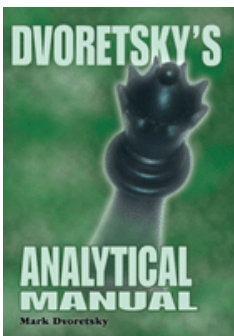




BOOK REVIEWS

From the Archives

Hosted by
Mark Donlan



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From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, ChessCafe.com has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

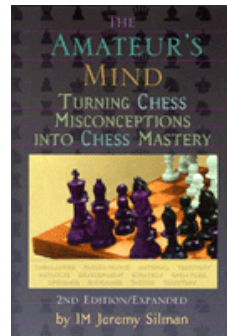
Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the ChessCafe.com home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

Revelation, or at least Minor Epiphanies

by Taylor Kingston

The Amateur's Mind (2nd edition), by IM Jeremy Silman, 1999 Siles Press, English Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 443pp., \$19.95

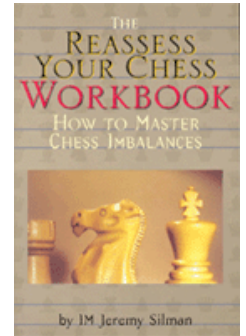
Among the hundreds of chess books I have read, a few, a very special few, have provided an experience akin to religious revelation, or if that is too strong a term, at least like a major intellectual or technological discovery, such as that the earth orbits the sun or that stone and metals can be made into tools. Among instructional books the prime example is probably Irving Chernev's *Logical Chess Move by Move*. I remember chancing upon it as a frustrated, fumbling teenage chess novice and being happily amazed to learn that chess actually had underlying principles I could learn and use. This process was aided by the simplicity and clarity with which Chernev explained myriads of previously mystifying master moves and maneuvers. Reading it was like a having a blindfold removed, waking up from a confused daze, or having a light turned on in a dark room (not to mention having several hundred points added to my rating).



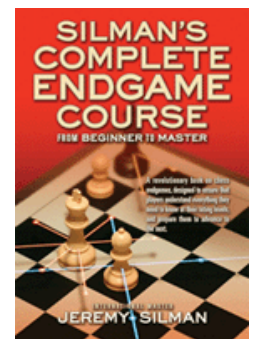
Since that time, few instructive books have made a comparable impression. I feel this is due less to my understanding of chess being more advanced, and rather more to the fact that very few of today's writers can convey chess ideas with the clarity, simplicity and intelligence that Chernev brought to *Logical Chess*. One of those few is Jeremy Silman. Though he has never been anywhere near FIDE's top twenty, IM Silman has quietly become perhaps the best American writer of general instructive books aimed at the great mass of players in the middle area of the bell curve. For above-average players, his *How to Reassess Your Chess* is an outstanding work. For anyone below that level, *The Amateur's Mind* may be a latter-day Book of Revelation, or at least a set of minor epiphanies that can add up to major chess improvement.

The book is derived from Silman's regular column in *Chess Life* magazine. Lessons fall generally into two parts. The first is the illustration of a particular strategic theme or tactical technique from an exemplary game. Silman excels at finding or composing examples appropriate to his chosen themes, and explaining the principles they illustrate. An example is Rosenthal-Steinitz, Vienna 1873:

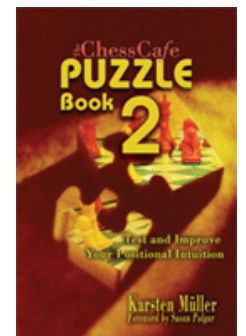
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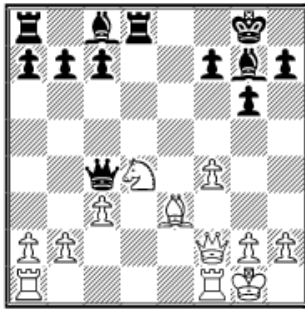
*Reassess Your Chess
Workbook*
by Jeremy Silman



Silman's Endgame Course
by Jeremy Silman



*ChessCafe
Puzzle Book 2*
by Karsten Müller



Silman comments:

“This position is one of the first games where someone demonstrated how to defeat Knights. Here Steinitz shows us that if you take away all their advanced squares, the horses become rather sickly creatures.

1...c5

Making the Knight move away from the fine post on d4.

2 Nf3 b6

Defending the very important c5-pawn. If this pawn were lost then the White Knight could return to d4.

3 Ne5

Trying to find another home.

3...Qe6 4 Qf3 Ba6

Defending the a8-Rook and attacking White's Rook at the same time.

5 Rfe1 f6

The poor Knight is deprived of yet another square!

6 Ng4

The active 6 Nc6 Rde8 7 Bf2 Qd7 8 Rad1 Qc7 leaves the poor beast trapped. Black will eventually play ...Bb7 and snap it off.

6...h5

Forcing it to permanent inactivity on the second rank.”

Silman continues for some moves, but this sample is enough to show how clearly he explains strategic themes, avoiding cluttering the narrative with tactical detail, except when necessary as at move six. Like Chernev, he makes sure the reader knows what is happening, by giving a note after almost every move. I might also point out that in choosing his illustrative games, Silman, unlike some other writers reviewed here recently, avoids over-used, clichéd examples.

