



Hans Ree

Poetry and Gruesome Deaths

The *Joys of Chess* by Christian Hesse is a mishmash of beautiful chess positions and interesting and sometimes weird stories. Hans Ree found that it did really deliver the joys promised.



One of the things I owe to Christian Hesse's book is the discovery of an interesting poet. Hesse's chapters are all preceded by one or more citations, sometimes weirdly illuminating the vast range of human folly, sometimes serious and enlightening, and often funny.

The chapter *Parity Arguments* is introduced with a short poem by Ernst Jandl which goes:

Many humans think
light and reft
cannot be invelted.
They'll in ellol.

Hesse's *The Joys of Chess* has brought me to poetry and to this gloomy scene where chess is no source of joy, but appears to be just one of the ways to kill time, body and soul.

The original is in German. I had never heard of this poet, but when I googled him I found that the Austrian Ernst Jandl (1925-2000) has a great reputation in his home country and in Germany. One of his collections of poetry is entitled *Selbstporträt des Schachspielers als trinkende Uhr* (Self-portrait of the chess player as drinking clock), which is the one I ordered, of course.

It turned out to be far removed from the jolly wordplay of the light-reft poem. Indeed, there was some play with language, but it was not at all jolly. The poems were about death, desolation and inadequacy. A line that sums it up says: 'He would have been a genius, had he been able to prevent himself', where 'he' clearly means 'I'.

In the poem that gave the collection its title, the poet is playing against a computer. From another poem we

know that it is Novag's Chess Champion Super System III.

The beast gets 15 minutes per move, and when it beeps to indicate that the move has been made, the poet makes his countermove within seconds. He fills his glass every 25 minutes with gin and tonic, taking a gulp every four to seven minutes, and he lights a new cigarette every 12 to 14 minutes, thereby becoming a drinking and smoking clock. Meanwhile he is writing the poem that we are reading.

So, Hesse's *The Joys of Chess* has brought me to poetry and to this gloomy scene where chess is no source of joy, but appears to be just one of the ways to kill time, body and soul. This switch from chess to poetry confirms what Anand writes in his foreword: 'The book bridges the gap between the world of chess and the rest of the world and makes numerous connections such as to literature, arts, philosophy, mathematics, physics and other areas.'

By the way, the original German version of Hesse's book, *Expeditionen in die Schachwelt* (Forays into the world of chess), was introduced by the World Champion of that time Vladimir Kramnik, whose text, now that he has been succeeded by Anand, has been relegated to an afterword in the English edition. Maybe next year Boris Gelfand will be called upon to write the foreword to another edition, and I relish the prospect that one day the Dutch champion Anish Giri will be asked to bless this book with his foreword.

Gruesome Deaths

I mentioned that Hesse's citations, meant to illustrate the theme of a particular chapter, often drew from the vast range of human folly. To be more concrete, what I really wanted to say was that Hesse shows a distinct fascination with self-inflicted death, if done in an unusual and curious way.

He quotes a report about an opera singer who had a 'Smith & Wesson 38 special' beside his bed, grabbed it by accident when he awoke at the sound of the telephone ringing, and shot himself to death when he brought it to his ear. As a colourful detail the report added that his cries of pain were similar to those of Cavaradossi in *Tosca*, Act 2.

I won't really count the quoted headline 'Golfing immortal dies at 69', so let's go on to a sheriff's report about a seaside visitor who dug a deep hole at the beach to protect himself against the wind and suffocated when the walls collapsed.

