

# Review

## of Paul Ostroverhy's The Diamond of the Chess Player

The Diamond of the Chess Player is a different kind of book. Different from your standard detective novel, and certainly different from books written for, and detrimentally not by, young people.

Paul Ostroverhy's second novel is a fun and fast-paced delve into the rich imagination of the author. The novel follows the story of Professor Eilfort, eccentric dandy and amateur sleuth, as he tries to uncover the mystery of a stolen diamond. Eilfort's journey begins at the fantastical Chateau des Lavettes, the ornate residence of the book's victim and a descriptive blend of Chateau Chantilly and Château de la Mothe-Chandeniers. Paul's rich imagination and appreciation for high arts is clear in his description from the very start, and doesn't get lost as the story develops. From the book's initial pages, Paul invites the reader into a world of "thick scarlet and gold rugs" and "French windows leading outside with long, luxurious curtains." In Paul's writing, it is not enough to simply state events and occurrences, he wants to draw you into the world he has created.

It is a credit to Paul that his description is neither too heavy nor too light, not too long-winded nor too lazy. Because he wrote the book at such a young age, his book is probably better in tune with the desires of young teenagers than anything written by more advanced authors. Paul finds a balance between description and plot that is likely to interest those of his own age. The book's characters, each with their own name, identity, and history, complement each other and the story at every place in the book.

One of those characters is Eilfort's faithful and ever-present sidekick, Peter Pratfield, who gives the book an extra sense of intelligence and humour. Paul is clever about the positioning of the characters, and has clearly given thought to both the environment and the context in which his characters are situated. His thoughtful, precise description of every scene makes for a perfect backdrop onto which the dialogue plays out. Therefore, consistently throughout the book, the dialogue between Pratfield and Eilfort is relevant, snappy, and funny all at the same time, without ever losing sight of the wider plot.

Paul is both bright and funny, and none of his good humour is lost in the pages of his writing. Sometimes this humour comes in French, with a flare of ostentation typical of Parisians. "Saperlipopette! Pourquoi maintenant!" demands a receptionist at the hotel d'Aubusson. Even minor characters, like in this case, complement the fast-paced rhythm and enjoyment of the novel. At other times, the humour comes in Dutch, as is the case with a group of Dutch tourists outside the Louvre: "'Het Louvre Museum is gewoon prachtig. vind je niet?'" While the rest of the time it comes in English, as the characters bounce ideas off of each other and battle to find the elusive diamond thief.

Young authors sometimes risk getting bogged down in the creative process of creating a new world. When they invent characters or set up new scenes, they want to squeeze everything they can out of them to ensure the description hasn't gone to waste. That is not the case with Paul or this novel. In *The Diamond and the Chess Player*, Louis Carmotaque is described as being "In his sixties, once a great friend of Nicolas de Lavette, the deceased chess player. He is staying at the Chateau out of respect, spending most of his time either grumbling on his gout or reading whatever there is to read," yet plays a wholly unimportant part in the development of the story itself. Dr Marregrevier is similarly richly described. He is a "Local inspector of Chartres and its environs, a retired medical doctor, in his middle ages... a man untroubled by the many misfortunes of the world, and his job as Inspector is not quite serious, for he has only dealt with small, provincial affairs of no grave importance." Paul's characters, like his scenes, are carefully thought out and richly described, yet never overused where they are not needed. In this novel, as in others, and in his creation of the mystical world *Ostroco*, Paul has shown his flare for world building. A craft that requires both imagination and patience.

In addition to the imagination of the prose itself, Paul's illustrations offer readers a slightly different medium through which to gain an insight into the world of the novel. The illustrations of Prof. Eilfort near the end of the book show the character through time, from ages 12 to 60. For Paul, the novel is not limited by the start and end of the story. It is a whole universe that has been carefully conceived.

