



BOOK
REVIEWS

Mark Dvoretsky –

The Best Chess Writer in the World?

Jacob Aagaard

Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual by Mark Dvoretsky, 2003 Russell Enterprises, Inc., Figurine Algebraic Notation, Softcover 384pp., \$29.95.

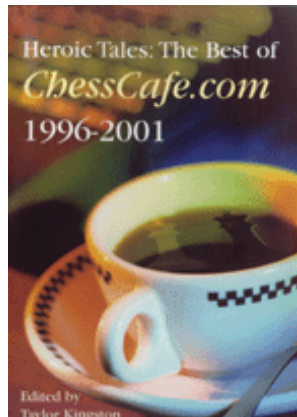
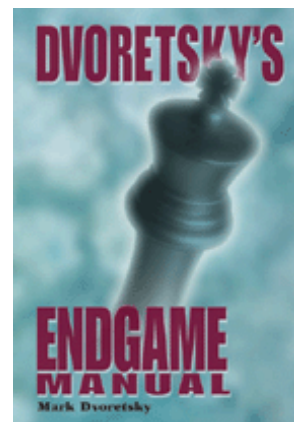
Last summer Mark Dvoretsky published the German version of his “definitive” endgame manual, *Die Endspiel Universität*. It is the tenth chess book he has written and also the most ambitious. Now this book has been published in English. We will try to put this in perspective first by looking at his previous efforts.

First there was a series of four books. This was followed by five more, co-written with Artur Yusupov, featuring articles and lectures from the school they ran for five years. The publication of his first book in English immediately made Mark Dvoretsky a celebrity in the chess community. *The American Chess Journal* called him “the world’s best chess trainer” in its second issue of 1992. Since then the title has become more or less official, and has not really been questioned. When I asked my Russian friends about Dvoretsky’s status in Russia, they said that he only became famous there about the same time as he became famous in the rest of the world. That is despite the fact that Yusupov already was one of the best Russian players at the beginning of the 1980s.

“But Jacob, many Russian trainers have had a pupil like that.” Coming from Denmark where our only real top player ever, Bent Larsen, never had a trainer, it was not an obvious explanation for me, but once your start to think about it...

I remember reading in Smyslov’s book of his own games how his father could not teach him any more by the time he had reached the age of 14 and he then started to play in tournaments. Then he shows a game where his father beat Alekhine with Black in 1912. No wonder Smyslov soon was one of the best players in the Soviet Union.

What made Dvoretsky famous in Russia was the line of great players he produced: Chekhov, Yusupov, Dolmatov, Dreev, Zvyaginsev, Chernin,



Women's World Championship finalist Nana Alexandria and several others. But first and foremost it was the books. So the question becomes: is Mark Dvoretsky's status as *The World's Best Chess Trainer* really based on his ability as a chess writer? To answer this question in detail we will have to turn to the books.

Batsford published *Secrets of Chess Training* in 1991 and this book later won the British Chess Federations Book of the Year Award. They then published *Secrets of Chess Tactics*. These are the first two volumes from the original Russian series, which then had to wait until the present day to be completely published in English.

The reason was that Batsford then published a new five-book series written and edited by Mark together with Arthur Yusupov. There were contributions from other Russian trainers and from other strong players such as Bareev and Kramnik. The books were *Training for the Tournament Player*, *Opening Preparation*, *Positional Play*, *Technique for the Tournament Player* and finally *Attack and Defence*.

After Batsford sank like an ax (a Russian idiom) a few years back, the Swiss publisher Edition Olms acquired the rights to these books. Some new chapters were added in the books and mistakes corrected. This new (?) series has been christened *The School of Chess Excellence*. Volume 1 is an updated version of *Secrets of Chess Training*, and is called *Endgame Analysis*. Volume 2 is *Tactical Play*, Volume 3 *Strategic Play* and Volume 4 *Opening Developments*. The last of these has just been published and not yet made its way to me. I have a Russian edition but cannot really read Russian, so my comments here will be limited.

Let's take a brief overview of Dvoretsky's previous works.

The School of Chess Excellence 1 – Endgame Play

This book is divided into 3 parts, dealing with the analysis of adjourned positions, general endgame themes (not theory) and the solving of studies. It might seem that analyses of adjournments are no longer relevant due to the computer's entry onto the chess scene and the subsequent general abandonment of adjournments. But analysis of any position is valuable for the development of chess understanding and Dvoretsky has therefore found little reason for abandoning this part of the book. The themes in the second part of the book are a collection of small essays with random endgame themes. There are four pages on the principle of two weaknesses, a few pages on same-coloured bishops, then analysis of an Ulf Andersson ending. The final part of the book is devoted to the way studies can be used in preparing for tournament play.