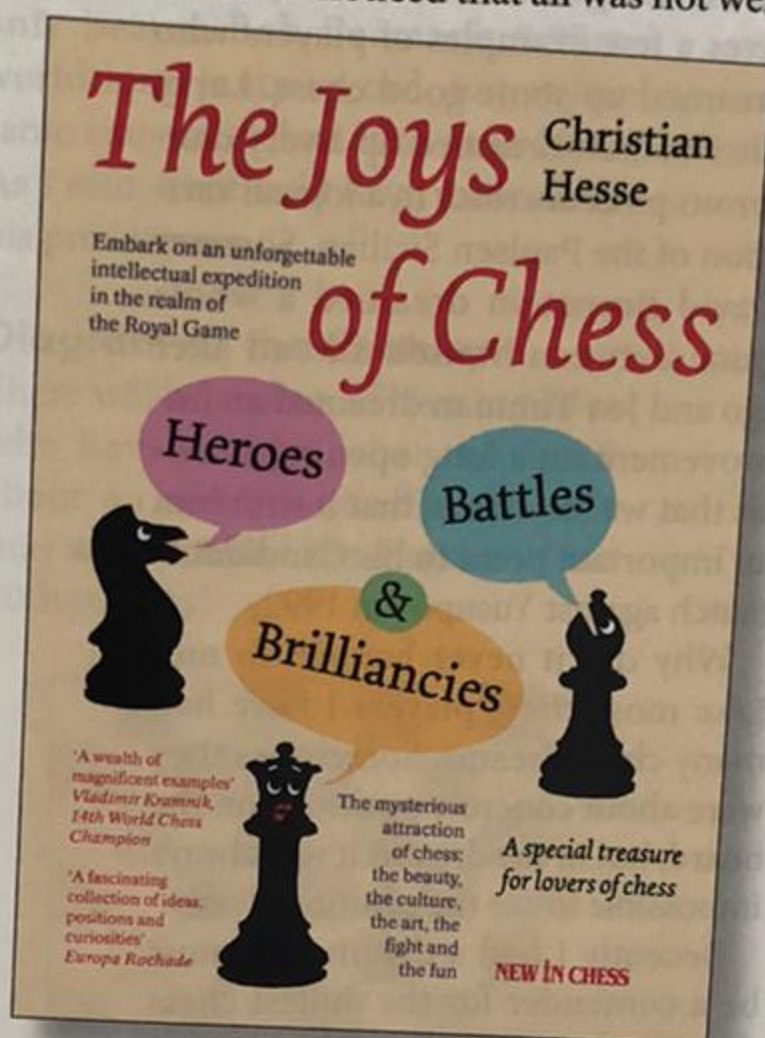
Onward, ho! to an angler who died when a big fish jumped into his mouth while he was yawning, and to a pedestrian who escaped unharmed when knocked down by a car, but died when he tried to re-enact the scene in order to collect insurance money and the car rolled forward and crushed him.

We are not done yet, or rather Hesse is not. There is a tale about a six-year-old girl who planted an oak tree in her garden that 60 years later fell over and killed her. A story about a terrorist who sent a letter bomb with too few stamps, got it back ('return to sender'), opened it and was blown to bits. And finally (but I may have overlooked a gruesome story or two) there is the newspaper report about a poacher who shot a stag standing above him on an overhanging rock and was killed instantly when it fell on him. Double mate, said the *British Sunday Express*.

For those who have not had enough there are a few chess-related murders and accounts of chess masters who died from a heart attack while playing a game.

About one of these, Vladimir Bagi-

rov, who died in 2000 during the Heart of Finland tournament, Hesse writes that he died at the board after reaching a winning position: 'Since Bagirov was neither in time-trouble nor had collapsed, but sat quietly in his chair, it took some time before someone noticed that all was not well.



He simply looked as though he was contemplating his next move.'

Cloud of Unknowing

A catchy story, but I don't think it's true. The report I trust is that of Mark Crowther's *The Week in Chess* and his Finnish sources, which at the time gave the more sober version that Bagirov fell ill while reconstructing the game after a frantic time-scramble and died in a hospital the next morning.

Hesse hardly ever gives sources to back up his stories, which seems forgivable, as it is just not that kind of book. In this case his source must have been that anonymous cloud known as the Web. Well, so is mine, but as I said, in this cloud I trust Mark Crowther and the Finns.

Is Hesse a sadist? Am I a sadist, repeating his gruesome stories with relish while keeping up the pretence of being shocked? Are we chess players all sadists? Outsiders are often gen-

uinely appalled by the violent language of chess players and commentators. 'Tearing apart his kingside limb by limb' is a quote that comes to my mind. It's only fun, we say, but it must have something to do with the contrast between the strong emotions of chess and the strict code that stops us from physically expressing them.

As a mathematician Hesse is denied the solace of violent language in his own profession. 'Tearing apart the Banach-Tarski ball limb by limb' would be very bad manners in a mathematical journal. Fortunately, we still have chess writing, and a public that will embrace the lurid details gladly.

Lucky Escapes

By now, dear reader, you may have become a bit impatient. OK, we have had an Austrian poet and some gruesome accidents, but wasn't this book supposed to be about chess? It certainly is, and to remove all possible doubt it can be said that on its 432 pages it has 597 diagrams, mainly of studies and problems, but also of game fragments.

