

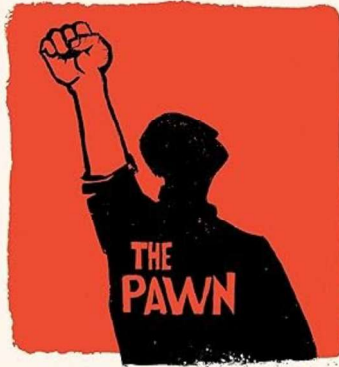
The Pawn

By Paco Cerdá (Translated by Kevin Gerry Dunn)

Deep Vellum Publishing (2025), 264 pages

Reviewed by Mark Capron

PACO CERDÁ TRANSLATED BY KEVIN GERRY DUNN



“... is stuck, like an isolated pawn, with no defense from any other piece of his color. Like a pawn that has advanced far on the board, he is weak, unarmed, easily captured. Or perhaps he has already been removed from the board, is no longer part of the game. The victim of an ambush. Of a sacrifice made for the good of the team and tolerated by servile miters, common crooks; a flock impersonating a shepherd.”

A pawn can be defined as a chessman having the least value, allowed to move only

one square forward ordinarily, to capture diagonally forward, and can be promoted to any piece except a king upon reaching the eighth rank. It can also be defined as one that is used to further the purposes of another.

The author melds these definitions of a pawn as he weaves the storyline. *The Pawn* is a masterful blend of history, politics, and human drama. Layers upon layers of plot and storyline are offered. At first glance, it is a book about Spanish Chess prodigy Arturito Pomar, but it is about so much more. Every chapter begins with a white and a black move from the game Bobby Fischer – Arturito Pomar, Stockholm 1962. Each chapter describes a snippet from history, moving fluidly across cities and continents— from Stockholm to Madrid, New York to Reykjavik. The two chess prodigy’s fates were shaped as much by global politics (Cold War and Franco-era Spain) as by their own ambitions.

All chapters are interconnected, since each describes a “pawn.” In between, we get glimpses into the lives of Pomar and Fischer. The author’s descriptive, harsh, in-your-face, writing style is especially effective at forming substantial imagery in your mind’s eye. You feel as if you’re right there with “the Pawn” being described.

A prime example was that of Fischer’s “Game of the Century” vs Donald Byrne.

“...an almost unknown Bobby (black pieces) faces international master Donald Byrne (white pieces) in the eighth round of the Rosenwald Trophy Tournament in New York, and Bobby is about to swerve into the special lane reserved for legends. At this point in the game, the seventeenth move, Bobby abandons his threatened queen and shifts his bishop back two squares, swapping an active position for an unremarkable one. No one understands what’s happening. Murmurs bounce off the venerable Marshall

Club’s dark wood and the heavy vermillion-velvet curtains that have witnessed the living history of chess. It’s a mild, 64-degree October night, and the usual din of the street shuffles between Fifth and Sixth Avenue. Professor Byrne, who is twice his opponent’s age and the U.S. Open Champion, studies the board from behind his horn-rimmed glasses and captures the black queen with his long, slender, elegant, intellectual, lily-white fingers. Then Fischer gets to work.”

I could almost feel as if I were part of the collective audience, gasping.

This is a difficult book. Be prepared to consult a dictionary, and to learn some Spanish history, especially the Franco years. The history knowledge will help with understanding the first few chapters. Definitely not mandatory, just helpful.

An example is the word Falangist. The dictionary states, “relating to or characteristic of the Spanish Falange movement” and “a member of the Spanish Falange movement”. Well, that wasn’t too helpful. After further research, Falangism was a political ideology that combined Spanish nationalism, authoritarianism, Catholic traditionalism, and anti-communism, along with a call for national syndicalism. Many of the chapters deal with Falangism and Falangists as they confronted the oppression caused by the dictator Francisco Franco.

In 1946, at the peak of Pomar’s fame, a book entitled *Over Fifty Games with Masters* was released. “The book concluded with a question that, in the heat of Arturo-mania, was ubiquitous: Will Pomar reach the apex of world chess? Who knows. He could become a genius or a notable figure in global contests. And if things go poorly, he’ll be a fleeting but bright meteor that sets the skies ablaze before burning out into oblivion.”

In 1949, Pomar traveled to Argentina without giving proper notice to Spanish authorities. He was censured by the Spanish Chess Federation and restricted for one year from competing in the national championship.

Pomar’s run-ins with authorities didn’t stop here. In 1952, he set sail for Cuba to avoid getting a “real” job, since tournaments didn’t pay enough. He found that exhibitions paid best. He then traveled to America for more exhibitions. However, he didn’t have permission. In 1953 he was charged with absentia and had 20 days to report. He stayed until 1954, so he obviously missed that timing. Both Mexico and the US offered political asylum and citizenship, but he still chose to go back home and face the consequences. Luckily a high ranking General, who was also a chess player, got Pomar off the hook and out of prison.