The School of Chess Excellence 2 – Tactical Play

This book is again a compilation of a long list of articles with a common thematic link. The first part (part 4) is "Combinational Vision and the Calculation of Variations". Part 5 is called "Attack and Defence", which brings the Dvoretsky book with the same title to mind, but the two should not be confused. The title covers a lot of articles based more on empirical reasoning than on thematic explanations. Good strong analysis of interesting games, always with an idea, but these ideas do not follow a certain core logic, something Dvoretsky usually does not advocate: "Chess is too complicated and diverse, for it to be exhausted by a single plan or theory," he writes. For Dvoretsky thinks (as all Russians do) that spending a lot of time analysing and solving high quality material is an important part of progress

in chess.

The School of Chess Excellence 3 – Strategic Play

This book has two parts, part 6, "Positional Play" and part 7, "Simple Positions". The first part considers things like advantage in space, exchanges and pawn structures, while the other part is based on positions where one type of piece no longer exists, but where both players still have at least two pieces. This would often go under the name complex endings, and even Dvoretzky himself admits that this is not a very scientific definition, but only something he has made up for the occasion. Again chapters have titles like "Turning Points" and "Failure to Defend Actively", which should indicate the division of themes.

The School of Chess Excellence 4 – Opening Developments

As I said earlier, I have not yet seen this book in English, but a glimpse at the Russian version gives even someone linguistically challenged like myself a chance to see what this book will contain. And it looks like it will mainly be practical examples of opening problems, usually from the two strongest of Dvoretzky's earlier students, Yusupov and Dolmatov. Plenty of wisdom awaits us here I am sure. Also note that some of these articles have been previously published in other languages.

The School of Chess Excellence series is very handsome and well edited. The level is for players of Elo 2000 and up and in reality mainly for players trying to get an international title. The exercises are truly difficult - or challenging if you like. Dvoretzky writes himself on this issue: "My books may or may not be liked, but it is unlikely that they could have been any different. I demonstrate examples that are memorable to me in the way that I myself see them, and I describe the chess and psychological mechanisms in the same way that I explain them in lessons to my pupils. I am sure that an attempt to deliberately correct, and artificially simplify the material would have led to a significant lowering of its quality, and a distortion of the chess patterns generated in the mind of the author, and, I hope, subsequently in the head of the reader." I believe that Dvoretzky is correct about this. You do not find your style, your style finds you. And writing will be easier if you do not try to avoid it.

The great strength of the books is Dvoretzky's enormous ability as a chess academic. If he was a practical player with great discipline and good physical condition, he would be a top 50 player. His fantastic ability to analyse a position correctly and his dedication to write the best possible books, makes this series a fantastic collection of chess wisdom.

My critique of the books is based mainly on Dvoretzky's abilities as a teacher. Dvoretzky is a very knowledgeable man. He knows his classics and he knows a lot about chess generally. But his explanations are often short and the examples very complex. I have a feeling that most players will find it hard to get a core feeling of what is going on. I would have preferred Dvoretzky to be a little more redundant in his examples, as there is a great difference from being able to understand something when it is explained to you, and knowing how to use that knowledge when you are left to your own devices.

I also have a problem with Dvoretzky's choice of material. As a matter of principle, Dvoretzky has chosen only to use his own games or the games of his pupils, to avoid copying the material of others. He uses material previously analysed only when he has new analysis. From one point of view

this does avoid the rather tiresome experience (and I am sure I am not the only who has experienced it), of looking through a "new" collection of combinations, and recognising about 75% from our other collections.

The problem here is that though avoiding this, the result is not always necessarily better. First of all most strong players my age and older remember a lot of Yusupov's games from his time at the top, and secondly the material sometimes seems to be less accurate compared to other better-known examples. It is best illustrated by the lectures I have attended with both Yusupov and Dvoretzky, where they again use the examples from the books, as they struggle to remember what examples were used where. I think that Dvoretzky could have made his books even more attractive if he used more examples from less famous Russian players such as one of his favourites, grandmaster Simagin. But then again this would probably mean even more work, as the important point here is that Dvoretzky and Yusupov have already analysed Artur's games together.