It is a miscellany of everything in chess that was interesting to Hesse, who applied the sound rule that the best way to produce a book was to write one that he would like to read himself. It combines entertainment and instruction in the tradition of chess writers such as Chernev, Soltis and Fox & James, although in its emphasis on chess compositions it is most similar to Tim Krabbé's *Chess Curiosities*. Krabbé is much more of a purist, limiting his search for beauty to chess moves, without excursions into other intellectual fields.

As a miscellany the book is hard to sum up. I'll just pick a few subjects that are treated here and make my review, if you can call it that, a miscellany of rambling remarks inspired by *The Joys of Chess*.

Among the tales of gruesome accidents there is one story about an accident that fortunately did not happen. Hesse has it from Christopher Lutz, who had it from Artur Yusupov, the

lucky escapee of the tale. Yusupov had told Lutz that once in a tournament in the Soviet Union, when his game was adjourned, he thought for a long time about his sealed move, wrote it down, put it in the envelope and left the tournament hall. Just a short time after he had left, a heavy light fell from the ceiling bang in the middle of his board.

Chandeliers in Soviet tournament halls could be really big and heavy. So lucky that FIDE had not yet abolished adjournments! With a modern schedule Yusupov would have been playing till the end. His end, that is.

I witnessed a similar lucky escape during the Dutch championship of 1969, which was played in a big old hotel in Leeuwarden, the capital of the province of Friesland. About an hour after the start of the round a big, thick chunk of ceiling fell with thundering noise on one of the little tables in the space for the spectators. Almost all players stood and stared motionlessly, helpless like sheep. Only Donner had the presence of mind to hide under his table.

No more chunks came falling. As it was early in the round, the spectators had not yet arrived; if someone had been hit, he would certainly have been dead. Later Donner was to write: 'On April 14th, 1969, J.H. Donner – that's

me – was hit on the head by a piece of falling concrete, which made him lose five games in a row and which enabled Ree to win the title by the smallest of margins!'

Dreamers of Genius

In the chapter about dreams Hesse gives a few examples of players who dreamed up some good chess. Larry Christiansen dreamed up a very dangerous piece sacrifice in a topical variation of the Paulsen Sicilian. Sorcerer David Bronstein dreamed a whole game between himself and an alter ego and Jan Timman dreamed an improvement on a long opening analysis that was so strong that it won him an important point in his Candidates' match against Yusupov in 1992.

Why did it never happen to me? Like most chess players I have had many chess dreams. Sometimes they were about concrete positions on the board, but in my dreams it was always impossible to see the position clearly.

Recently I had a dream that must be a contender for the dullest chess dream of all time. Bent Larsen and Wolfgang Uhlmann were playing a Candidates' match, as they did in real life. Larsen won, again as in real life. After the game I was sitting at a board with Uhlmann, who maintained that he should have been able to get a small

advantage as White in a hedgehog position.

How unsufferably reasonable! I might as well stay awake.

Based on my own experience, never getting the position really in focus, I am sceptical about the claims about important theoretical novelties or even complete brilliant games thought up in dreams. I always suspected these people were pulling our legs. But who knows, maybe great players are also great dreamers.

Coincidentally, while I was writing this article, the Dutch IM and chess writer Gert Ligterink put up a column at the Tata Steel tournament's site about chess dreams (in Dutch).

Ligterink quoted an interpreter of dreams who had said: 'If you dream that you are playing a game of chess, this might indicate that you are in dull company and that your business and your health are in a bad state.' Bad news for us. One suspects that actually playing chess would be an even worse omen than dreaming about it.

Ligterink shares my scepticism about the brilliant chess moves found in dreams and tells a story about a visit to his friend, the Dutch IM Paul Boersma, during their student days.

He didn't have to ring the doorbell, because the squat where Boersma was living at that time didn't have a door.



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Boersma was still asleep when Ligterink walked into his room, but then he woke up and with a curse he jumped up and went to his chess board. After making a few moves he said sadly: 'I had dreamt there was a forced win for White from the initial position, but I see now that it doesn't work.'

A fine writer, but I forgot who it was, once wrote that in the middle of the night he briefly woke up and scribbled a note, a splendid idea for a novel. In the morning he found that he had written 'bear eats yoghurt'.

