

TWO NEW BOOKS ON SCRABBLE

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The John G. White Chess Library in Cleveland has about one hundred thousand volumes. Victor Mollo has had about two dozen books published on bridge. But the number of titles available on Scrabble [registered trademark] can be counted on the tiles of one rack, and until a year ago, none of them was based on the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary.

After a series of delays (due in part to obstructionism from Selchow and Righter, the makers of Scrabble games), Joel Wapnick, the 1983 North American champion, has come out with The Champion's Strategy for Winning at Scrabble Brand Crossword Game. At about the same time, Gyles Brandreth, a British expert, has modified his A Guide to Playing the Scrabble Brand Crossword Game for release in the American market.

If you translated the Kol Nidre into Latin, that wouldn't make it a Catholic prayer. By the same token, the fact that Brandreth has revised his book on British Scrabble to use the official American dictionary does not make it a book on the American game. In Britain, rather than running a tournament by wins and losses, the champion is the person who scores the most points over the course of the event.

Naturally, British strategy is much different from American. For example, in a game where winning is the prime objective, strategy varies considerably depending on the score. In the small part of his book devoted to strategy (as distinct from tactics - how to maximize your score on a single turn), no mention is made of this. In fact, such short shrift is given to strategy in this book that only one of the board positions is accompanied by a strategic discussion, and that discussion recommends a truly horrible play!

After the opponent has opened with VYING (placing the G on the central star), your rack is 1LNORTW. Any decent player under American rules would play TWIRLY, WINTRY, or TOWNY for a good score (22-24) and a healthy turnover of four or five tiles. But Brandreth recommends GROW because of the setup of GROWL and GROWN, though it scores but 8, and lets you see merely three new tiles. I'm sure that's right under British rules, but not here.

The author also occasionally gets the rules wrong, again because he's thinking of the British game. For example, he says that a player is not allowed to pass a turn without trading tiles. While rarely a good strategy (see below), this is a perfectly legal thing to do. Other mistakes deal with exchanges at the end of the game

and acceptability of words.

Not all the mistakes in the book are a result of this translation. For example, in one figure, a word is misplaced, making the accompanying discussion meaningless. In many places, words are listed as "possible plays" without an indication of where on the board they belong, making it harder for the reader to follow. A list of words which can be formed from the letters AEINRST omits ANESTRI (the omission occurs three times, so it isn't a typo). A board diagram contains the unacceptable word AZURA.

Although Brandreth is correct in stating that the player with low-value tiles should work towards a 50-point bonus play, he's wrong that such plays happen by chance "very rarely," a statement he makes about a half-dozen times. In fact, one-eighth of randomly chosen racks can be formed into seven-letter words.

A list of strategic considerations not covered in this book would double the length of this review, and is omitted out of consideration for the editor and readers.

Brandreth's description of tournaments further demonstrates his unfamiliarity with the situation in this country. He suggests that they have "ten to fifteen" people; in fact, thirty is closer to the median, and a hundred is not unusual. He also says that a typical tournament has three or four games. In fact, ten is standard, though some single-day events have only five or six.

Many other things which would be useful are omitted; rather than list them here, I refer you to the review of Wapnick's book. Lest you get the impression that Brandreth's book is totally worthless, it has one redeeming feature. In the back of the book he lists sixteen "variations." While many of these are either trivial (limit the number of trades per game to three, even though a good American player will very rarely trade more than once), easy to think of (solitaire, open-book), or so common as to belie the term "variation" (play in a tournament, use a chess clock), there are a few worthwhile ones (split the tile pool into vowels and consonants). Nonetheless, there are much better sources for lists of variations.

Brandreth's book also covers the basics of the rules, strategy, and how to find high-scoring plays. In the absence of any other books on the game, this material would be valuable to a beginner, particularly if he were warned about the mistakes. The book also contains many word lists which are also available elsewhere, and with fewer errors. In a few minutes of searching, I was able to find the all-important FAQIR missing from the list of five-letter Q words, and BLZE from the list of four-letter Z words.

Wapnick's book covers the same topics that Brandreth's does (though more in keeping with the American game), and then some. There are also a fair number of mistakes in this book (see below, and the errata list in Scrabble Players News 73, June 1987), both typographic and otherwise, but none of them is likely to mislead or confuse the reader regarding strategy.