But the choice of what material to use is really difficult. Both I (in *Excelling at Chess*) and my good friend IM Jesper Hall (in *Chess for Budding Champions*.) decided to use a rook endgame played between Jeroen Piket and Garry Kasparov in our books, both of which were published at the same time. My analysis was slightly better than Jesper's, but clearly inferior to those later published by Dvoretzky. I think my book would have been less good without the game, as my interest was not so much the secrets of this particular endgame, as the inaccuracy of the grandmasters' performance.

The main conclusion about these books is simple. There is nothing better out there. The only books I know that match the level of these books are those by world champions writing about their own games, some of John Nunn's books, some of Polugaevsky's books, Müller & Lambrecht's two endgame books, Nimzowitsch's books and perhaps only a few more.

Now let us turn our focus to the second series of books by Dvoretzky, written in conjunction with Artur Yusupov.

The series is called *School for Budding Champions*, consists of five volumes and contains articles based on lectures given during a ten-day period in a school for talented young players (age 12-15), which was run by Dvoretzky and Yusupov. It existed from 1990 to 1992 and had only 6 sessions. Pupils there were many of the great players of our time, such as Svidler, Movsesian, Baklan, Alexandrov, Yemelin and so on.

The books are organised along a common theme, but still do not try in any way to cover everything. Each writer has an idea of his own around which his lecture is structured. Yusupov and Dvoretzky gave many lectures themselves, but many quite competent guest teachers also visited the school.

All the books end with a chapter written by Yusupov about the merits of the pupils attending the school. This goes so far as to include a game by Vadim Zvyaginsev that was awarded the prize for the best game in Informant 62.

Training for the Tournament Player

This book is first and foremost memorable for some very fine analysis of games by Artur Yusupov. I remember a friend told me that he did not understand Karpov's games at all before he saw the analysis of Karpov-Yusupov from this book. Truly this is deep insight from top players. Also

there is some material on analysis of classics and on other topics.

Positional Play

This book is probably best known for the following position:



White to move and win (not really though).

The position arises after **1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Nf3 c6 5.e3 Nbd7 6.Bd3 Bb4 7.a3 Ba5 8.Qc2 Qe7 9.Bd2 dxc4 10.Bxc4 e5 11.0-0 0-0** and has been played by World Champion Botvinnik among others. Botvinnik played 12.d5. Keres showed that Black would find it very very hard to find a satisfactory reply to the simple prophylactic move **12.Ba2!!**. It took Dvoretsky a long time to come up with 12...Bc7 13.Nb5 Bb6! as the only defence (in a positional sense; the threat is not material loss but positional ruin.). This illustrates pretty well the depth and content of this book. Aside from Dvoretsky and Yusupov, there are also contributions from a very young Vladimir Kramnik, Igor Khenkin, Evgeny Bareev and Aleksei Kosikov. The theme is deep positional understanding. Again the games of Karpov are investigated deeply. Kramnik gives a lecture on the Dutch Stonewall and Bareev on grandmaster strategy, including deep explanations of two of his games against Karpov and Kasparov.

For many people this is their favourite book from the series. And this is with good reason.

Opening Preparation

Dvoretsky's favourite line against the Sicilian as a practical player was 3.Bb5. His main weapon against the French was the King's Indian Attack. The guy was never interested in opening theory at all, and therefore it is with some scepticism that one opens this book. It has a lot of good advice about opening play from a general perspective, and a rather interesting article about the KIA, but for the player who wants to build a top-level opening repertoire there is little advice, as could have been predicted. You should know that before you buy this book, but it is nonetheless definitely worth reading. The book gives good advice on how to react when faced with unexpected moves in the opening, and how to go from the opening into the middlegame or endgame. Besides this there are valuable contributions from Dolmatov, Vulfson, Razuvaev, Zlotnik and Kosikov.

Technique for the Tournament Player

This book is now out of print in English, which is sad, as this is the best book in this series. The book is divided into three parts: Endgame Theory, Endgame Analysis, and Technique. Two personal favourite chapters are from this book: Dvoretsky's chapter on "Exploiting an Advantage" and his chapter on opposite-coloured bishop endings with the poetic title "From the simple to the complex". The book is really very nice even though it does not

have the huge attraction of famous guest teachers or fancy subjects. It is just a large collection of great knowledge.

