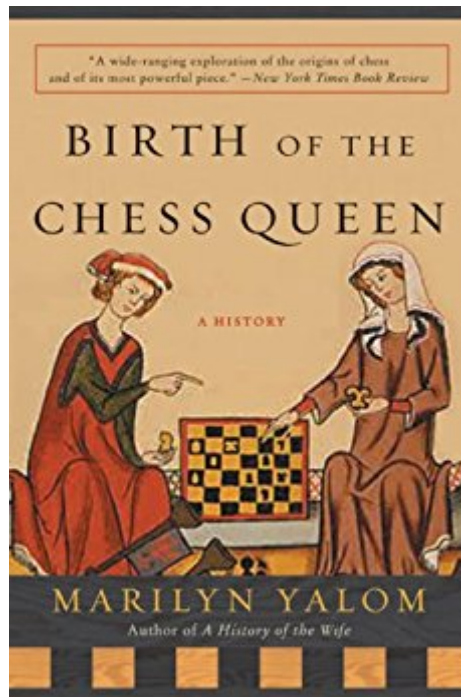


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Birth Of The Chess Queen: A History



Synopsis

Everyone knows that the queen is the most dominant piece in chess, but few people know that the game existed for five hundred years without her. It wasn't until chess became a popular pastime for European royals during the Middle Ages that the queen was born and was gradually empowered to become the king's fierce warrior and protector. Birth of the Chess Queen examines the five centuries between the chess queen's timid emergence in the early days of the Holy Roman Empire to her elevation during the reign of Isabel of Castile. Marilyn Yalom, inspired by a handful of surviving medieval chess queens, traces their origin and spread from Spain, Italy, and Germany to France, England, Scandinavia, and Russia. In a lively and engaging historical investigation, Yalom draws parallels between the rise of the chess queen and the ascent of female sovereigns in Europe, presenting a layered, fascinating history of medieval courts and internal struggles for power.

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Customer Reviews

Yalom advances an interesting thesis: the development of the power of the chess Queen was directly influenced by powerful women (queens and nobles) in Western Europe. However, she fails to support her thesis. Essentially this book is historical example after example of women in Medieval

Europe who held and exercised well the reins of power. Yalom then shows a few pictures; cites a few poems and manuscripts; and eventually says that because these women were powerful that chess playing society decided to make the queen more powerful. Yalom ignores the most compelling reason for the development of the chess queen's power: the rise of the middle class. There was no queen when the Arabs played chess; instead there was a vizier--a weak piece at best. Chess was also an extremely slow game, often taking days to play. It was played by the upper classes. It is quite natural that Western players would eventually replace the vizier with the Queen. Moreover, it is worth noting that as we see a rise in the middle class--many wanting to mirror the nobility in manners and tastes--that they, too, would play chess. But they needed a faster game, and during this time we see rapid changes in chess rules, and a steady increase in the Queen's power (bishop, too). The development was mainly for speed. It is also of interest that Yalom so strongly claims that it was the rise of powerful women that caused the chess Queen to develop as it did, but then she ignores that line of thinking with other pieces. For example, the Bishop also gained in power during this time, but in society at large we see during this time the erosion of church power in secular affairs. If Yalom's thesis holds true for the chess Queen, then applied to the Bishop we should see that piece losing power.

The birth of the chess queen is synonymous with the birth of "modern" chess rules, when the Court of Queen Isabella of Spain expanded the power of the Queen. Had we all known about the date and place of this sudden change, the book would be little more than a "travel guide" down the corridors of chess heritage; but the new light that Marilyn Yalom sheds upon chess history makes "Birth of the Chess Queen" a landmark work. It was interesting to read chess history for the specific nations of Europe, England, Scandinavia, Spain, Italy, Russia, and the lands bordering upon the Mediterranean Sea. Marilyn Yalom presents the archaeological record related to the chess sets or pieces recovered from the many nations, and adds to it, historical accounts of the chess play from around the world known at that time, through poetry and other literature and representation of chess in art work. It is an account of chess used for romance and courtship, in addition to other social discourse. It is refreshing for the ability of its author to elaborate the defining moment when chess expanded from its slow-moving and primitive structure, to the dynamic game we know today. There is a chess history which costs well over \$70.00, besides which, chess history can lend itself to mere repetition. I appreciate this affordable and scholarly work for its distinct approach. Marilyn Yalom draws a clear distinction between chess play of the Medieval period, the players of the chess "Golden Age" (1800's), and the highly competitive and organized event we play now. Marilyn Yalom

introduces some fascinating questions regarding certain historical anomalies.

Every once in a while, I read an appealing book and say to myself, "It's about time somebody wrote something like this!" But the most interesting books I've read are about things I never would have thought anyone would write about, which is exactly how I would categorize *Birth of the Chess Queen: A History*. To be honest, I've still got some misgivings about this ... but I guess a book can't be bad if I find myself scribbling notes to myself every few pages. I've been a chess player for nearly as long as I've known how to read, and I admit I have wondered from time to time why in a game with early Muslim roots that was popularized in Europe during the Middle Ages -- neither culture known for its egalitarian qualities -- would be so dominated by a single powerful female piece, the way the queen dominates chess. Author and Stanford University gender scholar Marilyn Yalom's thoughts on the same subject were no doubt the starting point for this book, which is filled with information that any chess player or anyone curious about gender roles will find interesting. For example, the queen piece evolved from the vizier (a bearded male piece that was like an anemic bishop, able to move only one diagonal space in any direction), who stood next to the king in one form or another for five centuries before the queen definitively appeared. Even then, the evolution was not universal: several games using the hapless vizier are still played in the Middle East, and the game most folks now know as chess is in some cultures still called "queen's chess," treating it as a derivative of some lost standard version of the game. The first chess queen appears in the 10th or 11th century, and it seems to have taken her around 300 years to accumulate the power she has today.

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