

BATSFORD CHESS

The Chessmaster Checklist



Andrew Soltis

BATSFORD CHESS

The Chessmaster Checklist





Andrew Soltis

The Chessmaster Checklist

Andrew Soltis

Contents

Introduction

Chapter One What Is He Threatening?

Chapter Two What Are the Tactical Ideas?

Chapter Three What Is Wrong With His Move?

Chapter Four What Is the Principled Move?

Chapter Five What Is His Weakest Point?

Chapter Six What Does He Want?

Chapter Seven How Can I Improve My Pieces? 164

Chapter Eight Will My Position Get Better?

Chapter Nine Finishing Up

Quiz Answers

Introduction

“If I move my queen to d5, can it be captured?”

Beginners ask themselves questions like this. They learn the hard way. If they don't ask, they lose a lot of queens.

But even strong players fail to ask.



Daulyte – Socko

Sochi 2015

White to move

No, the diagram is not wrong – 57 b6 is indeed mate.

Yet White played **57** ♔a5+??? and immediately resigned. And this was a world championship event.

Newcomers to chess are shocked by this. How can one of the world's best players make the worst of blunders?

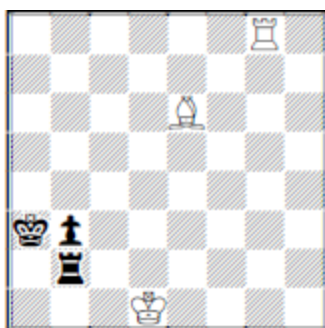
But tournament veterans know how, from personal experience:

You want to make a forcing move. You see the check on a5. You pick up the queen and put it there. You only see 57...xa5! when

your hand lets go of it.

Beginners learn to protect themselves, in a beginner way. They grab the piece they want to move and place it on the desired square. They know the touch-move rule so they hold it there, often with one finger, until they have scouted the rest of the board to see if the piece can be captured.

It's a clumsy procedure. But even grandmasters have used it – badly.



Morozevich – Svetushkin

European Team Championship 2011

Black to move

White's only real winning chance lies in capturing the b3-pawn and then outplaying Black in a drawable ♔+♚+♞-vs.- ♔+♚ ending.

Of course, he might also win if Black blunders horribly. But Black was not only a grandmaster but an experienced teacher of young players. He taught them the paramount value of rechecking the move you want to play before you make it on the board.

He picked up his rook, placed it on a new square and held it there. He looked about the board and then let go of the rook, **76... ♖g2??**.

He resigned immediately after **77 ♜xg2!**.

Chess Adolescence

When you were a beginner you learned to do a lot of things. You probably didn't realize it, but some were things you did subconsciously.

When you decided on a move, you didn't think about how to make it on the board. You didn't ask yourself "Should I slide the piece or pick it up? If I pick it up, should I use two fingers or three? Or all five?"

No, moving a piece had become as natural as any everyday routine, like putting on your shoes.

You learn more good routines in your chess adolescence. After your opponent moves, you wonder "Does he threaten something?"

At first, you had to remind yourself to do that. But as you improve, you look for a threat without prompting. You may do it instantly.



Nakamura – Carlsen

Internet 2020

White to move

When Hikaru Nakamura played **30** ♖b6, Magnus Carlsen didn't have to ask himself if there was a threat. He saw 31 ♗xd8.

But he did not stop there. He also spotted 31 ♖f5!.

He immediately replied 30... ♗xg5!.

He was worse after 31 ♖f5! ♗g6! 32 ♖xh3 ♗xd3 33 ♗xc8 ♖xc8 but managed to draw.

Carlsen knew to look for more than one threat. After all, he was once a chess adolescent, 20 years before.

Habit Building

You get better at chess by acquiring other good habits. You won't get *much* better until you can perform those habits without thinking.

For example, you will not only ask yourself "What does his last move threaten?" but also "What does it allow me to do?"

You may ask specific questions such as "Which of my pieces can I improve" but also general questions such as "What is his weakest point?" and "What is his goal in the next few moves?"

Masters are masters because they ask themselves these and other questions. They form a checklist.

In the heyday of postal chess, many correspondence players used an actual written list of do's and don'ts. Consulting it was their final step before they sent their next move off in the mail.

But you can't comfortably play chess, over the board or on the Internet, by trying to remember these questions. It is awkward, wasteful and often just confusing.

