

“Scandalous Pi Wondrous Persona: 1981-2007”

ONE book of review of FOUR books (count ‘em, four!)
Viktor Kortchnoi *Persona Non Grata* (1981)
Yann Martel *Life of Pi* (2001)
Steve Brown *A Scandalous Freedom* (2004)
Junot Diaz *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)

Ok, so where the heck have I been? I mean last book I reviewed was December 10th of **last** year! I know I have the typical excuses: I am the father of seven and I have a grandson; my wife got sick, my oldest (step) daughter graduated from college (English major!), had to play Santa at home, visited Florida, played in Land of the Sky (3 points and a 2030 performance rating so I came back a happy if not wealthier camper) and oh almost forgot, I did read four books. So I kept busy and now I bring back the spoils, the booty, the pith of witty sayings, the condensed wisdom directly from Sinai. I shouted that last part for the added effect... Well, not quite, but I do have some cool things to tell you about four great new books I have met.

Let me introduce to Piscine Molitor Patel, a shy Indian boy whose father is the owner of the Pondicherry Zoo. Of course with a name like that, you are bound to face some encounters of the bullying kind and Piscine is no exception to the rule that made my sixth grade year a living hell: children tend to go to extremes even in being cruel. And so at Saint Joseph’s school he was mercilessly taunted with the nickname “Pissing Patel”. Until one day in a new school when he goes to the board to declare his name to be “Pi Patel” and for good measure “3.14”. The zoo closes and Pi’s father is forced to ship his animals to zoos all across the world. It is there that the true tale of *Life of Pi* begins. And it is there that this narrative of an adventure at sea captivates going back and forth between animal behavior and human nature. The author’s insights into both prove this short novel to be a worthy read. I would especially recommend it if: 1. you like going to the zoo 2. you are interested in how humans can cope with devastatingly traumatic experiences through storytelling 3. you’ve wondered how a man can go in a cage with ten tigers at the circus and boss the tigers around 3. you want to know how a boy, a Bengal tiger, a hyena, a zebra, and an adult female orangutan can survive in a life raft.

Speaking of hyenas let me tell you how Anatoly Karpov defeated Viktor Kortchnoi in the 1978 match for the World Championship played in Manila. I have to warn you that I am Cuban and have suffered the reality of Communism in my native country during the last 50 years. And so when Kortchnoi warns

his readers that “Chess is one of the levers of Soviet penetration into every corner of the globe... How many times it has already happened that Soviet grandmasters have paved the way for diplomats, then ‘advisors’, then arms”, I think of how the Castro regime has used doctors in much the same way the past thirty years in order to politically penetrate Latin America. Do you think it is by chance that we have brutish socialist demagogues running Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Nicaragua? This brief 110 page book that is probably out of print, fascinated me with accounts of the great lengths the KGB and the Soviet Chess Federation went to insure that Karpov would not lose to Kortchnoi, a defector who immigrated to Switzerland two years prior to the match and whose family was being held in Russia. Meanwhile, Karpov, the darling of the Soviet chess political machine benefited from the psychological warfare being inflicted on his opponent. He also had a delegation complete with cooks, dieticians, psychologist, doctors, interpreters, bodyguards, and the infamous Doctor of Medicine Professor Vladimir Zukhar, the evil hypnotist. There is Kortchnoi’s telling of the paradox of the sealed move of the seventh game and the famous handshake incident of Game 8. Those events are worth alone the reading of this short book that includes the games of a match that 5-2 in favor of the champion Karpov after 27 games. Then begins the telling of the greatest (near!) comeback of all time! You’ll have to borrow my copy and find out how it ends!

And so fresh from reading *Persona Non Grata* I embarked on the story of a fat Dominican super nerd non persona who grows up in a New Jersey ghetto where he has absolutely less than nil chance of getting a girl immersed in an obsession of 1980s sci fi novels and Dungeons & Dragons. Yes, it is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. His name taken from his attempt to explain Oscar Wilde to some less than receptive young hoodlums. This book is not just a must read for all of us who were full or half nerds back in our youth but for anyone who has no clue about the Dominican Republic. This novel has Dominican history dripping off its pages. And it drips with the reality of Latino immigrant life in the U.S. I am Cuban but also a product of Jersey in the 80s and I can assure Junot Diaz gets it right down to the comic books we were reading (scary!).

Now I have to put them all together and say that Oscar in his pathos reminded me of Kortchnoi, and Piscine goes through the kind of hell that only people like Kortchnoi whose family was held in Russia by ruthless commies can say he has lived. And how is all this related to chess? I think it is important as chess players to always see new perspectives. That is how we stay in the game. That is why you must read Steve Brown’s *A Scandalous Freedom*. If you are like me, you are tired of being swindled by religion and those who claim they can tell you how to live your life in the name of God. I’ll leave you

with one quote to try to convince you that this is a radically different view of the gospel than what you are used to. “As I understand it”, Steve writes, “Christians are folks who came to the astounding truth that we are not very good people, but God is fond of us anyway”. We are not better, cleaner, holier, purer...no, we are just as bad as everyone else! Ain't that awesome! I wish Oscar, Piscine, and Viktor could read that because then their worlds would make a lot more sense. At least you can! Now go to it!

Fabio Hurtado

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