to cite all the mistakes that beginning chess mom’s make and correctly see that over time these were, indeed mistakes. Understanding chess players and how they feel before, during, and after games is something that takes a bit of time.

Included are the obligatory discussion about obtaining material which does, and should, focus on chess books, but also includes web references – I had quite a few sprinkled about my book; Jones has fewer, all in a neat index near the back of the book. Gawain’s preferred on-line playing site is the Internet Chess Club, so there is parental information about that as well; interestingly, she does not mention the one theme that many ICC parents are most concerned – how to handle unwanted language aimed at your child. Since the ICC is a paid server, there is often less of that than at the free servers, but her only mention of guidance (besides too much on-line play!) is to “monitor the online conversations of a young or vulnerable child and discourage any from revealing personal information online.” Good advice, to be sure.

The last chapter, on what happens when your chessplayer either grows up or gives up chess for whatever reason, is short, sweet, and an appropriate ending for this type of work.

Finally, publisher Everyman Chess uses a small font, single space, and no “white space” or pictures (other than Gawain’s games’ diagrams), so there is a lot more information packed into *Survival Guide*’s 174 pages than you might think at first glance, likely as much as most 300-page chess books.

Overall, I think the intended audience, especially if they are British, will easily get their money’s worth and more from *Survival Guide for Chess Parents*. I can’t help add that if parents purchase *A Parent’s Guide to Chess* as well, they will have all their bases well covered, with cross-Atlantic reinforcement on most issues. If you can afford only one text, then likely the one from your side of the Atlantic will be more helpful although, from another aspect, parents of very strong kids (the ones who may no longer need either book!) will prefer *Survival Guide* while the more “normal” family might have a preference for *Parent’s Guide*.

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by Tanya Jones

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