Instead, you should internalize these questions, to use a fancy word:

1 What Does He Threaten?

2 What Are The Tactical Ideas?

3 What Is Wrong With His Move?

4 What Is The Principled Move?

5 What Is His Weakest Point?

6 What Does He Want?

7 How Can I Improve My Pieces?

8 Will My Position Get Better?

9 Is There A Better Move?

10 How Can My Move Be A Blunder?

Asking these questions should become effortless and automatic. It should be as comfortable as ... well, putting on your shoes.

Chapter One:

What Does He Threaten?

This is one of the first questions players learn to ask themselves – and one of the first they forget.

Even grandmasters forget it. They forget because they are busy asking other questions.



Karjakin – Anton Guijarro

Internet 2020

White to move

White understood that Black's best chance for survival lay in perpetual check (46 g4 ♔e2+ 47 ♔g3 ♔e1+).

He met that threat with **46 ♖e3** so that 46...♔e2+ 47 ♖f2.

This defeats all of Black's possible moves – except for the winning **46...♖h3+!**. It was Black's second and stronger threat.

White is either mated (47 ♔f2 ♔f1 mate and 47 ♔h2 ♔f1) or loses his queen (47 ♔xh3 ♔h1+ 48 ♔g4 ♔h5+ 49 ♔f4 g5+ and ...

♔xf7).

Sergey Karjakin, who had played a world championship match four years before, was the victim in that game. He was the beneficiary in this one:



Wei Yi – Karjakin

Internet 2020

Black to move

White threatens ♖xc6+. He would win after 38...♗xc5?? 39 ♖xc6+.

He also planned to meet 38...♔d5 with 39 ♖d7+!.

Then he would be winning after 39...♔e6?? 40 ♖xd3 or 39...♔c4 40 ♖d4+! and ♖xh4.

So, when Karjakin moved **38...♔f5**, White didn't have to ask "Why?" He had figured out that it was the only safe Black move.

White replied **39 ♖f7+**. His idea was to meet 39...♔e5 with 40 ♖h7 and ♖xh4.

Karjakin chose **39...♔g6** and the position was repeated after **40 ♖c7! ♔f5**.



White to move

Of course, White can continue 41 ♔f7+. But even with only seconds left he wanted more than a draw by repetition.

He was careful enough to look for a trap. He spotted one: 41 ♔xc6 would lose to 41...♘e5+.

He set his own trap with 41 ♔h7. Then 41...♘xc5? would lose a piece to 42 ♔h5+.

But the game ended with 41...♘e1 **mate!**.

Wrong Question

In your chess adolescence you asked “What is his threat?” after your opponent moved. You learned to do this instinctively. But this is the wrong question.

It is wrong because once you spot an opponent’s threat you may let your guard down. This is what White did when he saw 41 ♔xc6? ♘e5+. He didn’t look for another tactic, the mating threat.

Players are particularly vulnerable to this pitfall when they see more than one way to avert a threat. They focus on finding the best defense to it. Once they feel they have found it, they think their work is done.



Ding Liren – Nakamura

Internet 2020

White to move

White saw the threat of 28...♔e4+ followed by 29 ♔xe4 fxe4+ and 30...♖xd5.

He can avert that in several ways:

He can trade rooks, 28 ♖xd8.

That would work well after 28...♖xd8 29 ♗b6 ♖e8 30 ♔d5! – but less so after 29...♖d7.

Alternatively, he can move his king out of checking range. But 28 ♔e2 gets into a pin that Black can try to exploit with 28...♗h6, or 28...b5 first.

There is also a benefit – but also a drawback – to putting one of his rooks on d2.

In the end, White chose **28 ♔g2**.



Black to move

It had none of the drawbacks of the alternatives and one major benefit.

The ♖b6 idea is stronger. For example, 29 ♖b6! ♜c8? 30 ♚xc8 or 29...♜xd5 30 ♚xd5 and ♜c7.

But 28 ♚g2?? was a blunder. White forgot to look for a second threat.

He resigned after **28...b5! 29 ♚b3 ♚b7!** cost him a rook.

Near Term

“What is his threat?” is the wrong question. The right one is “What does he threaten?” The answer may be a plural.

When there is more than one threat, there are two very different ways to blunder.

A young player will see the obvious threat, such as a threat to mate next move. But he may not detect a long-term threat, such as to win a piece in two or three moves.

Experienced players develop a sense of danger that often alerts them to a long-term threat. But this foresight can work against them. It can blind them to a near-term threat.



Carlsen – Ding Liren

Internet 2020

Black to move

Black has just captured on e1. There is no immediate threat to his knight. But having an unprotected piece on a distant square triggered his sense of danger.