The illustrative games are followed by dialogues between student and teacher. The student, usually someone rated between 1100 and 1700, is asked, before he ever considers any particular move, to describe the imbalances in the position. By “imbalance” Silman means any significant difference between the two sides: better development, poor king safety, a flank pawn majority, control of space, possession of open files, central dominance, backward/isolated/doubled/hanging pawns, Bishops vs. Knights, etc. Based on his evaluation of the imbalances, the student must describe his general plan, and then explain his specific moves. The student's ideas, sometimes valid but more often erroneous, are presented mostly verbatim as recorded from actual tutoring sessions, and contrasted with the master's more accurate insights. We give a condensed (but still lengthy) illustrative example.



In this position Silman comments: “What's going on in this seemingly boring position? The pawn structure is more or less symmetrical, nobody can lay claim to any space advantage, all the pieces are well-defended and neither King is in any trouble. Aside from the fact that White's pieces are

more aggressively posted since they are trying to take control of d5 (while Black's Knights are passively trying to defend that square) the one major imbalance is [that] White has a Bishop and Knight [to Black's] two Knights.

“Due to the stated imbalances, White will use Steinitz's rule (to make Knights ineffective by taking away their advanced support points). He will do this by restricting the b6-Knight by b2-b3 (if necessary) followed by a2-a4-a5 (kicking it from its perch on b6). He will also place the Bishop on the flexible e3-square and move his Queen to b5 where it eyes the pawns on b7 and e5. All these things may seem small in themselves, but together they add up to unpleasant pressure on the Black position.”

The actual game (Silman-Gross, American Open 1992) then proceeded **20 Be3 Rfd8 21 Qb5 Qe6 22 b3 h6 23 a4 Rxd1 24 Rxd1 Rc8 25 Rd3 Qc6? 26 Qxe5 Re8 27 Qd6 Nxe4 28 Qxc6 bxc6 29 a5 Nxc3 30 axb5 Nd5 31 bxa7 1-0**. Note how Silman's clear introductory assessment of the position helps the reader see this as the unfolding of a plan, and not just a series of unconnected moves.

Three amateur players then tackle the same position. Here are the thoughts of a 1600 player, with Silman's comments italicized:

“1600: ‘I like 1 Nd5. If he takes, I get a strong passed pawn. I have to get my Bishop into play. So f2-f4 is a possibility and if he takes I go Bxf4. However, my King would then be open. I could also play Qb5 to support the d5-square and then Nd5. I could also pin by Bg5 to control d5 more.’

I told him he was not breaking the position down into imbalances. Instead he is just looking at a bunch of moves.

1 Bg5

1600: ‘This also connects my Rooks and develops my Bishop.’

He never recognized his Bishop for Knight advantage ... However he noticed the d5-square and is trying ... to grab it.”

With “1600” playing and verbalizing as white, and Silman playing black and giving running commentary (which we condense here), the game proceeds **1...Rfd8 2 Rxd8+ Rxd8**

“1600: ‘Now Rd1 ... allows me to continue my fight for the d5-square.’

Though he hasn't followed the best plan, he's still sticking to a clear idea ...

3 Rd1 h6 4 Rxd8+ Qxd8 5 Bxf6 Qxf6 6 Nd5 Qd6 7 Qb5! Kf8 8 Nxb6

1600: ‘This gives him doubled pawns.’

At the moment his Knight is superior ... so why should he swap it ...? One must avoid dumping a plan for baubles lying on the side of the road.

8...axb6

1600: ‘Now I will trade Queens since ... my King is closer to the center.’

It's clear the opposite is true.

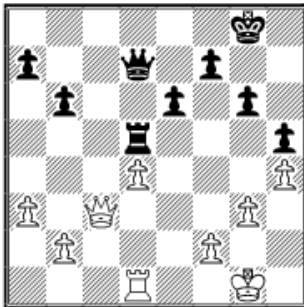
9 Qd5?? Qxd5 10 exd5 Ke7 11 Kf3 f5 12 g4 g6 and White lost the d-pawn and the game.”

This process is repeated with many different positions and themes. By examining both the correct lines of play, and the erroneous ones developed by his amateur students, Silman demonstrates not only correct methods of evaluation and analysis, but also refutations of the kind of play the amateur is likely to see. He also exposes common fallacies and mental errors that afflict so many lower-rated players: playing without a plan, inconsistency, a fondness for pointless one-move threats, wishful thinking, laziness, impatience, fear of phantom threats, obliviousness to real threats, playing reactively and defensively when aggressiveness is called for, falling into self-fulfilling pessimism, etc. In this manner the reader learns not only about objective factors on the board, but also about subjective psychological mistakes he must avoid.