Pomar never got to challenge for the World Chess Championship and his life, as the author imagines, became sad ...

World #2 Hikaru Nakamura Plays in Iowa Open By Mark Capron

"It's hard not to remember the panegyrics of his childhood as he works now in this post office in an irrelevant town forty minutes outside Madrid, sorting letters and packages from regular people as if he himself were a regular person. He, one of the most brilliant, privileged minds in the history of chess, the pride of his nation. It's clear that this pawn has been placed on the wrong board (Spain) in the most difficult round (the Franco era). But Arturo doesn't complain. He carries on. He always has. Resignation is one of his favorite words."

Chess comes down to winning and losing just like life itself as the author points out in the following passage.

"Losing. It seems like it's simply the flipside of winning; one of the three possibilities that every life offers when the clock starts ticking and the game begins. Winning is the hoped-for, childishly idealized, single-mindedly pursued outcome, until relentless time proves that an insipid, stultifying tie – a result reviled, often ignored, scarcely considered when the dimensions of the theater are confused with the true plot of the play- is usually the best that most players can hope for. Born for victory, we settle for draw. But no one is taught to lose, because nobody wants to learn to lose. There are no teachers or students in the school of Raymond Poulidor, with his eight second-or third-place trophies from the Tour de France, a dusty Parisian Sisyphus who never once wore the yellow jersey despite his status as universally beloved; he was a kindly, unsung loser without laurels, the epic face of admirable tragedy, the sweet poetry of missed opportunity, of dangerous relaxation, of false delight. Losing is taught only by life, the singular teacher who gives instruction on the supreme value of a timely draw, an outcome that is cold and useless, but also soothing and analgesic."

The rich, multi-layered approach is very interesting. Cerdà positions each move on the board as a metaphor for larger ideological battles that really made me stop and think. I enjoyed the 264-page book a lot. The translator Kevin Gerry Dunn did a fabulous job as I did not notice any awkward language spots. I did find a couple of other small errors. In one case, Black's move 70 had a typo. In another case, move 41 was not correct for either player. I had an uncorrected, proof copy to review, so these may have been fixed once the final version was issued. Is this the book for the person wanting to improve their chess game? No. Cerdà's storytelling is both thought-provoking and expansive, making this a standout work for fans of literary nonfiction, chess history, and Cold War history. It's a book that lingers long after the final page, because of its quiet revelations about power, vulnerability, and the cost of greatness. There is much to be learned within. Self-reflection. Empathy. Anger. Intrigue.

"Slow, small, weak, insignificant, often manipulated, easily instrumentalized. Poor playthings of destiny who never surrendered or abandoned the board. I can't anymore, I'm staying here. They knew they were pawns. A few perhaps dreamed of being crowned queen. But they all knew that a pawn is never just a pawn."

5.0 out of 5.0 stars.

Almost a year ago I agreed to help Eric Vigil direct the 70th Iowa Open. In September, like a shot heard around the world, we all found out GM Hikaru Nakamura attended a local FIDE rated tournament in Louisiana. The following Monday I was talking with Eric about the Iowa Open, and I joked about GM Nakamura randomly showing up. Eric said "can you keep a secret?" I told him I could and he let me know that "yes, Virginia there is a Santa Clause!" GM Nakamura was headed to Iowa, but he wanted it to be a secret for a multitude of reasons. GM Nakamura signed up for the tournament online about one hour before online registration ended. Soon the word was out.

I was pairing chief and right after I finished pairing the first round I saw GM Nakamura's first round opponent walk in. I moved to meet my friend Ben Darr, and let him know his pairing. At first Ben absolutely thought I was joking with him. Once I convinced him I wasn't pulling his leg he took the news as an exciting challenge as I thought he would. Ben has a nice write up about this and his game in the [October 2025 Iowa Chess News En Passant](#).

Shortly, Eric started receiving phone calls. He received one phone call asking if a player could still register for the tournament. Eric told them online registration was closed and first round pairings had been made. But, if they arrived well before the second round pairings were made they could enter as a late entrant with a half-point bye for the first round. So NM Artemii Khanbutaev and his father took off from the Chicago area and raced to Iowa City (3.5 hour drive). They made it before I paired the second round. A few more late entrants showed up as well. NM Khanbutaev got his wish and ended up playing GM Nakamura in the last round (see photo below).



The crowd was increasing in size as the day progressed. One lady was the girlfriend of a chess player who was out of town and he asked her come to get an autograph. Another was a reporter for the Chicago Tribune. Along with the chess players themselves, many more were friends and relatives. The line between rounds for autographs and pictures was quite long.

As expected GM Nakamura swept the field. He beat Ben Darr of Iowa in the first round. He then defeated Matthew Pikus of Missouri. In the third round he beat CM Dane Zagar of Minnesota. In