Attack and Defence

This book covers quite a large range of topics such as calculation, intuition, practical elements in decision-making, and of course, attack and defence. It features contributions from Blumenfeld (!), Krasenkow, Dolmatov and others. The lectures on calculation are rather compact and to some extent a trip back to the ideas presented in *School of Chess Excellence 2 – Tactical Play*, while the ideas about attack and defence are very little more than well analysed and annotated material (but what is wrong with that?). I personally really like Dvoretsky's ideas about intuition and I advise everyone who wishes to improve his play to read the opening chapters of this book.

All in all, these five books are less organised than the "School of Chess Excellence" series. The books are clearly marked by the different authors, and though the translation gives it a feel of one voice, the differences between the many contributions are clearly felt. None of the books pretends to give a full coverage of its individual theme, or even to stay faithfully within its theme. Rather they present lots of good advice, strong analysis and deep insights into the game of chess, with the main point of view that winning is the name of the game.

Now let us move to the new book.

After the publication of these two series of books, Dvoretsky did not write for a while. The last book (*Attack and Defence*) was published in Russia in 1996 and it was not until the summer of 2002 that a new publication saw daylight.

I heard about this book for first time in the spring of 2000, when I was attending a four-day seminar with Dvoretsky in Copenhagen. The promise was an endgame manual with all the positions a strong chess player should know by heart, to make up for the current situation in endgame books everywhere, where it is impossible for the reader to identify what is important, and what is less so.

Dvoretsky has already published two books on the endgame and has been somewhat pre-empted by the book *Endgame Strategy* by Shereshevsky (highly recommended.), which is largely based on ideas Shereshevsky first acquainted himself with from a series of lectures by Dvoretsky in 1970. Shereshevsky asked for Dvoretsky's permission to use them in a book and added some of his own ideas as well. And of course it should be remembered that most of the concepts explained in these lectures were already known by both authors from earlier chess literature.

But these three books are mainly concerned with the question of general technique and understanding of the endgame. Now, for the first time, Mark Dvoretsky had given us his concept of a complete endgame manual. It was of course originally written in Russian, but thus far it has not been released in Russian. The first publication of the book was in fact the German edition, *Die Endspiel Universität*, published in the summer of 2002. And now we are presented with an English version. *Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual*.

The book is a 384-page wonder. It consists of 897 different positions (4 more than than in the German version of the book) analysed with a perseverance

very few people in this world can present. It covers all endgames where each side has one piece or less and it has a chapter about various material combinations (e.g., rook+bishop vs. rook) and a large chapter (with 107 positions) about general endgame ideas.

The material has not been designed to produce a unifying theory about everything, but clearly springs from Dvoretsky's work as a trainer. The idea of having a limited number of positions for repeated study was thought up by him back in 1970 and seems to have worked well in practice. The author writes on page 8: "One should study relatively few positions, the most important and most probable, but study and understand them perfectly. One should not remember long and perplexing analyses. We may never have an opportunity to reproduce them in our games, and we will certainly forget them sooner or later. Our basic theoretical knowledge must be easy to remember and comprehend. Some complicated positions are also important, but we may absorb their general evaluations and basic ideas, plus perhaps a few of their most important lines only."

I really do like the philosophy behind this approach and have used it for the last few years of my own work as a trainer with great success. The idea is to build knowledge, the same way we learn a language. First we learn some of the letters/sounds, then we learn basic words, then sentences, all the time adding more letters, until we know it by heart. It is so natural to us because we have seen it before. And even though the book is in many respects a manual for achieving the grandmaster title, it is also a manual for attaining a small club championship. The 200 positions one should always remember can be understood by anyone who can go through a chess book without a struggle.

This brings me to my main point. Though a fantastic thing about this book is its incredible high level of new analysis (in both previously known positions and examples constructed for the occasion), the thing I like most is the structure.

Every chapter is a mix of these positions you should learn by heart (identified by being in **blue**), truly demanding exercises (skip them if they bother you), illustrative examples and the so-called "Tragicomedies", where high-level players make more or less obvious mistakes.

The book is fabulous because it anticipates that players of different strengths will read it. 99% of all active chessplayers will be able to follow the blue diagrams and remember these positions. At the same time, top players will still find a lot of the material challenging and valuable. Club players will probably find a lot of the exercises rather difficult. I myself, and a friend rated over 2600, have found the exercises quite demanding. But that is the Russian tradition. The student is to solve a multitude of demanding exercises.

