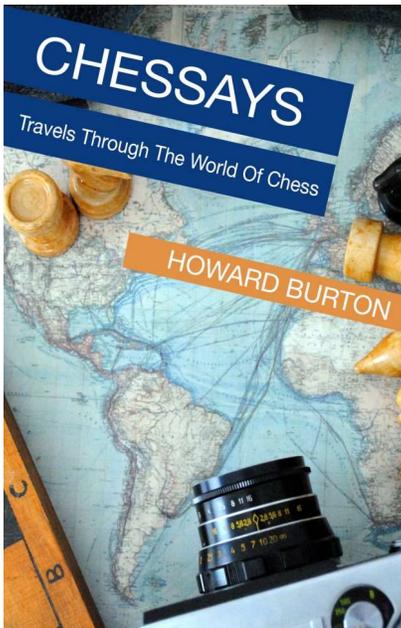


Chessays, Travels Through The World Of Chess by Howard Burton

Reviewed by Mark Capron

Howard Burton is an independent filmmaker and author. In 2012 he founded Ideas Roadshow. Ideas Roadshow is a collection of documentary films based on detailed, long—format conversations with internationally renowned experts in various fields of study. The author holds a PhD in physics and an MA in philosophy. He previously created the four—part documentary, *Through the Mirror of Chess: A Cultural Exploration*.



In *Chessays, Travels Through The World Of Chess*, the author presents eight topics over 193 pages. The topics include “The Uses and Abuses of History”, “Waste of Time?”, “Evolutionary Forces”, “FIDE is a Four—letter Word”, “Watch Her Play”, “Far Transfer”, “Farther Transfer”, and “Farthest Transfer”.

Each topic consists of a detailed essay presented with ample footnotes. The essays are passionate and full of zest with strong opinions. In the introduction the author even states: “And for those who do find themselves indignant and offended, the one way I respectfully suggest that you *shouldn't* react is by launching some sort of reflexive, ad hominem salvo based on the fact that I have a pitifully low Elo rating or am not a FIDE executive, but rather by attacking the substance of my claims. I say this not because I am worried about anyone being angry with me (I am not), ...”

The first essay discusses the history of chess. Burton uses a scientist’s perspective to both shame and highlight various authors of chess history. Here is what he has to say about this: “Which brings me to the topic of ‘chess historians,’ perhaps the strangest of all creatures in the entire chessophilic landscape. With a few pointed exceptions (such as the medievalist Richard Eales, author of *Chess: The History of a Game* and a FIDE master), no self—proclaimed ‘chess historian’ has any significant training or background in history, and virtually all drifted toward histor-

ical investigations after having first fallen deeply in love with chess.” Page 9.

To Burton the historian should have “steely determination to avoid preconceived notions” and “unswerving resolve to find out what actually happened”. Furthermore he continues: “And the vast majority of ‘chess historians’ exhibit neither of these two vital character traits, set as they are on finding ‘proof’ of something they already ‘intuitively know’ to be the case. That is not history. That is propaganda.” Page 10.

He even adds humor: “...to conclude that something purporting to be a serious work of historical scholarship shouldn't be competing directly against Pokémon for recognition.” Page 18.

The second essay “Waste of Time?” was one of the more intriguing discussions. Here Burton discusses if chess is an activity that benefits the world. He delves into some of the most famous quotes that have been used derogatorily towards chess. An example is from H.G. Wells: “*The passion for playing chess is one of the most unaccountable in the world.*” Page 26. How much you agree or disagree will very much depend on your personal investment in the game itself.

Essay three deals with what makes chess, chess. What makes a sport a sport and what make chess a sport? How did we get to a sport from a game? The author’s theory is that it ultimately requires four components: Status, Money, Internationalism, and Organized Infrastructure. He goes on to explain each in detail. The subject of cheating in chess comes up and Burton says the following: “If you are someone of a Paul Morphy—like disposition, revolted by the prospect of sullyng ‘the most moral of amusements’ by playing it for filthy lucre, the notion of surreptitiously tapping into a computer to conquer your opponent is not only unconscionably unethical, but smacks of downright insanity. Why on earth would anybody go to all that trouble for a ‘mere game’?” Page 76.

This last passage brings me to a point of note about the language used throughout the book. The chosen language isn't familiar in many cases, and the reader should be prepared to reread sentences and look up unfamiliar words. For me this was a bit of a distraction, albeit a welcome distraction, as my vocabulary should be vastly improved after reading the book!

