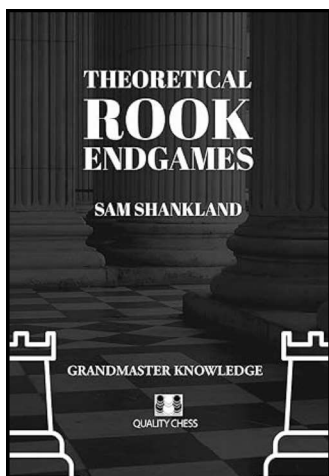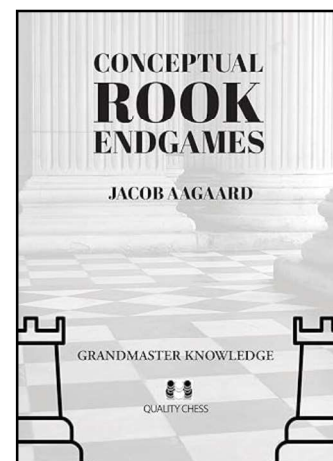# Book Review
Correspondence GM Jon Edwards

Sam Shankland, *Theoretical Rook Endgames* (Quality Chess, 2023)

Jacob Aagaard, *Conceptual Rook Endgames* (Quality Chess, 2023)

What's this? More endgame books? Not one, but two books from the same publisher on the same endgame type? Should I read one of them? Both of them? Are they really different?

Every master emphasizes the importance of studying endgames, but if indeed chess endings are a science, then it is not at all surprising that the most comprehensive endgame books through the past century have tended to be dry, encyclo-pedic, and quite unappealing to the average player. More than that, many of the past's endgame manuals and encyclo-pedias have contained significant errors and omissions, some quite significant, and perhaps more important, they in-volve a distinct dearth of obvious pedagogy. In my view, *Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual* was a pleasing step forward, with instructive examples and well–considered planning goals interspersed. But it still left me hungry for more.

The emergence of tablebases, essentially computer–confirmed look up tables of endgames with five, six, and now seven pieces, has given us a new computer–based approach that has refined the meaning of endgame science and truth, and exposed the extraordinary depths of seemingly simple endgames. The "Secrets" series, which began with John Nunn's *Secrets of Rook Endings* (Holt: 1992; now published by Gambit), is based upon these tablebases and is well worth your time if you are rated over 1800. Their fifth entry, *Secrets of Queen Endings*, like the other books in this series, are full of entertaining surprises, especially when presented pedagogically by a highly rated and articulate human.

But I seriously digress. Surely there is a path to endgame success without having to plow through such reportage. After all, as players, we need more than just the endgame truth. We also need to know the practical reality of what actually happens in the final phase of the game. There's a human factor, since these endgames frequently occur when players are tired and in time trouble. Even Grandmasters, who arguably ought to know all or most of this endgame truth, play inaccuracies and outright blunders from time to time.

We also tend to miss the human context that explains how these endgames emerge, and we miss out on the human drama of facing endgame challenges while hopefully avoiding endgame pitfalls.

Just as Nunn began the Secrets Series with the truth about 5–piece rook endgames, the two new books from Quality Chess hopefully represent the start of a lengthy series of endgame books covering all of the main endgame types in both theory and practice.

Most of the examples in these two books are drawn directly from Grandmaster play, following a modern games–based focus. The moves are computer verified, which may cause some readers to moan, but the endgame should indeed be played like science when the truth is not wholly intuitive. Happily, here we have very strong human players providing pedagogy and commentary.

Shankland's book provides the theory. This is a product of Shankland's pandemic isolation, an admirable devotion to tackling what he perceived as the weakness in his own games.

Even if you are already comfortable with the basic Lucena and Philidor positions, you may be surprised by Shankland's coverage of the subtleties and the breathtaking transitions that have occurred within his own and others' games. But there is so much more. There is coverage of the long and short side defenses and the Vancura Defense with readable examples. If you have read this far, you have heard all of these themes, but may not have confronted them with rigor.

Now you can enjoyably master them. As you would expect, Shankland also provides comprehensive coverage of ♖+2♙ vs ♖, ♖+2♙ vs ♖+♙, ♖+3♙ vs ♖+2, all on the same side, and comparable coverage when the pawns are racing forward on both wings.

[Chess diagram: White king h8, white pawn h7, black king c7, white rook d2, black rook g1]
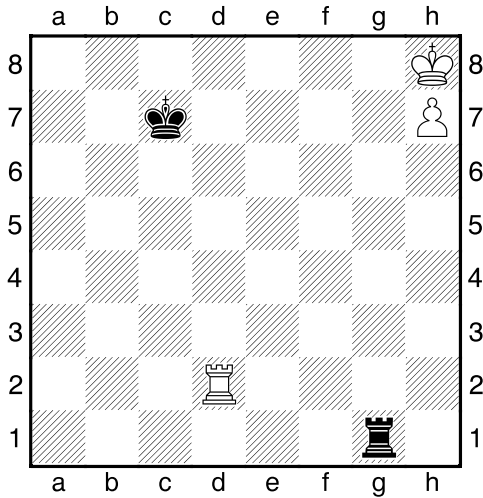
With white to play, is this a win or a draw? Do you know the optimal play well enough so that it becomes a building block in your middlegame analysis? Know that Shankland's annotations are extensive and presented throughout with the reader in mind. His presentation is memorable enough to make a lasting impression.

