

Quality comes at a price

by Glenn Flear



NEW IN CHESS

Over time a healthy tree grows taller, wider and has a richer foliage. In a similar way, popular variations develop an ever-increasing variety of possibilities that an author will want to cover. All this requires space, and the problem arises as to how to deal effectively with a subject matter that burgeons out of all proportion. Vast numbers of games accumulate in the database and yet books have to realistically stay about the same size.

As there is an evident limit concerning how much information can be physically included in a book, it's interesting to compare the different approaches in the three works that I review below.

Psakhis covers the French Defence in three substantial (if this one is anything to go by!) tomes. He goes for completeness throughout, but at the risk of data congestion.

Watson sticks to a Black repertoire enabling him to keep to one (albeit equally bulky) volume. He also relies on great detail, but at the cost of omitting totally some quintessential systems.

The 'Chess Stars' work on the QGA prefers to significantly edit down game references to keep the book to a realistic size. They cut out the fat preferring to be streamlined and practical.

The disadvantage is that the coverage of certain variations can seem lightweight.

All three works impressed me however with the way that the authors interpret history, assess the state of play and advise for the future. Fundamental attributes for any decent opening book.

As to the title of these lines... quality comes at a price.

All these books are of a certain quality, but what price does one pay?

In a shop we naturally expect to pay more for a top-of-the-range product, whereas with chess books, price reflects production costs rather than the worth of the content.

Money-wise, Psakhis's work on the French will cost the cash price of three books rather than Watson's one. However it should be borne in mind that readers of the 3rd edition of *Play the French* won't have any material on the *Tarrasch with 3...Åf6* for instance. That's an inevitable cost of a repertoire book!

Buying a good book isn't enough however. To make a book-reading experience worthwhile we need to seriously delve into the writer's explanations. Only then does the quality shine through.

The price that we really have to pay then is the time and effort to get to grips with the material. So I recommend that you turn off your computer, dust down and set-up your old chess set and spend some quality-time with a world-class chess author!

John Watson
Play the French (3rd edition)
Everyman 2003
272 pages, paperback

I don't want to be disrespectful to others but John Watson has simply been the most notable US author of the last 20 years. The top flight American players do occasionally

For more book information
we refer to our website:
www.newinchess.com

publish a work or two but are nothing like as prolific or as widely read in Europe.

He has produced some fine works in the past and even his smaller monographs are full of his views and original analyses. In July 1986 I purchased his 64-page Chess Enterprises booklet on the '4.Äc3 Gambit in the Queen's Gambit Accepted and Slav' and used many of his ideas in the months that followed. I even analysed some of his suggestions with Tony Miles in Dubai 1986, but I couldn't persuade him to play 4.Äc3 in a key game. Nevertheless, I stuck with 'my interpretation of Watson's ideas' and won a couple of games in the 1987 Bath Zonal on the way to my final GM norm. So perhaps I should offer him a belated thanks?!

As to the French Defence, with which Watson has had considerable writing experience...

Many repertoire books are usually aimed at club players, where the slings and arrows of theoretical developments are avoided by keeping things fairly general. Watson however likes to combine the attractiveness of a pre-packaged repertoire with cutting edge analysis. He intelligently avoids putting all his eggs in one basket by giving at least two variations of differing style for Black.

This third edition is not just a dusted-down version of what Watson has written before. There are considerable changes from the second edition, for instance the Tarrasch with 3...Äf6 is ditched (too much theory apparently!) in favour of 3...Äe7, plus the provocative 3...c5 4.ed5 ©d5. In the Winawer he concentrates on 7...0-0, rather than 7...©c7, which is again a remarkable divergence from his previous works.

Watson has chopped and changed even main lines to produce a refreshing new book. He cuts out completely some old favourites in

order to concentrate his efforts into limited areas (so prepare to be shocked, your pet line might be missing!). These he develops with a certain depth (20 pages on the Tarrasch with 3...Äe7, compared to Psakhis's 16) and his own interpretations of some controversial lines. So there you go, don't be fooled by the 'third edition' bit of the title, this is a brand new book that stands on its own feet!

