

# Could There Be a New Contender on the Chess Scene?

## Ben Graff tells all about his new book, *The Greenbecker Gambit*, and its protagonist, Tennessee Greenbecker

When I was a child, I couldn't have told you much about the latest rock band or popular craze, but I would happily regale anyone with the latest (obviously second hand) Kasparov-Karpov gossip. I might even have been able to share some superficial thoughts on their games. The truth is, I grew up idolising the world's best chess players. I hoped one day to join the ranks of the elite.

Like many others, it took me a long time to realise that being in thrall to chess and excelling, are two quite different things. Increasingly, I recognised that while I would always play, there were other ways to experience the game we all love. More than anything, I wanted to write about it.

I've enjoyed many fine books about chess over the years. Some of which, including *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, *The Chess Artist and King's Gambit – A Son, a Father, and the World's Most Dangerous Game*, I have written about in previous articles for *CHESS*. Others, such as *The Complete Chess Addict* and Nabokov's seminal *The Luzhin Defence* have also made a deep impression on me.

I think that much of life can be found in chess. Winning and losing. Looking deeply and not quite seeing. The way every game gives us a chance to begin again, much as every new day does likewise. There is so much to see in any tournament hall, both at and away from the chess board. For these reasons, I have always thought there should be more novels about chess.

In my first book, *Find Another Place* (2018), I took a tentative step by telling some of my own chess stories, including those about games I had played against Korchnoi, Norwood, Short and Nunn in simulcs. I started to write more articles, but I kept coming back to an idea for a bigger project that had nagged at me for years. What would happen if someone attempted to storm a world chess championship match? Why might they do this? Could such an act appear perfectly logical to the protagonist?

When Carlsen and Caruana played in London, I was lucky enough to spend a day at their world championship match, and to write about it in these pages. As I sat in the tiny,

baking hot theatre, I couldn't help but think about these questions. I wondered whether someone could use chess as a way of giving their life meaning, even if how they described both their achievements and potential at the board did not necessarily accord with objective reality. Was it possible for a person to carve a whole sense of self out of not very much? Might such an individual be able to convince themselves they were Magnus Carlsen's rightful challenger? So it was that ultimately Tennessee Greenbecker came about. A man who sees chess and life in the following terms:

*"I only feel truly alive when the chess clock is ticking and the patterns on the squares in front of me are dancing in my head. Very little else gives me the same feeling. Nothing else that does not involve a flame."*

*"It is like unlocking a complex riddle, that is beautiful and for a few moves might only be for me, until ultimately all becomes clear and appreciable to the talentless fans and hangers on. Often, my opponent only understands when it is too late to alter the course of events."*

*"No, nothing can surpass the feeling of weaving magic into cold hard combinations on the board. Creating game by game another part of chess's story with me at its centre. Let's be honest. The feeling that comes when an opponent has been humiliated, their ideas destroyed, cannot be bettered. There is no higher calling than to crush a man's dreams, and to then hold out your hand for him to shake."*

Yet at the outset of *The Greenbecker Gambit*, Tennessee Greenbecker is a long way from the top of his game. Near destitute and with only his long-suffering brother still trying to help him, Greenbecker counts his deeply creased copy of Bobby Fischer's *My 60 Memorable Games* amongst his most treasured possessions and as a constant companion. He does not have all that much else:

*"There are some cans in my bag. A hip flask too. My pocket chess set with its playing surface worn smooth. My books. A few clothes. Photographs. The folder that my comeback depends on, where I will also record my story. Time will show that I am the real writer in the family. A pack of wet wipes."*

*Playing cards. A few low denomination poker chips. A printout of Gabriel's email. A box of matches. A few spare firefighters. The fake ID that occasionally comes in handy. Not much to show for all my years on the planet, but my worth can in no way be measured through an assessment of my meagre possessions."*

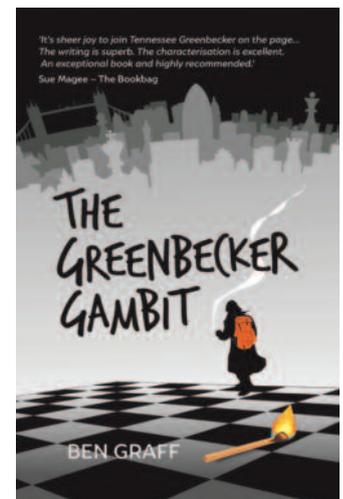
I often reflect that many people are trying to make sense of lives that for all sorts of reasons have not gone entirely to plan. I spend much of my working life in London. The city draws us all in, just as it has Tennessee Greenbecker, and has the capacity to swallow people up with its cold indifference. It just so happens that Tennessee Greenbecker has found something to cling to in the game of chess. Where others might see a loner sitting in an all-night café, chess has given Tennessee Greenbecker a certain amount of resilience, an inner-life, a way to keep going – however misguided he undoubtedly is on many levels.

Tennessee Greenbecker is by no means an easy character. His mental and physical health are both fragile, his choices often catastrophic. His obsession with fire and his certainty that the 'State' (which takes many forms) is determined to thwart his ambitions, does not always turn out well for him, albeit there is considerable comic potential in many of his experiences.

Still, if nothing else, Tennessee Greenbecker is generally not lacking in confidence. As he says:

*"It is not always obvious to people when they are in the presence of greatness. I am wise enough not to expect too much. Not everyone can fully comprehend Tennessee Greenbecker, the foremost chess player never to be world champion. A better claim to that mantle than Korchnoi, Keres or Bronstein. Now all dead, as is my good friend Bobby Fischer. Their stories over. My own just beginning."*

It is fair to say that Tennessee Greenbecker is more right than wrong on some of this. Certainly not everyone he encounters fully understands him. The reader will have to draw his or her own conclusions as to where Tennessee Greenbecker ranks amongst the world chess elite. However, whether his tale is destined to end with a match against Magnus Carlsen or not,





At the 1971 Alekhine Memorial one King's Gambit legend studies another, as Bronstein watches Spassky's game, two men Ben Graff's protagonist Tennessee Greenbecker dreamed of emulating.