He could protect the knight with 31...♔e7. The added benefit is that 32 ♔xe7+? would hand Black a winning endgame.

But 32 ♔a6! would win either the a-pawn or d-pawn. On top of that, Black's knight would remain endangered, by 32...♞f3 33 ♞e6! and ♞xd5.

This explains **31...♞f3**. Black wanted to safeguard the knight well before it is threatened.



White to move

But he missed White's near-term threat, a mate after **32 ♞g6!** and ♔f7.

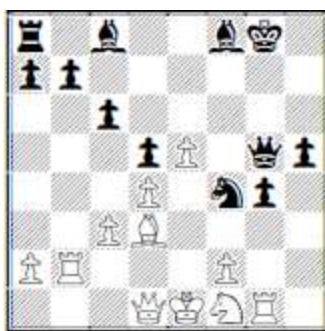
For example, 32...♔e6 33 ♔b4+ and mates. Or 32...♔g8 33 ♔f7+ ♔h8 35 ♔e8+.

Black's best defense was 31...♔e7 after all. Then he could continue 32 ♔a6! ♔f7! and ...g6, e.g. 33 ♔b5 g6 34 ♔xd5+ ♔g7 (35 ♞e6 a3!).

Dealing with the long-term threat, 31...♖f3?!, was fatal.

Alarm Shut-Off

Even if you have a good sense of danger you can inadvertently turn this alarm system off. This often happens when you cannot imagine how your unprotected pieces can be attacked.



Carlsen – Giri

Internet 2020

White to move

White has a fairly wide choice of what we call candidate moves. Candidates are the most appealing moves you can consider playing.

For example, White might pick 25 ♖e3, which improves the placement of his knight. Another candidate is the safety-minded 25 ♖b1, which denies Black his only forcing move, ...♗xd3+.

But why does White need safety? All of his pieces are protected except his rooks. And they can't be attacked, can they?

This led the world champion to play **25 f3**. It gave him options such as launching a kingside attack with ♖f2, fxg4 and ♖e2.

But he didn't look for a threat. He was lost after **25...♗xd3+ 26 ♖xd3 ♖c1+** and **27...♖xb2**.

False Security

Carlsen's sense of security misled him because Black's pieces seemed too far away. Your feeling of danger can be blunted in another way – when you believe you are making progress. Here is a typical scenario:

You make a threat. Your opponent parries it, by dodging, protecting or retreating. Then you make another threat. You begin to feel you command an initiative. You are the only one capable of forcing moves.



Nakamura – Carlsen

Internet 2020

White to move

Hikaru Nakamura had been forcing matters for the previous eight moves.

Feeling optimistic, he was unwilling to accept a drawish trade of rooks, 26 ♖xd8+ ♗xd8 27 ♖xd8+ ♔xd8.

Instead, he sought additional forcing moves, **26 ♖d7** and then **26... ♗xd7 27 ♖xd7**.

Good things can happen after 27... ♔e8 28 a4 and better ones after 27... ♗h1+ 28 ♔c2. This is the kind of thing that happens when your initiative continues.

Carlsen replied **27...b4!.**



White to move

Black threatened mate on b2 but also ...♔xg4. This forced **28**
♖d4!.

Nakamura still had reason to feel hopeful about his winning chances because there were ways he could win immediately (28... ♖xd4?? 29 ♔xc7+ and mates).

On the other hand, he would have no more than a draw after 28... ♖e1+ 29 ♔c2 ♕e2+.

When Carlsen replied **28...** ♖ **d6**, it should have set off an alarm. Why would he retreat when he could make unlimited queen checks?



White to move

Nakamura began to appreciate why. If he moves his attacked bishop, Carlsen would play ...♔xg4.

In addition, Nakamura could not play 29 ♔c3 because of 29... ♖h1+! 30 ♔c2 ♖a4+ and...♗xd7.

But 29 ♗e4 looked safe.

The truth was revealed by 29...♗a4!. The threats of 30...♔d1 mate and 30...♗xd7 prompted resignation.

Why did White collapse so quickly? The illusion of making progress earlier in the game concealed the dangers that led to 26 ♖d7? and 29 ♗e4??.

Threat Blindness

This illustrates one of the many ironies of chess. The player who can quickly see how to make threats can become myopic when his opponent surprises him with a threat.