He's rarely afraid to stick his neck out in his choice of recommendations backed up with games and comparisons. His lively style is so digestible and never dry, his analyses are stimulating. Reading through Watsonian prose is something to get excited about, he's even tempted me to think about giving 1...e6 a go!

For an Everyman book it has a solid feel to it. An unprecedented 272 pages and a significant number of sub-variations, despite his valiant efforts to help the reader 'simplify' the process of choosing how to play. The advantage of all this detail is that as usual Watson's books are suitable for the higher ranked (game references up to the summer of 2003 is a nice bonus), but the clear directions of the author will appeal to the more average player.

The variations are numbered in a novel way: '8.621' for instance can be found in Chapter 8, '4.112' in Chapter 4 etc. The drawback is that a variation called 9.2213 might be a digit too far for some readers.

The bibliography was more extensive than most, but curiously fails to mention his first two editions. Touching modesty (!?) or simply an oversight (!?) as these are compared to in each of the introductions!

Any writer who is willing to get off the fence to give clear-cut opinions

backed up with personal analysis will occasionally be proven wrong. There are surely a fair few holes here and there, but they are definitely worth it. Just the process of testing Watson's views will stimulate the reader to further his own research. It's a catalyst for positive action!

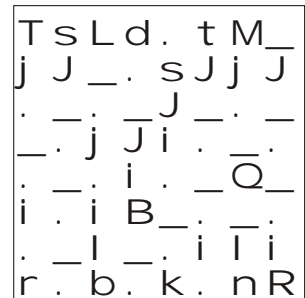
At times he errs with a few sloppy references (names of players the wrong way round etc.), on page 170 the drawing line should be attributed to Gallagher (not his opponent) and there are even misprinted illegal moves (a rare occurrence these days). Fingerfehlars are inevitable to some extent, but are easily noticed if they are in a crunch variation!

Now the time is right to split a few hairs:

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Äc3 Äb4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 Äc3 6.bc3 Äe7 7.©g4 0-0

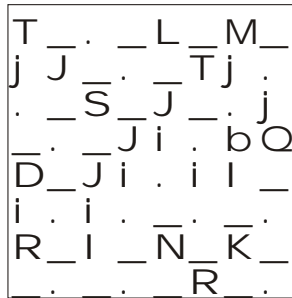
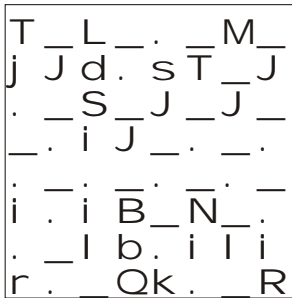
Another new line for the third edition rather than 7...©c7. However he does cover 6...©c7 and gives fair space to all those weird and wonderful anti-Winawer systems that are played by many at a lower level.

8.Äd3



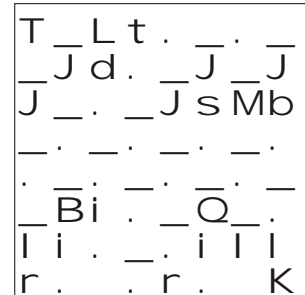
8...Äbc6

The move 8...f5 is Watson's second-string idea (so he gives it a slightly less detailed examination than 8...Äbc6) 9.ef6 Öf6 10.Äg5 Öf7 11.©h5 g6 12.©d1 ©a5 13.Äd2 Äbc6 14.Äf3 ©c7 15.dc5!



Here's a comparison to show that both authors have a contribution to make to topical theory.

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Äd2 c5 4.ed5 ©d5 5.Ägf3 cd4 6.Äc4 ©d6 7.0-0 Af6 8.Äb3 Äc6 9.Äbd4 Äd4 10.Äd4 a6 11.Öe1 ©c7 12.Äb3 Äd6 13.Äf5 Äh2 14.®h1 0-0 15.Äg7 Öd8 16.©f3 ©g7 17.Äh6 ®g6 18.c3



This critical position is analyzed over four pages in Watson's book, most of which deals with 18...e5 where he adds much original analysis. Psakhis prefers to emphasize the other of Black's two strongest moves 18...Äh5, offering three pages of excitement! They both agree on their conclusion: Black is OK in both lines! It's clear that with two authors looking at a variation from two differing angles, their work can be deemed to be complimentary. It certainly will be fascinating for some to compare their efforts.