In Chapter 4 Burton discusses how corrupt FIDE has become over the years since its inception in 1924. He provides lots of discussion on how the USSR seemed to have FIDE in its pocket. He goes on to say this about change: "More significantly for our purposes, they are also well aware of the fact that the few people who *do* care about such issues—i.e. chess players—will not be able to do anything about it, given that, on the whole, chess players are, as a group, the most politically hopeless of all human beings." Page 92. Did this touch a nerve? Be prepared! Burton discusses some of our common motifs and chess idols in ways you may not have contemplated before. Need an aspirin? A punching bag? The chapter then evolves into a discussion on the World Championship and how antiquated our process is, compared to other sports such as tennis. He explains why he believes there is money in chess and what FIDE reform might look like. This chapter is sure to elicit many emotions. I could only smile and shake my head after reading it.

Essay 5 is about gender and chess. Are there differences and should there be differences between the sexes? Burton retorts: "...as anyone with the slightest modicum of understanding about human beings is well aware, there is clearly **no** significant existing intellectual difference between men and women..." Page 130. When rationalizing why no one has figured out why there are less elite female chess players he offers: "To put it another way, there is no pressing demand to tackle the question of why elite—level chess is also not significantly peopled with porcupines..." Page 130. Real problems generate real study. This is not a real problem that actually affects the world as a whole. But, how can the chess world profit from either exploiting or removing these biases?

Essays 6, 7, and 8 are entitled "Far Transfer", "Farther Transfer", and "Farthest Transfer". Page 149 states: "'Far transfer' is a popular term in the contemporary educational lexicon, roughly defined as the application of specific knowledge or skills to a domain quite dissimilar to one's starting point—as opposed to 'near transfer,' where the gap between the two domains is much narrower." He continues, "...a vast number of chess advocates ... pronouncing that chess is a veritable far transfer panacea."

Burton explores the pedagogical claims that chess makes you smarter and that chess should be taught in all schools. Is there concrete scientific evidence? How about how chess ties into mathematics? Burton states: "On the one hand, the sense of profound aesthetic appreciation that I experience when seeing a beautiful combination in chess certainly feels very similar to being presented with a beautiful mathematical theorem, ..." Page 162.

In "Farther Transfer" the author opines: "It's very hard to know how to measure these sorts of things, but if anyone was somehow tasked to investigate what, by some objective measure has been the most passionately embraced recreation in human history, it's hard to imagine chess not coming to the very top of the list." Page 169. The author then discusses "chess addiction" on his way to how chess has become more mainstream citing examples such as *The Queen's Gambit* and the *Queen of Katwe* amongst others. And finally there is a small section on prison chess.

The last essay, "Farthest Transfer", starts with discussion of artificial intelligence. Would you rather watch a match between two human players or a match between two computers? Of course most (if not all) of us, would choose the former, which leads to a rather important concept outlined in the following paragraph: "To the aficionado, however, it is so much more than that. Winning is important, of course, but in the larger scheme of things what really stands out is how that is done. Winning because your opponent blundered, for example, is clearly better than losing, but hardly something to write home about. And at the higher levels of play, when obvious mistakes by one's opponents are increasingly unlikely the ultimate thrill is not simply to win, but to win elegantly, with a brilliant sacrifice or penetrating combination or a truly innovative and possibly initially counterintuitive idea, ..." Page 183. This makes the pure aesthetics of the computer game less attractive. Then the twist shows up when a discussion of AlphaZero comes about.

The final statements sum it all up very well: "It's not about winning or losing, or chess, or sports, or entertainment or any of that. At all. It's simply about finding ways to improve ourselves. And the sooner we realize that, the better off we'll all be." Page 193.

I enjoyed the book very much. I did look up a substantial number of words and reread many sentences until I understood what was being said in the sometimes very esoteric language. Mr. Burton writes with a high level of skill in portraying his opinions and ideas. The humor used throughout (even made me laugh out loud a few times) allowed some of the very serious and cumbersome sentences to have a much more light-hearted feel.

The cover photo is amazing and grabbed my attention immediately—I wanted to know what this book was all about. Each chapter is led off by a diagram of a chess position. The diagram design was unique and thoughtful.

Within each chapter the author's arguments span much broader than the one or two narrow aspects chosen for this review. It was common to start at one place and end at a very different place, but they were always tied together under the same umbrella. Beware of many twists and turns throughout and the strong emotions the opinions can elicit. Whether you agree or disagree with in each topic you will be richer for the experience.

I recommend this book to those who are interested in any of the topics discussed above, not afraid of a little hard work, and open to lots of critical thinking.

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