Another credit to the author is his surprisingly atune sense of history and culture. *The Diamond and the Chess Player* is not just a jolly but unimportant ride through the streets of Paris, it is also an exploration of the cultural richness of the city. Paul's writing is conscious of the history that has created his world. In chapter thirteen, Inspector Beltron's trip across the Seine starts off with Paul's typically rich elaboration of plot: "As the minutes dragged by, the hansom cab came closer to the river Seine, eventually appearing underneath them." The text then quickly turns to an exploration of the history of the bridge itself: "the oldest one in Paris, being built in 1632, with Pierre Pidou directing the construction, but at the time it was a wooden toll-bridge and was named Pont St-Anne, in respect to Anne of Austria. The years followed, and being a fragile bridge, it was destroyed by various unfortunate events: once burnt and finally carried by a flood. It was rebuilt at various times but it was not until 1689, that it was reconstructed with stone – the king of France, Louis XIV, helping finance the bridge."

In moments like these, the reader can get a sense not only of the history of the story's setting, but also an insight into the mind of the characters. Paul uses elements of French to the same effect. When the secondary character Charlotte is introduced, she is described as having "long blonde hair, and hardly wore any jewellery as she complained it bothered her. She had only one, single, bijoux, a necklace of simple white pearls. Furthermore, she didn't have maquillage, as she simply detested it and thought it made her look like a clown." These two French words throw us into the mind of Charlotte herself. We can imagine her getting ready for the day, thinking in French about which items of clothing she was going to wear.

None of the humour, description, and dialogue detracts from the pace and excitement of the story itself. *The Diamond of the Chess Player* is, after all, a detective story, and Paul knows that his book needs to be exciting. As it is, the book is interesting, with a healthy narrative structure and, most importantly, a riveting ending. The chase and subsequent riveting shoot-out close what is, above all else, an extremely fun and engaging story.

Paul ensured at every point to raise the level of suspense where appropriate. At the end of the book, Paul's creepy description of "the glow of white teeth too white, the sinister I could sense in the very soul of that man. He made me shudder" sets the scene beautifully for the dark, twisted conclusion to the novel.

The development of the story, from the leafy comfort of the Chateau des Lavettes, to the open pursuit of a criminal amidst the bustle of Parisian life, to a near-deadly shoot-out about the steamship L'Hermes, is nothing if not exciting. No, it is not the most interesting or creative plot in the world, but it also doesn't have to be. Throughout the novel, the reader is introduced to a number of different places and people, each bringing a wealth of description to the novel. To make the plot any more complicated than it is would have only served to confuse the rich description and subtle clues Paul leaves throughout his work.

It is one thing to be interested in writing a book as a twelve year old. It is another to actually write a book as a twelve year old. But it is something else entirely to write a book of this length and standard. There is something special about *The Diamond of the Chess Player*. It is more exciting and has a devilishly subtle humour than many of its equals do not. Sure, there are many other books in the young-teen detective genre that have tighter and smoother prose, but very few of them have the charm that Paul's book does. Because of his young age, Paul brings a youthful joy to his writing that is in both parts fun and joyfully ignorant of some of the darker themes that afflict other novels of this kind. At such a young age, Paul has achieved a literary coup against his more advanced contemporaries.

Over the two year period between writing *The Painting* and *The Dust* and this most recent novel, Paul has developed his ability to construct a plot and keep the language sharp. Not only is *The Diamond and the Chess Player* considerably longer—coming in at 62 000 words as opposed to 7 000—but has a more developed story arc that keeps the reader entertained. For such a long book, *The Diamond and the Chess Player* is not boring, and Paul's frequent use of elaborative description and dialogue perfectly fleshes out the story. The advanced technique between these two books is a credit to Paul himself, who has dedicated himself to study the works of other authors Arthur Conan Doyle, Oscar Wilde, Jerome K. Jerome and Paul's personal favourite: P. G. Wodehouse.

*The Diamond and the Chess Player* is a credit to Paul not just because of the discipline it took to finish, from the laborious writing process to the even more strenuous editing process, but because of the high standard of its contents. Paul's work is a delight to read, and a credit most of all to Paul himself.

Joseph Peck  
History undergraduate, Yale University  
joe.peck@yale.edu