This book is particularly enjoyable to read, featuring anecdotes and humorous commentary throughout. It also contains sections giving an appreciation of the game and a sampling of exceptional plays. Eight annotated, high-level games are also featured.

The strategy section is well done, with a wealth of useful information. Nonetheless, as with any effort by a single individual, there are things missing. For example, Wapnick doesn't mention the most bingo-prone letters (SNRLTED, in that order) or the particular advantage of playing long words when winning to hasten the end of the game. If he wants to fit in some of this material in a future edition, he might shorten the section on passing without exchange of tiles: ten per cent of the examples needn't be dedicated to something which is useful much less than one per cent of the time. Unfortunately, I can't recommend condensation of his thorough coverage of the rules until the official Scrabble Players organization gets its act together and issues a sanctioned Rulebook.

Also, though the studying method he presents has clearly been successful for him, it requires considerable dedication and a certain mind-set. It would have been useful to present the methods used by some others. Similarly, different players will find different between-games activities most conducive to optimum performance. While Wapnick runs back and forth to his hotel room to relax during every break, some players juggle and others smoke (bad for the lungs, but perhaps relaxing). However, most of what's mentioned in the sections on tournament preparation and play will be useful to all readers.

Although computer programs capable of finding good plays in specific positions have existed for almost a decade, the author chose not to take advantage of such a program to proofread his manuscript. In the first of the eight annotated games, one such program was able to find five plays missed in the annotation; while none is blatantly superior to the published recommendation, any of them is arguably so and they all certainly deserve to be discussed. The plays, using the same standard notation as the book does, are: 6S (Spenser's sixth move): AYS 10I (41), 9W: NONS(K)IER 2B (64), 10W: FEOD 15L (31), and 11S: AERIE 2B (25) and OVATE 2J (20).

Be aware of a possible source of bias on the part of the reviewer: one author omitted a mention of the reviewer in a section where he belonged, whereas the other mentioned him several times in a positive light. Brandreth has a section on Scrabble records and says that the highest single turn with OSPD words is 613 for MAX1-MIZ1NG, devised by Kyle Corbin. In fact, a contest in the Scrabble Players News had three winners who devised nearly identical solutions: Kyle Corbin, Steve Root, and the reviewer (all of whom are known to **Word Ways** readers for similar efforts). Incidentally, there is a bigger mistake on the facing page: his "maximum opening move" shows a claim of 120, but CAZIQUE is 124.

Two valuable sections in Wapnick's book not previously mentioned are a list of major annual tournaments and a list of resources

for the interested player. Two of the seven "most prominent" events listed are run by this reviewer, and one of the five resources is his newsletter (since he wrote it, two of the others have become defunct). The reviewer also made one of the forty exceptional plays cited.

Finally, neither book has an index, although it's not clear whether such would be useful to anyone other than a reviewer who didn't keep good enough notes!

THE BEST OF MALEDICTA

Since 1977, Reinhold Aman has singly-handedly edited and published *Maledicta*, a yearly journal devoted to the study of verbal aggression ("the magazine readers swear by"). Although it is a bit surprising at first to see words from the barracks and locker-room discussed with restraint, scholarship, and even wit, one soon realizes that Aman has admirably filled a niche of intellectual study disdained by orthodox academicians (whom he calls "cacademics"). Running Press (Philadelphia) has gathered together the cream of the crop, 33 articles from the first eight years of the journal, in a 200-page paperback published in 1987 for \$9.95. The subject-matter of these articles ranges from farting styles to genitalia pet names, from forbidden license plates to pejoratives uttered by doctors about their patients (behind their backs), from Little Red Riding Hood in Viet-speak to X-rated bird names.

In the long run, the intellectual respectability of verbal aggression as a field of study will depend more on the correlations established between it and linguistics, psychology, sociology and the like than on the collection of data and its taxonomic arrangement (though this is a much-needed first step). The book does not really convey the excitement of such a quest for understanding, as the journal does; the selection of articles is slanted more toward entertainment, no doubt to appeal to the popular taste.