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The Chess Artist: Genius, Obsession, and the World's Oldest Game

J. C. Hallman

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In the tiny Russian province of Kalmykia, obsession with chess has reached new heights. Its leader, a charismatic and eccentric millionaire/ex--car salesman named Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, is a former chess prodigy and the most recent president of FIDE, the world's controlling chess body. Despite credible allegations of his involvement in drug running, embezzlement, and murder, the impoverished Kalmykian people have rallied around their leader's obsession---chess is played on Kalmykian prime-time television and is compulsory in Kalmykian schools. In addition, Kalmyk women have been known to alter their traditional costumes of pillbox hats and satin gowns to include chessboard-patterned sashes.

The Chess Artist is both an intellectual journey and first-rate travel writing dedicated to the love of chess and all of its related oddities, writer and chess enthusiast J. C. Hallman explores the obsessive hold chess exerts on its followers by examining the history and evolution of the game and the people who dedicate their lives to it. Together with his friend Glenn Umstead, an African-American chessmaster who is arguably as chess obsessed as Ilyumzhinov, Hallman tours New York City's legendary chess district, crashes a Princeton Math Department game party, challenges a convicted murderer to a chess match in prison, and travels to Kalmykia, where they are confronted with members of the Russian intelligence service, beautiful translators who may be spies, seven-year-old chess prodigies, and the sad blight of a land struggling toward capitalism.

In the tradition of *The Professor and the Madman*, *Longitude*, and *The Orchid Thief*, Hallman transforms an obsessive quest for obscure things into a compulsively readable and entertaining weaving of travelogue, journalism, and chess history.

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