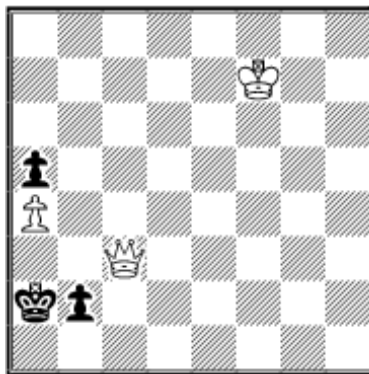
The place where Dvoretsky's work also distinguishes itself from other endgame books is the text. When you set out to write a complete endgame manual like this one, you cannot fill the pages with endless gibberish, and Dvoretsky has not done so. Still the material is explained very well. And it is explained very precisely. It is possible to criticise his explanations as being too short or easy to forget just as soon as one has read them. But on the other hand it can be argued that the student can repeat a theme more easily this way, and I think this is a more valid argument.

This brings us back to the "Tragicomedies". Some of the mistakes players commit can most certainly be forgiven, and sometimes they probably found it difficult to forgive themselves. But my point is that it is important to understand why Dvoretsky has included these in the book. He writes "The point is not to laugh at them [meaning the players]." And actually, it is impossible to laugh. Because you realize that you, just for a second, could sit there so sure of yourself, and think "My goodness, Anand (or whoever) is just a bozo - how can *anything* like this happen to a top player?" We understand that we know better only because we have read the author's exact explanations and solved the exercises. This is the real proof of how brilliant this book is. (Thank you to IM Jonas Barkhagen for making this completely clear to me.).

Dvoretsky writes in the foreword (page 9): "In a handbook, a solution of a position is all one needs; in a manual, it should be explained how one can discover the correct solution, which ideas are involved." And that is exactly what he achieves here. And that is why I wrote in the preface to the book, and why I felt a bit as if Shakespeare had asked me to write a preface to Hamlet. I truly do feel that this is the greatest chess book I have ever seen. It reminds me of a short list I have of books I truly love and admire because they were written from a point of total control and complete insight. I truly do believe that this is the best and most useful chess book there is.

I want to finish this review with two examples. The first is from the German book and for obvious reasons it did not find its way into this book.

Together with a friend who is pushing Elo 2650, I have tried to look for mistakes in the analysis in the German version of the book. And though some people have been able to come up with some improvements, it is with some sadness that I have to admit that so far we have failed. While travelling through Moscow I had time to visit Mark Dvoretsky and have him autograph the German version of the book. There he directed my attention to a very amusing mistake spotted by German grandmaster and endgame guru Karsten Müller. It is to be found on page 25 in the German book. In the following position, Dvoretsky draws our attention to a trap.

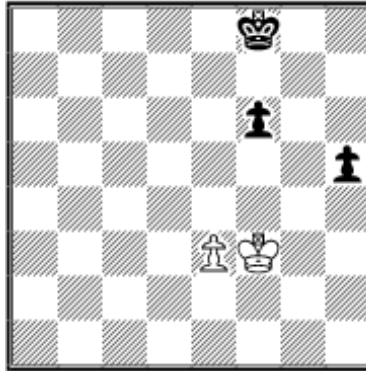


I challenge you now to find the mistake in the following text.

"1.Qc2 Ka1 (the primitive trap: 1...Ka3 2.Ke6?? b1Q 3.Qxb1 stalemate is with 2.Qb1! prevented.) **2.Ke6 b1Q 3.Qxb1 Kxb1 4.Kd5 Kc2 5.Kc2!** (For the first time we are here acquainted with the method of *Bodycheck*.) **5...Kd2 6.Kb5 +-.**" The solution to the puzzle is at the end of the article. It should be solved without putting the pieces up on a board.

The second example is one that I have chosen because I found the example very hard to understand personally when I went through it a long time ago. I actually tried to solve it – even though strictly speaking it wasn't an exercise – but failed. I just found Dvoretzky's explanation radiant, and though only the agony and the actual solution were still vivid in my mind, this example sprang naturally to mind.

Gulko - Short
Riga 1995



White to move

First, we must make sure that the direct attempt to force a draw by trading off the e-pawn does not work.

1 Kf4? Ke7! (it will become clear later why the king goes to this square, and not to f7) 2 Kf5 Kf7 3 e4 (3 Kf4 Ke6 4 Ke4 h4 5 Kf4 Kd5!-+) 3...h4! 4 Kg4 Ke6 5 Kxh4 Ke5-+.

