



## Chessboxer

**Stephen Davies**

Andersen Press (Mar 1, 2021)

Softcover \$9.99 (320pp)

978-1-78344-840-1

Burdened by unresolved grief and hounded by her coach and her mother, Leah, otherwise known as Chessgirl, finds herself losing chess match after chess match. Suddenly, the very game that used to excite her brings only exhaustion. Eager to see what else is out there for her, the seventeen-year-old dives into getting a job, some new friends, and a new life. Along the way, she is arrested, beat up, and grows up in Stephen Davies's *Chessboxer*, a wired coming-of-age novel.

A mere twenty points from Grand Master status, Leah can't seem to close the gap and earn the title. Instead, she gets stuck in her own head game until it swallows her. She doesn't so much lose to her opponents as to herself, and the impact reverberates through her life, as chess is everything that she is. When she discovers chessboxing, a strange mix of rounds of chess and actual boxing, Leah feels that perhaps she has found her place.

Davies makes vibrant the mind games of both chess and boxing, creating tension with swift phrasing and active language. Though the metaphor of chess and its machinations extends in many ways, it never becomes didactic or slow. The imagined board and its pieces all move with speed and determination. The use of the blog format gives Leah a platform for a specific public voice. It also gives her an opportunity to respond to the public that surrounds her. As a public figure, she responds to sexism and stereotypes in a cutting manner.

Funny and fast, *Chessboxer* and its heroine bridge the gap between board games and the boxing ring, seventeenth-century strategy and twenty-first-century blogging, in unexpected and fun ways.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (March / April 2021)

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