Although his spoken English is pretty good, Lev Psakhis has prudently written in his preferred language (Russian I presume) and the competent translation was undertaken by John Sugden. The prose is of a high standard and reads fairly smoothly as a result. However this extra process takes time so with the introduction written in March 2003, it means that Watson's book (September 2003) will have more recent references. As we are lacking a Bibliography, in order to compare it's necessary to look at some specific variations where

On page 191 Watson deals with this position. According to Franck Steenbekkers this move is sufficiently strong that one can 'forget about 8...f5'. 15...e5 16.Äg5 Öf8 17.c4 e4 18.cd5! ed3 19.d6 ©d7 20.de7 ©e7 21.Äe3, as in Lutz-Pelletier, Biel 2003. Kindermann now valiantly tries to revive the line with 21...Öf5! (rather than the unsatisfactory 21...Äf5 22.cd3 Öad8 23.©b3 ®h8 24.©c3 ©g7 25.©g7 ®g7 26.Öb1 Öd7 27.0-0 which was clearly better for White in the game) 22.Äf3 (or 22.h4 h6 23.Äf3 Äe6) 22...Äe6 23.0-0 Äd5 24.Äd2 Öh5 25.Öe1 ©h4 26.Äf1 (Watson marks 26.Äe1 but that is clearly a misprint) 26...dc2 27.©c2 Äe5 and if 28.f4, then 28...Äc4.

This position is not commented on by Watson. I presume that Kindermann judges Black's position to be playable, Steenbekkers not, and Watson (unusually) is uncommittal. After 29.©f2 I personally doubt that Black has full compensation.

Unfortunately for readers, if 14...©c7 proves to be shaky, then he would have to fall back on 14...c4 which Watson doesn't develop at all just judging it thus '...theoretically favours White slightly'.

9.Äg5!? ©a5 10.Äe2 Äg6 10...c4? 11.Äh7 ®h7 12.©h4 ®g8 13.Äe7; Black also has 10...cd4! 11.f4 dc3 12.0-0 Äg6. 11.0-0 ©a4 12.f4 c4 13.Äg6 fg6 14.Öa2 Äd7 15.h4 Öf5 16.h5 gh5 17.©h5 h6 18.g4 Öf7 19.®g2 Äe8

20.©h3

The novelty 20.Öh1! 'is not OK for Black' – Steenbekkers. This seems to be correct... 20...Öf8! (20...Öf4?! 21.©h4 Öf8 22.Äh6 is too dangerous) 21.©h4 hg5! (21...Äg6 22.f5! ef5 23.Äf4 yields a strong attack) 22.©h7 ®f7 23.f5! (after both 23.Öh6 ®e7 24.©g7 Öf7 25.©g5 ®d7 26.f5 Öe7 and; 23.fg5 ®e7 24.g6 Äg6 25.©g6 ®d7 Black can wriggle out) 23...ef5 24.gf5 and White's attack is too strong.

20...hg5 21.f5

'is unclear and hard to assess' according to JW, Koch-Apicella, Chambery 1994

A better than average book for all standards, but his advocacy of certain lines will raise a few eyebrows!

Nevertheless, all those concerned with the French should really buy this book and that includes all those who have copies of the earlier editions.

Lev Psakhis

French Defence: 3 Äd2

Batsford 2003

288 pages, paperback

Lev Psakhis is another of those authors whose books are always worth a detour. A decade has passed since his definitive work *The Complete French* (1992) came out, so an update is due, but unfortunately for the publishers this coincides with Watson's *Everyman* publication.



I've found references up to February 2003, but no later.

The writer's sense of humour shines through as does his own understanding of the opening. He has a diligent attitude towards covering all reasonable lines. This is why you'll need to fork out for three volumes this time around (and one can only guess for how many in say 2014!).