Tennessee Greenbecker is correct about one thing. At the outset of *The Greenbecker Gambit*, his story really is just beginning.

## The Greenbecker Gambit

What follows is an abridged extract from a chapter of *The Greenbecker Gambit*, which shares its name with the book title. Having discovered a new gambit and then utilised it to beat Dubrovnik in an early game in their Candidates match, Tennessee Greenbecker does not react well when chess journalist Chris Hamish suggests the opening may not have been sound.

*All gambits contain a dilemma. A trade-off. You offer up something in return for something else. Yet there is no promise. It is never certain that what is proffered will yield a greater return. That the sacrifice will not just be pocketed and swallowed up. Not all attacks break through and win. We do not always get what we deserve. Even when we do win, it is never quite what we thought it would be...*

*Nothing is ever quite enough. A defeat inflicts more pain than a win can bring joy. Normally that is, but the revelation of my gambit was something else. A stunning victory in a game that will be replayed for as long as chess exists. An opening system named after me. Or at least that was what I thought at the time...*

*Chris Hamish ran a piece in one of the broadsheets suggesting the Greenbecker Gambit, even if he was too ignorant to call it that, was not sound after all. That even after his queen move, there was an unusual knight manoeuvre at Dubrovnik's disposal which would have left his position perfectly fine. Most likely left him a little bit better even. He wrote that while I had won, I had been lucky. It was all something of a fluke.*

*As I read his article the blood drained from my body and I prayed only for death. Simply*

*too much to take. I went to the restaurant bar and ordered a double whisky. Rolled the ice in the glass, feeling its satisfying clink, before downing it in one and ordering another. Then another. Continually rereading Hamish's article convinced he must be right.*

*Then it gets a little hazy, but somehow, I missed game four altogether and was defaulted. The first player to suffer such a fate since Bobby Fischer, when he failed to turn up for the second game of the world final with Boris Spassky. He had made a conscious decision not to show. A protest over the presence of a camera, the seating arrangements in the auditorium, the levels of noise. For me it was not quite like that. Rather, I just woke up to be informed that I had missed the thing.*

*The match is still level, my team told me. It is still all to play for. I vaguely remember Gabriel urging me to get some rest. To get sober. To come back fighting. That was sort of what I did...*

*I did play games five, six and seven. I had chances in each of them. Yet the fact that I had essentially abandoned my hotel room for the bar appeared to have some effect. I was never properly drunk, but never properly sober either, existing in a world of whisky and cider and tobacco while Dubrovnik doubtless sat in his room with a chessboard, a plate of stinking herring and his terrible poetry.*

*For some reason, the patterns I sketched out on beer mats while I drank, never quite translated into accurate variations on the board. With every victory, Dubrovnik looked sadder and sadder, as if he was being buried ever more deeply in a world he had wanted to escape. After I lost again in game eight the match was over. Dubrovnik offered me his hand with the pensive look of an undertaker, who knows he is going to get paid, but is still wary of offending. Reluctant to intrude on private grief. I touched it briefly before sweeping the chess pieces off the table. The*

*sound they made was louder than I had envisaged, and they scattered further than I thought they would.*

*A white knight bounced off the stage and hit a child in the second row on the head and she began to cry loudly. That was the final straw. I collapsed into a heap on top of the pieces that lay on the stage around me, the battle now over, and wept and wept...*

*It was only in the weeks after the match that I asked myself afresh, what did Chris Hamish know about chess? Just because he had said the Greenbecker Gambit was unsound did not necessarily make it so. There was a certain logic to the line he set out, but the more I considered it, the more I wondered if I been too hasty in succumbing to his verdict. Finally, it dawned on me that Hamish had overlooked a potential consequence of his suggested knight manoeuvre and I had thrown away my life's work for nothing at all.*

Tennessee Greenbecker based his new opening on a study of Boris Spassky's use of the King's Gambit. In Tennessee's view, Spassky had not quite unlocked the King's Gambit's full potential. Back in the real world, this feels like a good excuse to remember 1960, a year in which Spassky won famous games against Bronstein and Fischer with this line. I suppose one might admire Tennessee Greenbecker's optimism in thinking he could do better, but all the plaudits go to Spassky, a true maestro. Here is Spassky-Bronstein.

### B.Spassky-D.Bronstein

USSR Championship, Leningrad 1960  
King's Gambit

1 e4 e5 2 f4 exf4 3 ♘f3 d5 4 exd5 ♙d6  
5 ♘c3 ♗e7 6 d4 O-O 7 ♙d3 ♗d7 8 O-O  
h6 9 ♗e4 ♗xd5 10 c4 ♗e3 11 ♙xe3  
fxe3 12 c5 ♙e7 13 ♙c2 ♗e8 14 ♗d3 e2



15 ♗d6!? ♗f8? 16 ♗xf7! exf1 ♖+ 17 ♗xf1  
♙f5 18 ♗xf5 ♗d7 19 ♗f4 ♙f6 20 ♗3e5  
♗e7 21 ♙b3 ♙xe5 22 ♗xe5+ ♖h7  
23 ♗e4+ 1-0

*Ed. – The Greenbecker Gambit will be published by The Conrad Press in early April and will become available from Chess and Bridge, retailing at £9.99 or £8.99 for Subscribers.*