

Houska, Jovanka, 2007. *Play the Caro-Kann: A complete chess opening repertoire against 1. e4*. London: Everyman Chess.

A problem faced by every chess player is how to respond to white's opening move of 1 e4. Over the course of a forty year plus chess career I think that I have tried pretty much every defence that enjoys a degree of respectability, and a few that do not.

There always seems to be one or two lines that throw me and, inevitably, these seem to be the ones that my opponents choose more often than not. If I play 1. ... e5 then I am content to face the Ruy Lopez but some of white's more immediately aggressive choices cause me difficulty; a difficulty made worse in over the board chess by having to remember complicated lines. I like the open Sicilian, and score well with it, but tend to lose against choices such as the Bb5 lines. Years ago I liked the Alekhine Defence but so many met it with the dull 2. Nc3 that I abandoned it. What of the French? Well, sadly, I just don't understand it and can't play the positions that arise. In my head I can now hear our Chairman shouting "Play the Pirc!" I did, with null points being the usual outcome.

This review considers Jovanka Houska's book on the Caro-Kann. As a respectable defence I have, of course, played it. Here my problems were with the Advance variation and, in correspondence chess, also with the Panov-Botvinnik Attack. Houska claims to offer a complete repertoire against 1 e4. Has she done it? I have to say that she has. Against the 'Main Line' 3. Nc3 she advocates the old Capablanca line of Bf5. I thought this somewhat inferior with both sides castling on the queen's side and white, by and large, the only one with serious winning chances. Houska thinks differently, preferring black to castle short producing tense positions with black being very much in the fight. Against my bug-bear of the Advance, instead of Bf5 she prefers the 'Arkell line' of 3. ... c5. This, too, used to be thought inferior but Houska shows that it is fully playable so long as black is prepared to learn a few tactical lines.

What I really like about this book is not so much the lines that she recommends but her writing. She writes so clearly and engagingly, remembering that not everyone who buys her book will be as strong a player as she is. She takes time to explain the consequences of pawn structures; she explains the plans available and does not assume that they are obvious. Against 3.Nc3 especially, she shows when black should try one pawn break rather than another. I bought this book as an impulse buy at a chess congress. I went to the congress intending to play the Sicilian against 1 e4. But, after reading the early chapters of this book I bashed out the Caro-Kann the next day, played 3...Bf5 against 3. Nc3 which I had never played before and felt that I understood the position and what I was doing. Indeed I got a great position from the opening.

Has Houska solved the problem of what to play against 1 e4? No, obviously not. One must play in keeping with one's style and chess preferences. But, if you like the Caro-Kann, or would like to re-examine it after a break then there is a great deal in this book to interest and inspire. But the real star is Jovanka Houska herself. Those of us who are not grandmasters must hope that she writes more books because, dear friends, she writes for us; not to show how clever she is but to explain so that we might understand. And that is such a joy.

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