I found that he has tried to get to grips with the subject in an honest enough way, but has probably overstuffing his notes with excessive game references adding rather to the length of the volume. The variations are intricate in the extreme, but frankly not everyone requires as much minutiae as his most famous trainee!

I can only compare it to having a delicious meal and then ruining it slightly by foolishly eating an extra portion of dessert.

Despite the book being so long (288 chock-a-block pages) Psakhis has a tendency to use many Informant-style signs, not just those for equality and advantage, but also for 'unclear', 'compensation', 'only move' and the 'initiative'. I'm sure many would prefer to see Psakhis's interpretation of 'why White has compensa-

tion', 'How strong is the initiative?' or 'Black's better, but why?' rather than a symbol. A symbol is fine in Informant or New In Chess, because this is understandable in any language to experienced players, but in an English-language book read by many lower-ranking mortals it comes across as incomplete when repeated too often.

I found navigating through the book difficult as unless one refers to the Index of Variations on page 283 it's easy to get lost, such as in Chapter Three – a mind-boggling 93-pages long!

The games are not numbered, the brief introductions to the chapters don't give overviews of the material, nor do we have the benefit of chapter summaries with indices à la Everyman.

The layout of the material doesn't ease matters either, for example on page 14 Adams-Morozevich, Sarajevo 2000 begins with 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Åd2 Åe7 4.Åd3, but then the author delves into 4th move deviations and only on page 18 do we return to this position. However the diagram is then wrong so it's easy to get confused. The game carries on with further hefty notes, and with Black's 8th move coming on page 24 it becomes clear that studying will be a long-winded task.

The author has avoided numbering his variations with a long string of digits, but I'm not sure his method will simplify life for most readers. Intricate notes emphasize the principle variation with bold-printed moves, but the sub-notes may still go on for half a page and feature a variety of alternatives and further brackets. I believe the chaotic nature of all this detail will be beyond most fans of the French Defence e.g. page 128, note 'c' on 14.©c1 (which is a subsidiary move to 14.Åe2, see page 126) features thirteen game references, with notes.

In any case you'll need more than one chess set to play through the games without losing your place!

It's arguable that a book dealing with only the Tarrasch in nearly 300 pages will be primarily for higher-echelon players, but this is not necessarily the case. In 1998 John Emms wrote a book on the same subject. It's only half as long, but so much easier to understand and ideal for all levels. That was (interestingly enough) published by Batsford when they were in cahoots with Byron Jacobs' First Rank publishing who are nowadays essentially the driving force behind Everyman. Batsford and Lev Psakhis seem to have fallen into the trap of going for completeness at the expense of clarity. His Batsford book on the Modern Benoni from 1995 is laid out in a more reader-friendly manner and yet certainly doesn't skimp on the detail!

I would have preferred to see more written explanation and a shaving down of some of the superfluous game quotations. Stronger players will check their databases anyway, but average folk appreciate 'words of wisdom'.

Despite being disparaging of the muddled presentation, it's clear that there are many golden nuggets in there waiting to be unearthed by the patient reader. If you read carefully and get used to the layout, you must be able to benefit if your preparation is deep and intense. Clearly aimed at a stronger readership, Psakhis's book will be a boon for those relishing in detail. However the structure is disappointing and will be heavy going for sub-2200 players.

Overall therefore I don't consider this to be for everyone.

It's worth glancing through the pages before deciding whether or not to buy. I suggest that you then try to answer the question:

Is such a plethora of game references really more useful than using a more ancient book teeming with clear explanations topped-up with an up-to-date database?

Konstantin Sakaev & Semko Semkov
 The Queen's Gambit Accepted
 Chess Stars 2003
 220 pages, paperback/hardcover

An ideal practical book for those wanting to learn about this opening.

Commercially it may not do well as the QGA isn't so popular at a lower level.

It's a positive selling point having a 2650 co-author, but Sakaev isn't that well known to the general public (compared to many weaker but more experienced players). These Bulgarian publications also have in general the disadvantage of being written in East European pigeon-English which can devalue one's appreciation of the quality of their chess content. This one is no exception and so I already suspect that it will struggle to impress some of the readership of the Anglo-Saxon world.

