

Meal Ticket

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During the world championship match between Magnus Carlsen and Fabiano Caruana in London in November 2018, Netflix released Ethan and Joel Coen's *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018), a finely produced anthology of six Western vignettes. Watching the film on one of the match's rest days, I found one of these tales in particular, the one titled "Meal Ticket," a telling metaphor for, among other things, some of today's chess writing, publishing and certainly marketing. It tells the story of how an old impresario (Liam Neeson) and "Professor Harrison, the Wingless Thrush" (brilliantly played by Harry Melling), a young artist who has no arms or legs, travel throughout the land in a wagon offering one-night-only theatrical performances from town to town, in which Harrison, seated on a stool on a stage, offers dramatic readings from Shakespeare, Shelley, the Bible or Abraham Lincoln's speeches. Whereas Harrison touchingly charms the audience with his oratorical skills, the impresario had to perform routinely all the physical labor

necessary for his artist's well-being and their work. The impresario's work reminded me of how much invisible effort goes into a well-done book.

As with all art, the price of creating genuinely entertaining and enlightening chess writing is long hours and heavy intellectual labor. Yet if there is one kind of chess book that by definition jettisons both time and effort, it must be the instant match book. The bastard child of a loveless coupling between new publishing speeds and age-old greed, the instant match book usually chases profit at the cost of style, quality, depth and substance—factors of little concern to the shysters involved, who revel in shoddy goods. **Raymond Keene** and **Byron Jacobs'** *Carlsen v Caruana: FIDE World Chess Championship, London 2018* (Everyman Chess, 2018), released as an e-book on December 4, 2018, within a week of Carlsen's victory, is yet another example. As with all Keene's literary output in recent decades, the e-book ("Publishing two days after the match completes!" the Everyman website had promised, inaccurately and ungrammatically) is dreadful.

Without intending to provide a comprehensive proof-reading sheet for its authors, which history tells us would be ignored in any event, I'll illustrate some of the book's problems below. These issues are connected to Keene's wholly typical copy-and-paste, scammy approach to writing, his incompetence regarding historical matters, the authors' laughable imprecision over even basic facts, Keene's cartoonish vanity and, as expected, an embarrassing lack of style and editorial rigor.

There's much copy-and-paste throughout the book. For instance, the 900-word introduction signed by Keene and titled "World Chess Comes to London" is a word-for word regurgitation of his article published in the summer 2018 issue of *Synapsia*, available [online](#) (Vol. 13, issue 3, see pages 9-11). No attempt is made to place it in proper context (either for substance or grammatical tense) in the book. Similarly, large chunks of verbiage offered to the reader are mere rehashings of texts previously published in his *Spectator* columns, also freely available online. Neither *Synapsia* nor the *Spectator* is mentioned, which encourages the false assumption by readers that much of the material was actually written specifically for the match book.

The same approach is evident in other sections. See, for instance, the lengthy but fragmentary and superficial section titled "History of the World Championship," which is recycled from Keene's previous instant match books. The e-book even carries evidence of how the various crosstables were simply copied and pasted into the text as low-quality images. Recycle, reuse, rehash is the *modus operandi* here. None of the reused passages in the book have been noticeably honed, although since they have appeared before, sometimes in multiple works, there is no reason why they could not have been somewhat, if not seriously, improved. And what does this say about the authors' attitude toward readers familiar with Keene's frequent dumping of old products into new, who might still forlornly hope for something new? Be damned. Just buy it again.

Keene's crass ineptness with historical matters is visible too. The authors offer London as the capital of "the chess world from 1846 to 1883" with no reasonable explanation, misspell Lionel Kieseritzky's name, laughably claim E.S. Freund had the pseudonym Jean Dufresne (as opposed to the other way around). The book also has this about Alexander Alekhine:

Alekhine was born in Moscow in 1892 and led one of the most turbulent careers of any chess professional. The First World War, in which he served during the hostilities between Russia and Austro-Hungary, followed by the Russian Revolution, almost derailed his career. As an aristocrat, his very survival was in question, but he escaped to Paris, where he established himself during the 1920s as the leading contender for Capablanca's world crown.

Alekhine scoured the world to find financial backers for a match against Capablanca, and ultimately he found them in Buenos Aires. In 1927 Alekhine achieved the virtually impossible. He defeated Capablanca in a match. This was the high point of Alekhine's career. If one examines the statistics, Capablanca lost fewer games than any other great master and, to beat him six times in one contest, as Alekhine did, bordered on the miraculous.

Alekhine held the world championship until 1935, en route dominating tournaments such as San Remo 1930 and Bled 1931, in a way that few champions have done before or since. Alekhine lost the title to Euwe in 1935, only to regain it two years later. His latter years were marred, once more, by turbulent world events as he was sucked into the geographical sphere of Nazi influence during the Second World War. To complete the picture of the bohemian, romantic artist, the genius buffeted by the cruel reality of the world, Alekhine died, impoverished and intoxicated in a Lisbon hotel, still in possession of the title in 1946.

