

Book Review

Uhlmann, W., 2018. *The French Defence... Properly Played*. Eltmann: Joachim Beyer Verlag

Some years ago, when studying for a MA degree, I had to take a module on the philosophy of science. How hard can that be? I was at that time a qualified microbiologist and thought I had some grasp of what science was and how it worked. I also held an undergraduate degree in a social science and felt that I was pretty comfortable with managing conceptual ideas and theories. Well, we worked our way through epistemology (how can we know if something is true?), ontology (the nature of reality), some stuff by a chap called Saussure on things and the words we use to describe things which I didn't quite follow, and a whole bunch of stuff about the social construction of objects, concepts, and meaning. The whole course left me with questions and doubts about the everyday world and whether things were really as they seemed.

I was reminded of this exercise in intellectual gymnastics as I worked my way through the subject of this issue's book review. My lovely wife, despite clearly not having read my last column about not understanding the French Defence had bought me a book on the French Defence. Or had she?

The French Defence Properly Played had to be an opening repertoire book, right? Well, no. While there are sections on each of the major variations of the French it isn't a repertoire book at all. Indeed, the lines played in some of the games could not say that they were not warned of a sticky end if they were played in grandmaster chess today.

Was the book, then, an examination of key ideas in the French? Again, not really. While Uhlmann does explain some ideas and typical plans it's not evident that this is the focus of his book.

With very few exceptions the games all feature Wolfgang Uhlmann playing black. If one was so minded, the book could be seen as a 'best games' collection except all of the games are French Defences and that would be weird. So not that either.

Then, finally, it dawned on me that this book is none of these things at all. It is a love letter from Uhlmann to his favourite opening. Written by Uhlmann when an old man, it is a recollection of all the joys the French has given him, the happy times spent together and, yes, a little of some of the heartbreaks when his opening let him down. Despite this, he remained faithful to the end of his career (the latest game with Uhlmann as black is from 2001). Yes, that is what this book is. A love letter.

But you don't read these columns for romantic old tosh, you want some good, sensible, consumer advice. So, should you buy this book? If you want a ready to go repertoire in the French then no. There are plenty of proper repertoire books on the French available; you should buy one of those. If, however, you already play the French and have some idea of what you are doing then yes, absolutely buy this book. There are 75 games here and some of them are absolute corkers. I would

expect that your ability to play the French will improve with careful study of these games.

But, mostly, this book is for you if, like Wolfgang Uhlmann, Cupid's arrow has pierced your heart and you too are besotted with the French. If you can forgive it its failings, the annoying white pawn on e5, the sometimes crushing lack of space, a queen's bishop that thinks it's a pawn and so much more. Yes, if you love the French's imperfections as much as you love its finer points then you must buy this book.

Adam Spencer