Variations on Krabbé

Earlier I wrote that Hesse should be forgiven for not explicitly naming his sources. Indeed, it would probably make the book unreadable if he had cluttered it with notes and references at every occasion. There is an impressive eight-page 'Index of literature consulted and further reading' and that must do the job of attribution.

In a few cases I think that he should have been more explicit and more generous. Can one write four pages about the Babson task without mentioning the name of Tim Krabbé? Krabbé has written extensively about this subject, on his website and in his book *Chess Curiosities* (which appeared in different forms in Dutch, English and German), and in Dutch he has even written a small book devoted completely to it, *De man die de Babson task wilde maken* (The man who wanted to make the Babson task).

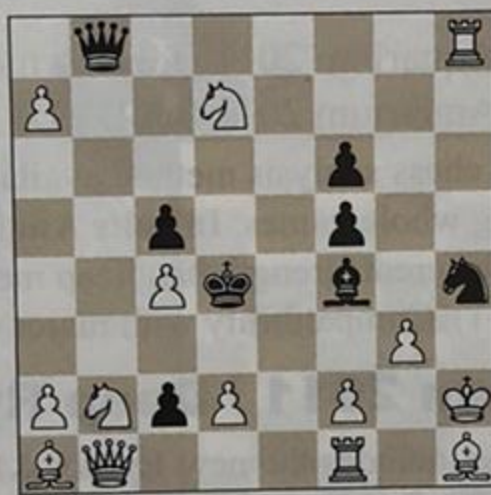
That book is not so much about the man who succeeded in this task, the Russian Leonid Yarosh, but mainly about the Frenchman Pierre Drumare, who spent his life trying to fulfil it. After many false tries that had generated real monsters of composition, he came to the conclusion that the task was impossible. Later he did finally succeed, but only after Yarosh had shown the way.

About Drumare Krabbé wrote in *Chess Curiosities* in 1985: 'One hesitates to imagine his feelings when he saw Yarosh's miracle.' Now Hesse

writes: 'It is difficult to imagine how Pierre Drumare must have felt when seeing diagram 204.' Krabbé wrote: 'Compared to Drumare, Lindgren and Geyerstam, Yarosh hadn't just broken the world's 100-metre record, he had set it at eight seconds flat.' Hesse varies: 'It is as though someone had not only beaten Bob Beamon's 8.90m world long jump record, but at the same time stretched it to over 10m.' As I said, he should have mentioned his predecessor.

Diagram of the Century

There will be readers of *New in Chess* who have no idea what this is all about, so here it is, the diagram that may well be called 'the diagram of the 20th century'.



L. Yarosh

Shakhmaty v SSSR, March 1983
Mate in 4

After the key move 1. ♖xh4, Black can promote on b1 to four different pieces and the stipulation of the Babson task is that White can only give mate in 4 moves if he mirrors Black: after 1... cxb1 ♖ the only correct way starts with 2. axb8 ♖, after 1... cxb1 ♗ the only way is 2. axb8 ♗, and so on.

That this can be done is indeed a miracle, but a few months later Yarosh improved on it with an amended version (the one that Hesse gives) in which White's key move is not a capture.

Taking Mistakes Lightly

Have you found any errors in this book? ask the editors of *New in Chess* on page 4, and they promise to forward all relevant corrections to the

Errata page of their website. I had a look at that page and found only a few minor mistakes (probably typing errors) connected with the relative value of bishop and knight.

To be honest – an expression used by many young chess stars nowadays, as the World Champion does not only set the fashion in openings, but also in manners of speech – I must say that I found quite a number of errors about chess history in this book that are much more substantial, but I am not writing a proofreader's report here, so I'll let it go.

This is a big book, with an abundance of beauty and laughter, and it really conveys the joys of chess both to experts and novices. But what about the errors? Hesse's book is a compilation of materials compiled by many other compilers and as such a fine thing, but stories told and retold sometimes lose accuracy. The mistakes are all there, waiting to be made, wrote the great Savielly Tartakower, who always took his own mistakes lightly.

All through writing this article I had to suppress the urge to quote Hesse to such an extent that it would go beyond propriety. Well, as a conclusion here is one more diagram.



Hesse, *The Joys of Chess*
diagram 320

This is the final position of a problem (mate in 10) by Carl Friedrich Andreyevich Jaenisch, 1850. To see what the initial position was, what moves were made and what the story was that inspired Jaenisch, you'll have to buy the book. ■