This entire 250-word section on Alekhine is copied, without warning, from page 240 of *Keene On Chess* (New York, 1999). Of course, Alekhine did not die in Lisbon. Making mistakes is human, but it takes a superhuman dose of ego and ignorance to repeat them *after* you've been publicly admonished about them. The Kieseritzky, Dufresne and Alekhine errors by Keene have been previously pointed out by Edward Winter in [Chess Notes](#). Yet here they are again.

Fact-free assertions and inaccuracies are offered to the reader in abundance. Keene repeats the now commonly regurgitated phony statistics that, if not defining thoughtless chess prose, highlight its presence:

... chess can now boast 11 million games played online, worldwide every day; 600 million active chess players and no fewer than one billion smart phones in use with chess apps!

He omits important world championship matches in his recital, such as those contested by Carl Schlechter and Efim Bogoljubow, and the book misinterprets events during the Carlsen vs. Caruana match itself. As footage and the actor's own account reveal, Woody Harrelson's toppling of Caruana's king was not an accident, as the authors believe. It was a pre-planned gag. The Rossolimo variation of the Sicilian Defense is not mentioned once by its name, although it figured prominently in the match. And upon closer scrutiny, even the games' most entertaining moments lack thorough treatment (see, for instance, Carlsen's **35...Qe2!** in game ten: the authors

only offer 36.Qb3+ Kh8 37.c4 Rxb6!! 38.Rxe2 fxe2 39.Qa4 exd1Q+ 40.Qxd1 Rxf2 and Black wins; no mention is made of 39.Qc2 Rb2! or the equally elegant 36.Qd4 e3! 37.c4 exf2). Keene and Jacobs give thanks “to Tarjei J. Svensen for permission to use the following extracts from an interview he conducted with Magnus Carlsen on Twitter,” when in fact what Svensen offered readers in an extensive Twitter thread was an English translation of the world champion’s hour-long appearance on the Norwegian-language podcast for NRK Radio, in a dialogue with Askild Bryn and Odin Blikra Veia on October 23, 2018. Perhaps this last example of poor craftsmanship is understandable on account of Keene’s long-standing unfamiliarity with precise crediting and acknowledging. Not acceptable, but understandable.

The repeated usage of “I (RDK)” is comical as Keene’s cartoonish vanity is on full display throughout the book. To pick but one example, he preposterously writes: “In fact, while researching for this book, the curious fact came to light that I had personally organised every match in London which might be considered to have decided the world chess championship from 1872 up to 2018!” But why limit his field of glory to such a short period? Why not from the Jurassic Period to the Second Coming? What Keene might have thought was a humorous aside kicks the thoughtful reader in the face with its pomposity and self-congratulating tone, so typical of his instant and not-so-instant products.

The lack of editorial rigor is just as revealing. There are serial misspellings (including Anand’s first name), typos and ungrammatical sentences. But why care about form and style when you clearly don’t care much about substance? Or your readers?

Somewhat surprisingly, the book has a 380-word foreword by **Nigel Short**. As one who appreciates Short’s writing for *New in Chess* and elsewhere, I was disappointed to see his name associated in print with a work so devoid of standards. Even if the matter of Keene’s [plagiarism history](#) is overlooked, and there’s no reason why it should be, any association by otherwise reputable writers with his clownishly erratic and depth-free drivel on the historical and cultural context of the game is counterproductive. For plagiarists, scammers and utter incompetents to thrive, they seek enablers with the same desperation and urgency leeches seek hemoglobin banks. That being said, another point comes to mind, perhaps suggestive of some misgivings on Short’s part in this sad process. A foreword generally is used to introduce or praise an author or a topic, and to urge the reader to read the book, but it’s rare to see a foreword, such as Short’s, that doesn’t even mention the author(s). Not even once. Imagine that.

In the Buster Scruggs ballad mentioned at the start of this column, as the impresario’s wagon visited the more isolated mountain towns, the profit dwindled as fewer and fewer people were interested in paying to listen to the wingless thrush. After yet another profitless night, the impresario stumbled upon a far more popular act: a man with a chicken seemingly able to answer correctly basic mathematical subtraction problems by pecking numbers on a wooden board. The impresario bought the chicken, now Harrison’s caged co-resident in the small wagon passing

through the mountains on its way to the next town. Upon reaching a river bridge, the impresario heartlessly ditches the invalid orator into the deep water, driving away with his new meal ticket. In more ways than one, most instant match books are as scammy as the Coen brothers' chicken routine: they take dubious shortcuts in the hope of a quick profit. Work, art, truth, morality, reader...be damned.

Acknowledgements and notes: A further note: about 90% of the biographies of Lasker, Capablanca and Alekhine is a direct copy from Keene's book on the 2000 world championship; this review was based on an ePub version of the book commercialized by the publisher and references to page numbers were intentionally avoided; the illustration above is provided courtesy of [Niki Riga](#)'s archives.