

Name _____

Questions Due _____

Reading Companion and Questions

Literature Work: The Child Is the Master

Author: Robert Horn

About the Author: Robert Horn follows his passions, one of which is his concern about the struggle for democracy in Burma (also known as Myanmar). "I wish more Americans knew what was happening there and cared about it," he says. The democracy movement has been led by 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, whom Horn counts among his heroes along with the late Pittsburgh Pirates baseball star and humanitarian Roberto Clemente. Horn moved to Southeast Asia after winning a Pulitzer Traveling Fellowship in 1993. He now lives and works as a journalist in Thailand.

Before You Read

The Time and Place

In this essay, Robert Horn reminisces about a chess game he played in New York City in 1973, when he was 16 years old.

Did you know?

A Prodigy is a person who shows exceptional talent at a very young age. For example, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart performed in public when he was only six years old and wrote his first symphony at age nine. Opera singer Beverly Sills began her career at age three! Some prodigals remain in the limelight by excelling in their fields as adults, while others fade from public view.

As you read...

Discover how Robert Horn plays the game.

The Child is Master

By Robert Horn

On a cold march morning in 1973, Robert Donnelly climbed the sagging, rickety staircase that led to the Shelby Lyman Chess Institute in Greenwich Village. The school was crowded. Cab drivers, college kids, beauticians and bankers were battling it out over the boards. Bobby Fischer was the world champion, and now everyone wanted to learn chess. No one, however, wanted to lose to a five-year-old.

Chess master Bruce Pandolfini held Robert's tiny hand. As they walked between the tables, searching for an opponent to test the youngster's skill, the room fell silent except for the creaking of the wooden floor beneath their feet.

Players averted their eyes. Some suddenly remembered errands they had to run. All of them found a reason not to play the kid. They were as nervous as a pack of farmers when a gunslinger struts through town.

Then Pandolfini spotted me.

Like Robert, I was one of Pandolfini's students. Unlike Robert, I showed little promise of achieving chess immortality. Nonetheless, I was obsessed with chess. So much so that my high school grades were plummeting. I was cracking the books, but the books were Lasher's Manual of Chess and Practical Chess Endings. The only lectures that held my interest were those delivered by Pandolfini.

Other chess masters had offered to teach me for less money than I was paying Pandolfini, but I was devoted to Bruce. Bruce was cool. With his long, light-brown curls, hooked nose, granny glasses and broad-brimmed black hats, he looked like a gangly John Lennon. He never got weird. And he never threw any chess-master tantrums.

At one time he was rated among the top 50 players in the U.S., but he had given up serious competition and dedicated himself to teaching. His speciality was young players and prodigies.

Pandolfini. His name had the ring of a sorcerer's, and I imagined he conjured up his prodigies in the still, black hours of the night while poring over musty texts on alchemy and Alekhine. Quietly he asked if I would play a game with Robert.

You think I wanted to lose to a five-year old? Part of me, though, sympathized with the kid. Middle-aged players often avoided me. They assumed I was a young tiger. Their refusals were frequently accompanied by some cutting remark about my youth.

Pandolfini's eyes were pleading with me to accept. To please him I agreed to the game. But I was about to get crushed, and I knew it.

We went into an empty classroom, away from the other students. Pandolfini brought in a board, some pieces and a score sheet. Then he sat on the side of the table, equidistant from Robert and me. "How are you, Robert?" I asked stiffly.

"O.K.," he said, staring at me suspiciously.

I was uncomfortable already. There was something surreal and ridiculous about trying to talk to this five-year-old as though he was a five-year-old when he was about to blast me off the board.

His eyes rarely met mine. For all the encouragement Pandolfini had provided, Robert was alone in an odd and adult world. I gave him a smile. I was no bully. He didn't smile back.

Robert had drawn the white pieces. He wrapped his little hand around the head of his king's pawn and thrust it forward for his first move. Like two wary fighters pawing their way through the early rounds, we slid into a safe and standard Ruy Lopez opening.

As we moved into the middle game, I was surprised to find that I was holding my own. I had been deliberate, cautious, and my position was strategically sound. But this was not my game. I prefer to attack savagely. Or even to scramble, slip and dodge until my opponent is spent and prone for my kill. In such games brilliance and blunders abound, and the danger is exhilarating. Such games, however, require taking risks, and I was sure that at the first sign of my daring, Robert had a move waiting that would wallop me.