Wade – Gligorić

Saltsjöbaden 1952

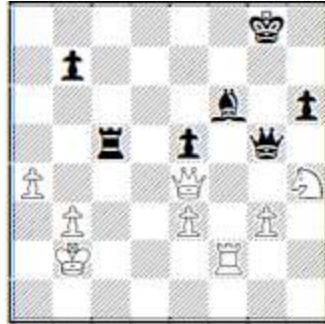
White to move

White should be feeling very good about his position. He has an extra pawn and a potential mating attack with 36 ♖d2!, threatening 37 ♖d7!.

He preferred **36 ♖f2**. Then he could activate his knight. For example, 36...♗g7 37 ♘f5! gets him close to a win.

He didn't have to worry about 36...♗xh4 because 37 gxh4 would open the g-file for a strong queen or rook check.

Black played the somewhat surprising **36...♔g5**.



White to move

White's advantage looks decisive. He naturally searched for a forcing move.

Instead of the move he intended, 37 ♘f5!, he attacked the queen with **37 ♖f5**.

It made tactical sense: 37...♔xg3 38 ♖xf6. But it was a false thread because after **37...♔g7** his rook occupied the best square for his knight.

Nevertheless, he was still winning. His position has been so good that he could retrace his steps with 38 ♖f2! and ♘f5!.

Computers have no problem recommending this. Humans want to make progress. White chose **38 ♘f3** with the idea of ♘d2-c4.



Black to move

White didn't realize it, but his winning advantage had vanished after **38...♖c6!**

By protecting the bishop, Black threatened 39...♔xg3!. He also set a trap, 39 ♗xe5? ♖c5! and wins.

When your opponent can suddenly make a threat or set a trap, it should warn you that his tactical energy is growing. Here White should have looked for a second threat.

He would have spotted the potential mating attack begun by 39...♔d7! and ...♔d1.

White could defend with 39 ♗d2 or 39 ♗e1 and 40 ♗d3. Chances would be roughly even after 39...♔xg3.

But his sense of danger was failing when he stopped the first threat, ...♔xg3, with **39 g4**.

He needed to refocus after **39...♔d7!**.



White to move

White was not prepared to think of the abject defensive steps 40 ♖h5! and 41 ♖h2.

He tried one more forcing move, **40 g5**. His idea was 40...hxg5 41 ♖xf6! ♖xf6 42 ♗xg5, when anything can happen.

But he overlooked, **40...♗d1!**. He resigned after **41 ♗d4 ♖c1+** in view of 42 ♔a2 ♗d2+ 43 ♔a3 ♗e7+.

Each of White's earlier moves looked positive, even 38 ♗f3??. This was the problem.

What to Remember

“What does he threaten?” is the first checklist question because threats account for the greatest number of the critical moments of a chess game.

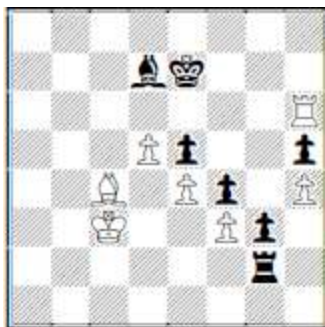
“What is his threat?” is the wrong question because there may be more than one. And you can't always count on a sense of security because it fails when you feel your opponent's pieces are too far away or when you are forcing matters and making progress.

When you spot a threat, a good procedure is: First, see if you have a defense. If the answer is yes, look for a second threat. If there is none, you can go back to the first threat and see if there are better ways of meeting it.

Quiz

Let's elaborate on the themes of this question with quiz positions.
The answers can be found beginning on [here](#).

1.



Firouzja – Giri

Internet 2020

Black to move

Black's **58...♖f2** threatened ...♖xf3+. What was wrong with this?

2.



Vaganian – Adorján

Thessaloniki 1984

White to move

Black's queen is trapped but he is not ready to resign. What should White do?

3.



Santos Latasa – Shirov

Leon 2020

Black to move

Black's earlier advantage was gone. What was wrong with **45... ♖e6** ?

4.



Warmerdam – Eljanov

Wijk aan Zee 2020

Black to move

What did **18... ♖c4** threaten?

5.



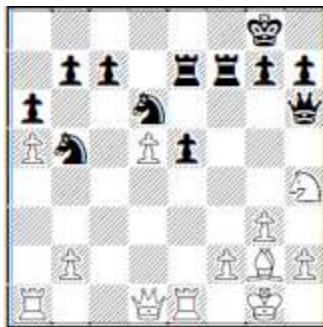
Adams – Harikrishna

Biel 2020

White to move

White averted ...♔xd3 with **40 d4**. Was this wrong?

6.



Saduakassova – Smirnov

Wijk aan Zee 2020

White to move

What should White do?