Just another aside, but we are truly living in an amazing technical age. As I entered this position within ChessBase 17's setup board in order to generate a diagram, it tells me that this exact position had been reached in these six games, all with a successful result for the player with the extra pawn.
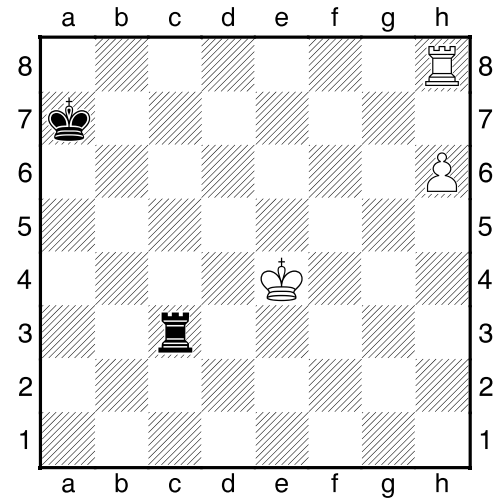
☑ Search automatically

1966: Marovic,Dr - Gromek,Jo
1996: Busquets,Lu (2265) - Sanpera Bonet,Ju (2115)
1998: Bellon Lopez,Ju (2455) - Pecorelli Garcia,Hu (2465)
2003: Franck,Ru (2185) - Oldach,Eh (2054)
2005: Milla de Marco,Ca (2092) - Blanco Villalba,Jo (198.
2017: Stohl,Ig (2504) - Pcola,Pa (2374)

As you might expect, the positions in Shankland's book build upon each other usefully, and he has carefully laid out the learning order. In the following example, it is Black to move and draw, and you must confront two logical candidate moves, 1...Rc6 and 1...Rh3. One move draws, the other loses. Instincts can be wrong, and placing the rook automatically behind the outside passer is flawed.
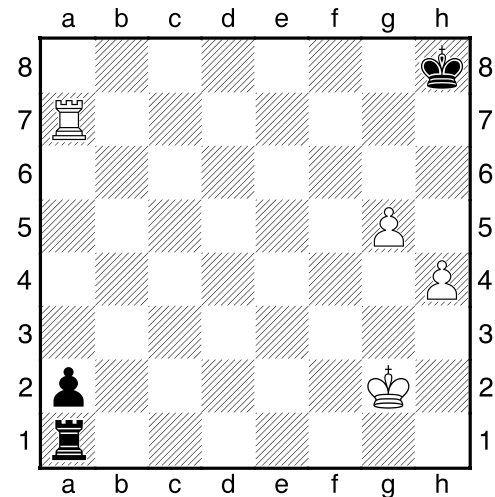
Shankland writes: "Black seems to be in a bad way. His king is light years away from the h6–pawn. Also, since the pawn has not yet been pushed to h7, White can, in theory,

still use the h7–square to hide his king from checks from behind. But the position is still a draw thanks to the Vancura defense.

[Chess diagram: White rook h8, black king a7, white pawn h6, white king e4, black rook c3]

Once again, a ChessBase search of similar endgames produces many examples, but here, there are many examples in which the defending side failed. Success goes to those who prepare well.

Here is a third example. As you can see, attention to detail truly matters in these endgames.

[Chess diagram: Black king h8, white rook a7, white pawn g5, white pawn h4, black pawn a2, white king g2, black rook a1]

With white to move, advancing the h–pawn is tempting, but Black then has ...Rb1–b5. The correct way is to start patiently with 1.Kh2! enabling 1...Rb1 2.Rxa2 Rb5 3.Rg2

If you find these examples as pleasing as I do, you will soon have a new book, best friend. I should add, by the way, that ChessBase reveals that very few GMs found the correct way to proceed here.

This is the first endgame book that I am reading carefully, cover to cover, front to back, barely putting it down, since my misspent youth with Fine's *Basic Chess Endings*. Given the amount of time I am investing with the book, I purchased the hard cover edition so that I can lay it flat while I

ponder each position within ChessBase. That way, I get a diagram on every move and, of course, I get the bonus of seeing all of the players who got these right and wrong.

Ah, but wait. There is much more! Shankland provides the theory, in its useful reality. In a companion volume, Aagaarde (*Conceptual Rook Endgames*) provides the grandmasterly practice. He has made no effort to mask the complexity. He is most decidedly unapologetic in presenting the difficult reality of playing rook endgames. All of the examples are drawn from GM games and Aagaarde has clustered his examples around 25 common themes, such as activating the rook first, check the checks, king activity, connected passed pawns. I hope that two examples from the book will help to clarify Aagaarde's approach. They provide a sense of the book's importance and the extent to which it belongs on your endgame shelf.