Consequently, I was locked in a dry, balanced position. I was playing Robert's game. And as I watched him across the table, in his jumpsuit embroidered with little white bunnies, peering out at me from under his brown bangs, I knew I had been intimidated.

It was my move. I could continue to play it safe, push a pawn and hand the initiative back to Robert. Or I could be aggressive and try to seize the center—the chess equivalent of the high ground—with either my bishop or my knight.

The pawn, the bishop or the knight. I considered long and hard. Eventually I eliminated the pawn from my plans. Meanwhile, masters were wandering in and out of the room to get a glimpse of the young wonder at work. Pandolfini was rubbing his chin and studying the position. He was doing his best to appear impartial, but it felt as if Robert and I were competing for his favor.

The bishop or the knight. Lines that seemed to lead to a win appeared and then evaporated like apparitions meeting daylight. The bishop or the knight. The lady or the tiger. My pondering was proving fruitless. Without conviction I sent my bishop crashing into Robert's center, and as we exchanged pieces, the crisp clacking of plastic colliding sheared the heavy silence.

I had blundered. When the smoke cleared, I was down a pawn. As Robert grabbed it with his little fingers and pulled it off the board, my confidence collapsed. Robert smiled at Pandolfini. A pawn is a small advantage, but it is enough to win. I searched the board for a chance to retaliate. There was none. My only hope was to keep things complicated and pray that Robert would make a mistake.

I laid a trap for Robert on his kingside. Perhaps he wouldn't see it. Perhaps his mind would wander to thoughts of Captain Kangaroo. Robert kicked his buckled shoes in a staccato rhythm against his chair and nimbly danced around my snare.

I tried to lure him into a bad exchange on his queenside. Maybe I could fool him. Maybe he would be daydreaming about Big Bird.

Robert didn't fall for it. Instead, he launched his own attacks, and we battled on for another hour. Finally, on the 40th move, I could no longer prevent his extra pawn from reaching my end of the board and transforming itself into an all-powerful queen. I toppled over my king and surrendered.

Robert giggled. Pandolfini put his finger to his lips to signal Robert to stop. I let out a long, dejected sigh.

Anyone who says that chess is not a physical game ignores the subtle yet powerful connection between mind and body. My limbs were leaden, and a Jovian gravity seemed to be pulling on my chest, draining me physically and emotionally. I was afraid to leave the classroom, believing I had been humiliated.

Pandolfini looked at me and smiled. "That," he said, "was an excellent game. Hard fought. Deep." Then he began to analyze the action, heaping praise on me for the things I had done well. As he did, my spirits began to lift, and as we analyzed Robert's moves, the concerns of my ego dissolved, and I began to share in the wonder the masters felt in Robert's presence.

Still, I was left with troubling questions. I had valued chess as an intellectual pursuit. How could I reconcile that belief with this experience? Robert may have been ready for Fischer or Boris Spassky, but he wasn't ready for Dostoyevsky or Camus. Was his ability based on some cognitive skill I would never possess to the same degree? I had a vision of myself dragged by the weight of my limitations, struggling for every yard on an uncertain road to the rank of master while Robert gleefully hopscotched ahead of me.

If that seems depressing, ultimately it was liberating. I had lost the game, but with it I also lost my illusions and ambitions. Stripped of that baggage, I rediscovered the pleasures of chess. I realized that, all along in our lessons, Pandolfini had been concerned less with my need to master chess than with making the beauty of the game accessible to me.

As for Robert, his brilliance was ephemeral. The rush of attention and acclaim, inevitably accompanied by the continual pressure to perform, became too much for him. By the age of 10 he was out of chess. Today he never plays. So when I go over our moves from so long ago, it's with a touch of sadness, knowing that, for all his talent, he doesn't love the game as much as I do.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

On a separate sheet of paper, answer these questions using complete sentences.

1. Why doesn't Horn want to play chess with Robert Donnelly?
2. What style of chess game does Horn say he usually like to play? Explain why he doesn't play that style in this game.
3. Why does Horn think Robert might fall for his traps? Describe the irony in what actually happens.
4. What does each player do when the game ends? In your opinion, why does each player behave as he does?
5. What does Horn say about giving up his ambitions of becoming a chess master? Who does Horn really think won, and why?

Evaluate and Connect

6. How would you feel if you lost a competition to a child wearing a jumpsuit with white bunnies on it? Explain your answer.
7. In your opinion, does Horn make the reader feel his tension and anxiety? Use Examples from the selection to support your opinion.
8. Would you like to have a teacher like Bruce Pandolfini? Why?