



Ideas Behind the Chess Openings: Algebraic Edition

Reuben Fine

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In the opening, each player tries to control the center, set up a flexible pawn structure, develop the pieces rapidly and harmoniously, sometimes even go for direct attack. But there are so many complicated variations -- how can you memorize them all?

You can't -- and you don't have to! If you understand the basic goals of the opening you're playing, you will know which moves fit logically into its overall scheme. This classic, best-selling volume, now completely reset in modern algebraic notation, explains everything you need to know to play the opening sensibly and successfully.

Reuben Fine, an International Grandmaster, is one of the world's top players and a leading theoretician of chess. He is the author of over half a dozen books, including the definitive Basic Chess Endings.

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Author : Reuben Fine

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David says

I imagine I'd have liked it better if I was any good at chess. I guess I can add that to the list of things I thought I was good at as a kid. Like skiing and skipping class. I enjoyed the author's name more than anything. You can start calling me that if you want. Reuben Fine, indeed.

Cormac Zoso says

A good one-volume short intro to the wide world of chess openings. Rueben Fine does a great job of putting the most vital info into a pocket-sized book. This is a classic book in the chess lexicon. I have the old second edition in the Descriptive Notation and one of the newer editions in Algebraic to give my well-worn paperback a permanent and well-deserved resting place on my bookshelf.

Manny says

There's been a long discussing thread this week on my review of *Scott Pilgrim vs The World*. I started off by complaining that I found the movie hard to appreciate, since I'm not part of the video game generation and the references aren't natural for me. Many younger people countered by saying that they've hardly played video games at all, and they completely got it.

Well... my belief here is that you often soak up far more of the surrounding cultural ethos than you realise. A striking recent example: when I spent a couple of weeks on Hawaii in 2008, one of the first things I did was to buy a book on Hawaiian grammar. I read it every spare moment I had, and by the time I left I had picked up the basics of the language and at least two or three hundred words of vocabulary. Wow! It was so interesting, and, amazingly, it made sense! But as soon as I'd left, and was no longer in the only country in the world where Hawaiian is spoken, I had trouble remembering why I'd been so fascinated. The odd thing is that, consciously, I have hardly any memory of hearing anyone speaking Hawaiian. I suspect that people born after 1980 are in a similar position with regard to video games. Even if they don't play themselves, they're immersed in a culture where many of the people they hang out with are players, and they pick things up without realising it.

Which brings me to *The Ideas Behind The Chess Openings*, the first serious chess book I ever read. It was 1971, and the whole world was captured by Fischer-mania. Bobby had powered his way through the elimination stages of the world championship leaving several shell-shocked wrecks behind him (this is barely an exaggeration); now everyone was wondering if he would stay sane long enough to take the title. Meanwhile, lots of 13 year old kids like me decided they would study chess properly.

My father gave me this book. It was written by Reuben Fine, one of the greatest players of the 1930s, and it had a good reputation. Fine walks you through the most important openings, explaining the strategic concepts. Your basic goal is to do this, you want your pawns here and here, your queen should go to this square, you need to transfer your knight to the king-side. But I found it very unsatisfying. I didn't want all

this strategic advice. Sure, ideally White wants to put the pieces where he says. But supposes Black crosses his plans by doing this, or maybe this? Then what? He hardly ever told you.

When Fine wrote the book he was a top Grandmaster, and when I read it I was a beginner. He knew a thousand times more about chess than I did. Having now read Kasparov's fantastic *My Great Predecessors*, I think I can explain both why Fine's book was so good, and why I was so dissatisfied with it. Fine grew up influenced by Capablanca, who played positions in a harmonious, strategic way, and tried to avoid complex tactical calculations wherever possible. Fine explains Capablanca-style play very well. But, since then, things had become more and more concrete. Of course strategic principles were still important, but tactics were more important. I somehow knew that, even though I'm sure no one had ever told me. Within a couple more years I was playing 1970s chess, and often using concrete tactics to run rings around older players who still thought primarily in terms of abstract positional categories. But it wasn't until much later that I could have described any of it in those terms. I just knew the old guys were behind the times and didn't get it.

Human thought patterns are changing faster than we want to believe; I've been discussing with my psychologist friend whether it's possible to use chess to investigate that change quantitatively. Looking at books like this one, I have a tantalising feeling of something there that's almost within our grasp. Excuse me for thinking out loud at you.

Corey says

Fine can be a little dogmatic in his advice, and some of the book is now dated, but this is still one of the best books for understanding what openings are all about-- not just memorizing variations.

Ernest Cadorin says

Read 50%. Focused on the sound openings, especially the ones I play or encounter. Skimmed passed the others. I got limited insight into how to follow up certain openings and a few specific tricks, but not much more than that. Occasional use of colourful language helped to liven up this inherently dry topic.

Serge Pierro says

This is a classic for a reason. Fine gives great insight into the openings, giving the beginner and intermediate player, the knowledge needed to understand the opening of their choice. A bit dated, but overall still relevant.