YOUR KINGDOM FOR MY HORSE: WHEN TO EXCHANGE IN CHESS

Andrew Soltis

9781849942775 | £15.99 | PB
208 pages



WHAT IT TAKES TO BECOME A GRANDMASTER

Andrew Soltis

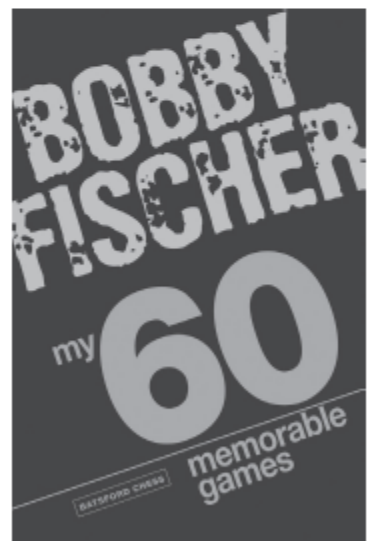
9781849943390 | £15.99 | PB
320 pages



NEW ART OF DEFENCE IN CHESS

Andrew Soltis

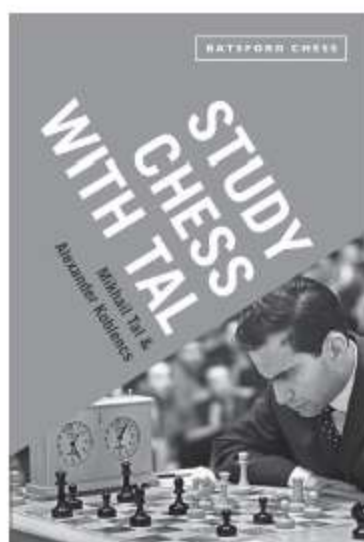
9781849941600 | £15.99 | PB
288 pages



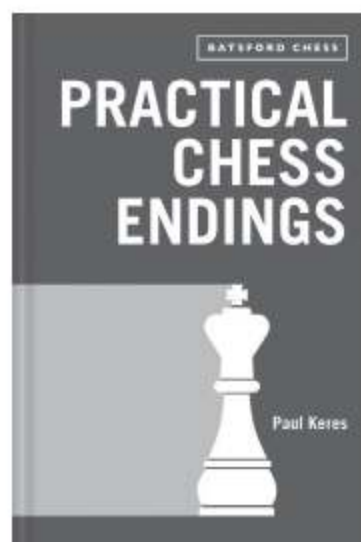
MY 60 MEMORABLE GAMES

Bobby Fischer

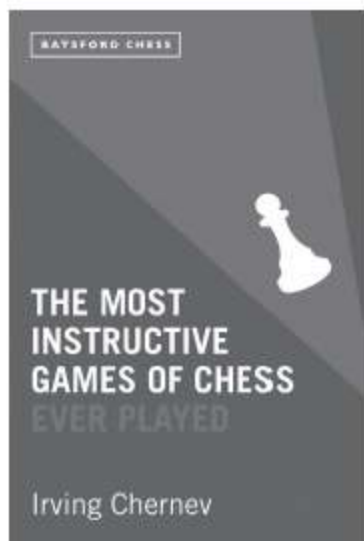
9781906388300 | £15.99 | PB
384 pages



STUDY CHESS WITH TAL
Mikhail Tal, Alexander Koblencs
 9781849941099 | £15.99 | PB
 272 pages



PRACTICAL CHESS ENDINGS
Paul Keres
 9781849944953 | £16.99 | PB
 352 pages



THE MOST INSTRUCTIVE GAMES OF CHESS
Irving Chernev
 9781849941617 | £15.99 | PB
 320 pages



THE ART OF CHECKMATE
Georges Renaud, Victor Kahn
 9781849942706 | £15.99 | PB
 224 pages