Putting any negative prejudices to one side I have to say that I liked very much the balance of the material. There's enough chess content to illustrate the whys and wherefores, without going overboard. There are plenty of diagrams and the authors take the time to highlight ideas and manoeuvres. They recommend various approaches with commonsensical own analysis, discussions about move-orders and finish off with salient conclusions.

By significantly abridging lesser sidelines they have produced a manageable 220-page volume. It's wisely divided into 27 small chapters, so navigating is easy. There's overall a comfortable feel about

flicking through the pages, pausing at a familiar diagram position and reading what they have to say. Here is an example where their suggested improvement is worth a closer look:

QG 6.10
 Filippov,Valery
 Flear,Glenn
 Reykjavik 1999 (3)

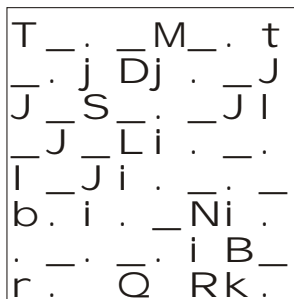
I was surprised to see an interesting suggestion in one of my own games. However I'm not convinced that it's as dangerous as the authors make out.

1.Äf3 d5 2.d4 Äf6 3.c4 dc4
 4.Äc3 a6 5.e4 b5 6.e5 Äd5 7.a4
 Äc3 8.bc3 ©d5 9.g3 Äb7
 10.Äg2 ©d7 11.Äa3 g6 12.h4
 Critical.

12...Äd5!

I believe that Black is OK after this move delaying committing the king.

13.h5 Äc6 14.hg6 fg6 15.0-0
 Äh6

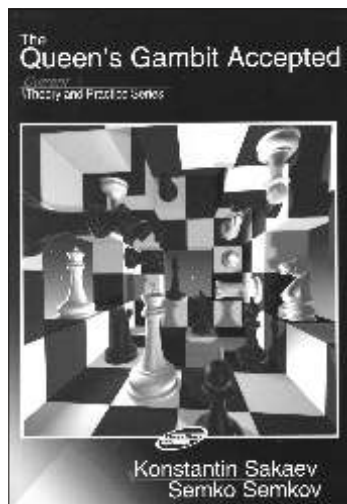


16.Äh2

Their idea is to open lines with 16.e6, e.g.

A) 16...©e6 17.Öe1 ©c8?!
 (17...©f6! 18.Äe5 Äg2 19.Äc6
 ©c6 20.Öe7 ®d8 (Flear) offers a
 better chance) 18.Äe5 Äg2
 19.Äc6 Äc6 20.Öe7 ®d8 21.d5 is
 certainly very dangerous. S & S
 consider it even winning for
 White;

B) 16...©c8 17.Äh2 ©e6
 18.Öe1 ©f7 19.Äd5 ©d5 20.Äg4
 Äg7 21.Äe3 ©f7 22.f4 0-0



23.©f3 'threatening 24.Äd5' and giving White an initiative according to S & S, however 23...Äd! 24.cd4 Äd4 25.Öad1 c5 looks promising for Black, Flear. 16...Äg2 17.®g2 0-0 18.f4 b4 19.Äb4 Äb4 20.cb4 Öad8 21.Öc1 ©d5 22.Äf3 Äf4! 23.gf4 Öf4 24.®g3 Ödf8 with excellent compensation.

There are moments when the authors do use Informant symbols, but without getting carried away, and they occasionally churn out the last twenty moves of a game without annotations.

I found a few misprints and I should mention that the editing in general isn't quite as polished as Western European publications. Furthermore the paring down process may not please everyone, some may regret that there isn't more coverage of slightly old-fashioned sections such as Chapter 25, 7.©e2 b5 8.Äb3 for instance. However all these 'buts' are minor points. The crux of the matter is that the wealth of instructive comment throughout the book ensures that The Queen's Gambit Accepted is surprisingly good.

I would recommend this as a practical guide for all standards.