The first is from **Dhopade – Edouard**, Gibraltar 2018 with white play.
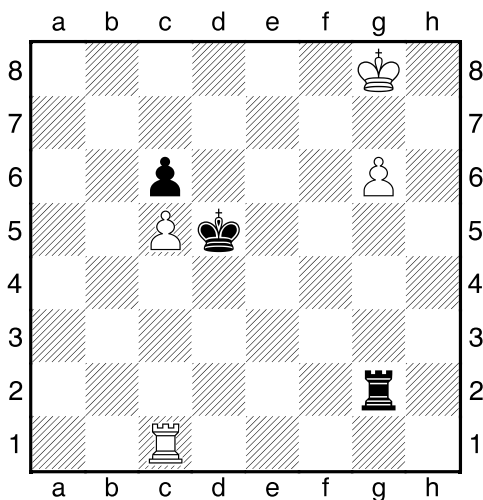
1.♔g7‼

An amazing king move with the understandable purpose to support building a bridge with the white rook on g4 or g5.

This correct idea was discovered only in the post–mortem with an engine running.

In the game, Swapnil played the very natural looking 1.g7? ♖g3 2.♔f7 ♖f3+ 3.♔g8 ♖g3 4.♖h1 ♔×c5 5.♖h6 ♔d5 6.♔f7 ♖×g7+! 7.♔×g7 c5=

1...♖g3 2.♖f1! ♔×c5 3.♔f6 ♔d4 4.♖f4+! ♔d3 5.♖f5! ♖e3 6.g7 ♖e8 7.♖c5 ♖c8 8.♔e6 ♔d4 9.♖g5 ♖g8 10.♖g4+! ♔e3 11.♔f7 ♖c8 12.♔f6 c5 13.♖h4 ♖g8 14.♖c4 ♖c8 15.♖×c5 ♖×c5 16.g8♕ When a difficult Queen vs Rook endgame still beckons.
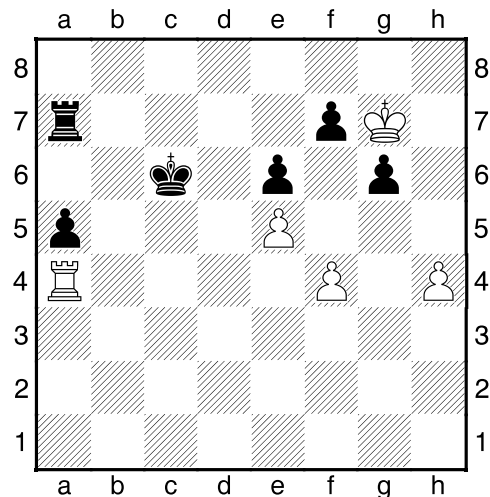
I warned you that these are hard.

If you saw all of that, know that I don't believe you. Here's another of my favorites from Aagaarde's book.

In Chapter 8: Breakthrough, we find this historic example.

Lasker, Emanuel - Levenfish, Grigory
Moscow, 1925

It's White to move and draw. It is worthwhile comparing the two variations. Lasker's choice was simply too slow.

1.♔f6? [1.f5! e×f5 2.e6 f×e6+ 3.♔×g6 ♔b5 4.♖a1 a4 5.h5 ♔b4 6.h6 a3 7.h7 ♖a8 8.♔g7 ♔b3 9.h8♕ ♖×h8 10.♔×h8 a2 11.♖h1! e5 12.♔g7 e4 13.♔f6 e3 14.♔×f5 e2 15.♔e4 ♔b2 16.♔d3 with a draw.]

1...♔b5 2.♖a1 a4 3.f5 [the correct idea, but too late]

3...e×f5 4.e6 f×e6 5.♔×g6 f4 6.h5 f3 7.h6 e5 8.♖e1 a3 9.♖×e5+ ♔c4 10.♖e1 a2 11.h7 ♖a8 12.♔g7 f2 13.♖a1 ♔b3 14.♖f1 a1♕+ 15.♖×a1 ♖×a1 16.h8♕ ♖g1+

0–1

Prepare to be challenged, frustrated, and entertained, all at the same time. It is clear that the rook endgame journey is a difficult one, a reflection mainly of the inherent nature of the subject. The examples throughout are instructive and often quite beautiful, but we are left with another interesting problem. Which book has the best approach, and which one should I buy? I addressed that issue in an old–fashioned sort of way… I bought them both, and they have become the two most interesting books on my endgame shelf. With luck, Quality Chess will soon expand this coverage to the other endgame types.

> "Chess is a game by its form, an art by its content and a science by the difficulty of gaining mastery in it."
>
> —Tigran Petrosian