ForeWord Reviews

SPORTS & RECREATION

Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport
Jennifer Shahade
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Do *not* judge this book by its cover. Both the title and the hot pink artwork showing the author in a fluorescent day-glo wig were clearly chosen to catch the eye and to make it seem edgy and kicky and fun, and above all, unlike the hundreds of other solemn, dry tomes on chess. In fact it really isn't a bit like those other books, but it would be a shame if anyone were to get the idea that this is a frivolous, chick-lit glimpse of the highest level of one of the world's most complex and venerated games. Shahade is a two-time Women's International Champion and at the ripe old age of 24, she's written a perceptive and engaging guide to the rarefied realm of world-class professional chess. She is emphatically not a "bitch," nor—with one or two exceptions—are any of the women profiled in this intelligent and informative tour of a very exclusive sorority.

One needn't to be a chess nerd to find this a fascinating read, and only a casual familiarity with the game is required (though a glossary is provided for absolute neophytes, and technical *connoisseurs* will find an appendix that presents move-by-move details of more than fifty of the most important matches in women's chess). But Shahade is more interested in chess culture than in rehashing individual games: she introduces a gallery of top-flight women from Judit Polgar, the only female in the top 100 grandmasters, to a new generation of gifted girls still in their mid-teens but already making a mark; she describes life on the tournament circuit, which involves both fierce competition and a good deal of partying; and she explores the riddle of why men are so dominant in elite chess, among many other subjects.

Readers will discover all sorts of unexpected details. Those who regard chess as a "game" may be surprised to find that insiders invariably refer to it as a sport—until they also learn that top competitors often burn off ten pounds or more during a tournament. Those who assume that every game ends in checkmate will learn that few championship matches are actually pursued to a decisive conclusion, as all of the best players can foresee the endgame many moves in advance and almost always resign a losing position. And those who think of women in chess as a dowdy, bespectacled bunch will meet some famous chess vamps from Lisa Lane, a tough, talented American whose pinup looks and take-no-prisoners style landed her on

the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in 1961, to today's top-ten-ranked Alexandra Kosteniuk, a knockout Russian grandmaster whose website offers autographed bikini shots that lend new meaning to the expression "Queen's Gambit."

Shahade herself is matter-of-factly feminist, and confronts the notion of women as second-class citizens of the chess world firmly but without a hint of stridency. She points out that the subtlety, slow pace, and lack of obvious drama make the sport unsuitable as a spectator event that can command the kind of wide public attention that supports large purses, and notes ruefully that one result has been that many superb players have migrated to the more television-friendly field of high-stakes poker, where their intellectual training and analytical skills can win far greater financial rewards. But she also presents a number of ways to make professional chess a more realistic way to earn a living, from sponsoring youth chess programs (an effort in which she herself plays an important role) to spicing up the game's mass appeal with "blitz tournaments," which replace the more traditional and less exciting round-robin format with head-to-head elimination matches in which players each have a total of ten minutes or less on the turn clock in which to make all their moves.

Her enthusiasm is both infectious and instructive, and her articulate, thoughtful approach will appeal to everyone from bright young girls in search of a challenge to feminists interested in the sexual politics and psychological issues of world-class chess to anyone interested in an engrossing tour of an unusual and very demanding lifestyle. Chess could scarcely ask for a better ambassador than this winning, entertaining, and attractive young woman, and the youngsters she introduces to the game are fortunate indeed, for on the evidence of this engrossing book, Jennifer Shahade must be a really wonderful teacher.