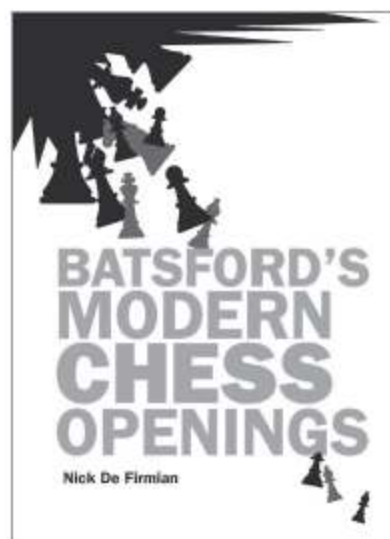


**THE WISEST THINGS
EVER SAID ABOUT CHESS**

Andrew Soltis

9781906388003 | £15.99 | PB

304 pages

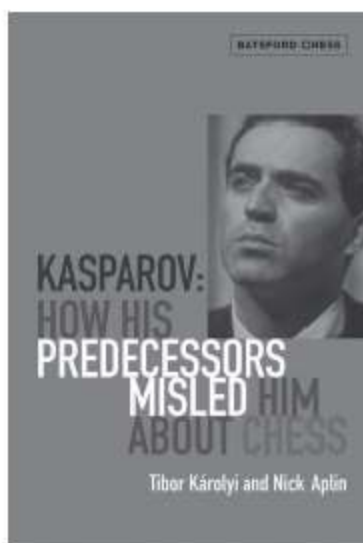


**BATSFORD'S MODERN
CHESS OPENINGS**

Nick De Firmian

9781906388294 | £22.95 | PB

720 pages

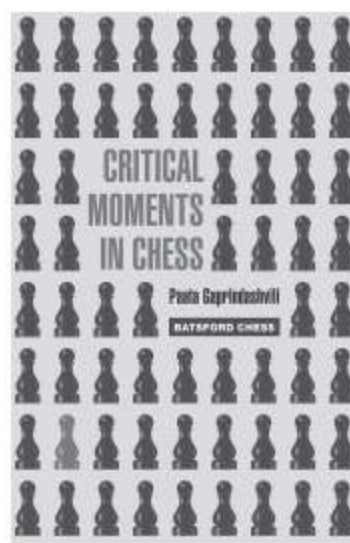


**KASPAROV: HOW HIS
PREDECESSORS MISLED
HIM ABOUT CHESS**

Tibor Karolyi, Nick Aplin

9781906388263 | £14.99 | PB

272 pages

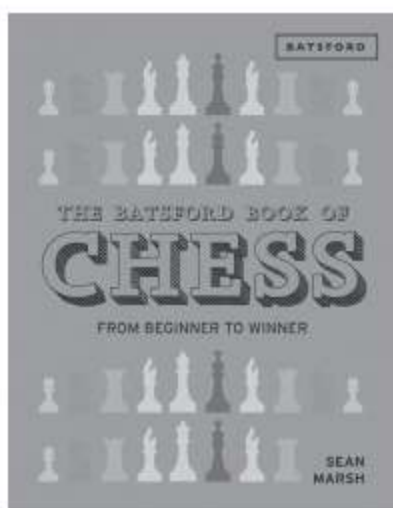


**CRITICAL MOMENTS
IN CHESS**

Paata Gaprindashvili

9781906388652 | £15.99 | PB

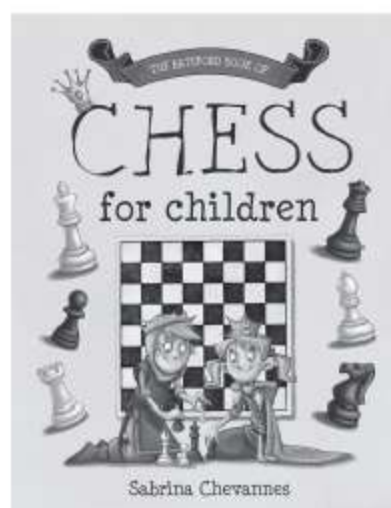
288 pages



**THE BATSFORD BOOK
OF CHESS**

Sean Marsh

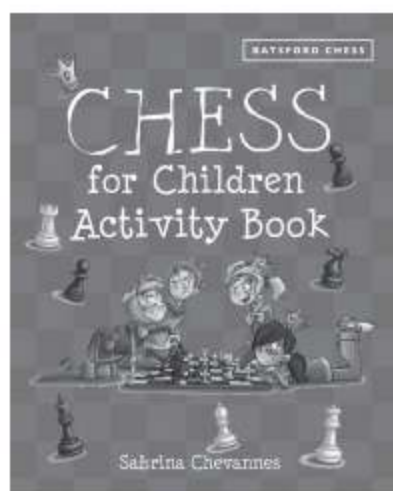
9781849941648 | £14.99 | HB
208 pages



**THE BATSFORD BOOK OF
CHESS FOR CHILDREN**

Sabrina Chevannes

9781849940696 | £12.99 | HB
128 pages



**CHESS FOR CHILDREN
ACTIVITY BOOK**

Sabrina Chevannes

9781849942843 | £9.99 | PB
120 pages