It's also worth noting that if it were White's move in the position after 3 e4, he would still lose after 4 e5 h4! 5 Kg4 fe 6 Kxh4 Ke6 7 Kg3 Kd5 8 Kf3 Kd4. The move e4-e5 only saves the game with Black's king at g7 or e7 (since the threat is to take on f6 with check).

Now, what can White do against the black king's march to the center? The only possibility is to attack the h5-pawn. He can draw, if he can meet Ke6 with Kh4 (with the pawn still on e3).

But if Black's king goes to g6, then keeping the king at h4 becomes pointless - here, White must go to f4, with the idea of pushing the e-pawn.

Note that these paired squares we have found are not corresponding squares, since no zugzwangs exist; but our calculations now allow us to begin the search and analysis of correspondences.

From f7, Black's king is ready to move in two directions - to e6 or to g6. White's king must keep the same possibilities in hand. This clarifies the first, and most important pair of corresponding squares: f7 - g3. (And here is why 1 Kf4? is to be met by 1...Ke7! - in order to meet 2 Kg3!? with 2...Kf7!, placing White in zugzwang).

We are almost ready to make our first move. 1 Kg3? Kf7! (zugzwang) is bad; and on 1 Kf2? Ke7! decides - the threat of 2...Ke6 forces White's king to approach h4 through the mined square g3.

1 Kg2!! Kg8

On 1...Kg7, White saves himself by 2 Kf3! The black king can reach e6 only through f7. The white king will then be able to access g3 on its way to h4.

2 Kf2 (2 Kf3 leads to the same thing) **2...Kf8 3 Kg2! Ke7 4 Kh3! Kf7 5 Kg3! Kg6**

If 5...Ke6 6 Kh4=; and if 5...f5, either

6 e4=, or 6 Kf4 h4 7 e4 h3 8 Kg3 fe 9 Kxh3 Ke6 10 Kg3 Kd5 11 Kf2 Kd4 12 Ke2=.

6 Kf4 Kh6

On 6...Kf7, the only reply is 7 Kg3! (7 Kf5? Ke7 zugzwang), while on 6...Kg7, it's 7 Kf3! (7 e4? Kg6 zugzwang, and 7 Kf5? Kf7 8 e4 h4 +- are two bad alternatives).

7 Kf5 Kh7

If 7...Kg7, then 8 Kf4! (but not 8 e4? Kf7 9 e5 h4++) 8...Kg6 9 e4! (zugzwang) 9...Kh6 10 Kf5 Kg7 11 e5=.

8 e4 Kh6 (8...Kg7 9 e5) **9 Kxf6 h4** Draw.

Note that the game position is not new - in 1979, C. Costantini composed it as a study. Of course, GM Gulko didn't know it - but he was acquainted with the idea of corresponding squares and was able to put the method successfully into practice.

I suppose I should say something about the German edition compared the English edition of the book. Obviously 18 months in the hands of Mark Dvoretzky will trim the mistakes from any book. Mistakes have been corrected, a few examples have been erased and a few more added. This is obvious and will probably also happen with a future version in Spanish or second editions in both German and English.

I can compare the books as physical forms. The German volume is a hard cover edition and has 492 pages with three columns to the page. The English book is in soft cover, double columns, but only 384 pages. Now why is that? This is because in the German version there is a lot of white space on every page, while the English book is more compact.

Concerning the code system I must say that the German book was exceptionally well done. A lot of graphic codes were used to indicate the value of different examples, or simply the theme of a chapter. I also prefer

hardback to softcover. But these are obviously minor aesthetic considerations.

Finally, let me answer the question presented in the headline. Is Mark Dvoretsky the best chess writer in the world? To answer this as exactly as I can, I would like to quote Hemingway, who said that *War and Peace* is the greatest book ever written (and I agree by the way), but that he would have preferred Turgenev to have written it. Mark Dvoretsky is a charming and funny man, but his writings have a tendency to be a little too serious for my taste. He has written the best book, but I am not sure that automatically makes him the best writer. I could only imagine if someone like Mikhail Tal had written this book (But would the analysis have been equally correct if he had? Hardly.) or the great American writer Yasser Seirawan. But as Dvoretsky notes, everyone has a natural style, and it is certainly no shame to write the best book ever written on chess. All there is for me to do is to congratulate Mr. Dvoretsky and ask him not to let us wait another 7 years before he shares his wisdom with us in book form again.

Solution to the puzzle (second diagram): There is no stalemate! 3...Kxa4 is perfectly legal! Dvoretsky had a wide smile on his face when he showed me this.

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