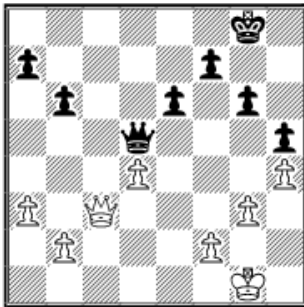
Silman also excels at making clear the finer points of general principles, the circumstances in which they do or do not apply. For example, an isolated pawn on an open file is generally considered a weakness, but Silman points out that in positions with most of the minor pieces still on the board,



the weakness is less serious and the pawn may actually increase one's dynamic potential by supporting a Knight or threatening to advance. Conversely, the weakness is most apparent with minor pieces off the board but Rooks still on, as here,

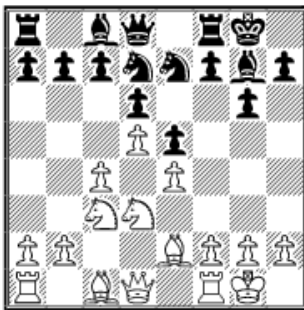


where Black wins the pawn with 1...e5. Finally with Rooks gone but Queens still present, the weakness is minimal or non-existent, as in this position



where a draw is likely. The clarity with which Silman explains these important refinements helps the student retain them in his memory.

As is apparent from these examples, the book deals mostly with middlegame themes: Bishops vs. Knights, territory and space, the center, pawn structure, material, initiative, etc. Each is examined at length, with (I stress again, as it is one of the book's great virtues) a harmonious and mutually reinforcing mix of general guidelines and relevant specific examples. As when "RULE 7: With a closed center, you know which wing to play on by noting the direction your pawns point," is illustrated by this position



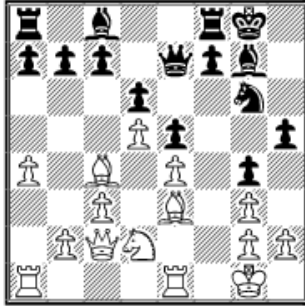
where Black must aim for kingside play with f7-f5, while White, additionally observing Rule 7's corollary that "In general, you want to push the pawn that stands next to your most advanced pawn," will aim for c4-c5 and queenside play.

The endgame is touched on somewhat, e.g. in the chapter "Using the Rooks," and there is one chapter on the opening, devoted not to memorizing variations but to illustrating the idea that once an imbalance is created in the opening, one's further development must address that imbalance in some way.

This is the second edition of *The Amateur's Mind*; the first was in 1995. The new version offers 171 more pages, due partly to an improved layout but mostly to the addition of 112 pages of tests. These are not the usual "White to play and win" combinational kind of position. While sometimes, as here



they call for immediate action (Do you see exactly what? It's White to move.), at other times



Silman says "Don't bother looking for individual moves. Instead, figure out what White's correct plan is." The tests and their lengthy, informative answers would make a halfway decent book by themselves.

As a writer Silman has a lively, pungent style that both keeps the reader from being bored and helps him to remember key points by presenting them in pithy prose (e.g. "If the enemy King is still in the center and you have a lead in development, consider these factors an invitation to rip the opponent's head off!"). Silman's command of vocabulary and grammar is refreshingly superior to many other writers reviewed here. I did notice some misuse of apostrophes and hyphens, and once the term "supplication" was used when it seemed clear "submission" was meant, but on the whole Silman is much more competent, enjoyable to read, and most importantly more effective in his writing, than most chess authors practicing today. The book is well proofread, with two exceptions: the capitalization of "White" and "Black" is inconsistent (they should be lower case when used as adjectives, capitalized when nouns), and for the chapter on Rooks the headings say "Using the Rocks."

The book finishes with a seventeen-page glossary explaining terms from "active" and "advantage" to "wild" and "Zwischenzug," another example of Silman's sensitivity to the needs of his target readers, who would not necessarily know chess jargon. Weighing in at a heavy 443 big pages (6" x 9") and a relatively light price of \$19.95, the book is a good bargain. It is also appealingly laid out and has a very handsome cover.

Negatives? Really, only one that seems potentially serious: the book's pages are glued to the spine rather than sewn. In a book requiring heavy use to reap its full benefit, this might eventually be a problem. Perhaps adhesives today are better than they used to be; one hopes so, or in time the pages may start falling out like they have in some of my older paperbacks.

However, if you use *The Amateur's Mind* enough to cause that kind of wear, and absorb its lessons, I can virtually guarantee you enough chess improvement that you will not mind. This is one of the best instructive books in print. I strongly recommend it to anyone above novice and below, say, 1800, and frankly even many experts (up to Elo 2199) would probably benefit from it. For teaching essentials of strategy, planning, calculation, and mental attitude it is unsurpassed by anything I have seen since Chernev.

(PS: In the next-to-last diagram above, White should play 1 c5!, when if 1...e4 2 cxd6 Qxd6 (2...exd3? 3 dxc7 dxc2 4 cxb8(Q) Rxb8 5 Bd2 and 6 Rac1 eventually wins a pawn for White) 3 Bc4+ Be6 4 Qb3 he has a promising position. If you missed this, it may be an indication that you need Silman's book.)

[Order *The Amateur's Mind*](#)
by Jeremy Silman

This article first appeared at ChessCafe.com in September, 1999.

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