

Fifth Chair



Two new books by Augie Boehm

Private Sessions: A Bridge Education
(Magnus Books [2004], 229pp, \$19.95)

Demon Defense and Demon Doubling; Defend with Skill and Double for Keeps
(HNB Publishing [2004], 172pp, \$13.95)

Augie Boehm has written two books that will be of great interest, pleasure, and value to intermediate players seeking to move beyond the rote rules of bridge to a genuine understanding of the game. As he states in *Private Sessions*, the way to make real progress in the game is to move from a consideration of your own 13 cards to a consideration of the 26 cards held by your partnership and finally to a consideration of all 52 cards for any given deal.

There is much to like about *Private Sessions*. First, he anchors bridge skill in declarer play: understanding how tricks are won and then visualizing the play during the auction is the best way to improve one's bidding skill. Although I am a scientist who knows, and more importantly can play well, hundreds of conventions, I believe that an over-fascination with conventions stunts one's bridge growth instead of helping it. From an anchoring of bridge in the play of the hand, Boehm considers hand evaluation and re-evaluation, singleton honors and the ace of trumps, the value of the ninth trump (as Marty Bergen once said, the most undervalued assets in the game), the timing of the auction, and so on. Boehm's advice is not limited to the auction; he provides a generous helping of declarer play and defensive hands as well.

Beginning and intermediate players will profit much from reading *Private Sessions*, and it is a book that can be read more than once with profit. The style of the book is Socratic: Boehm plays the role of bridge professor engaged in dialogue with Student. Some will find this style interesting, others boring, and most will have no strong reaction either way (I imagine)

My only criticism of the book is Boehm's discussion at the end of the book of the sequence 1♠ - 1♥; 1♠ - ? Responder holding ♠A72; ♥98654; ♦6; ♣J972 is advised to bid 2♣, and the Professor comments that after the preference to 2♣ "when I have 4-3-3-3 [shape] I will correct 2♣ to 2♥, retreating from the dreaded minor to a major. Now we will have escaped from a seven-card fit into an eight-card fit" (p. 224). There are two points to be made here. First, the old-fashioned way of playing the unforced preference to 2♥ (unforced because the 2♣ rebid by responder isn't forcing) is that it shows 3 hearts

AND EXTRA VALUES. Consequently, playing with me, I'm not apt to visualize the opening bidder from having a 4-3-3-3 13 count, but something like a 4315 14-15 count, a sort of 2-and-a-half heart raise with 3 trumps. Second, running from 2♣ with a 4-3-3-3 minimum runs the risk of partner having a 2-4-2-5 6 count, in which case you are playing a 4-3 major suit fit instead of a 5-3 minor suit fit.

Boehm's other book is more closely focused on defense and doubling while using the same Socratic method as Private Lessons (except that the student in this book is named Sally). Sensibly, he lays the foundation for demon doubling in demon defense, rightly arguing that the better the defender one is, the closer the doubles one can make. The first half of the book discusses the tools of the demon defender in fifteen chapters plus a mid-term examination; the second half discusses the movement from a cowardly ('tepid') defender to a courageous defender. Realistically, the student doubles a few contracts that she fails to beat, and so the professor has to help her regain her confidence.

This book, due to its subject matter, is at a somewhat higher plane than Private Lessons, but is still very accessible to intermediate players. A nice extra touch is that scattered here and there, Boehm provides material suitable to advanced players, often in the form of hand analysis that goes beyond what an intermediate player could reach and simultaneously leading them (by example) to more advanced concepts.

I recommend both books without reservation to intermediate players. A final request: a book for beginners that uses this same method to teach the game of bridge. Back in the day, Marshall Miles wrote a book entitled Marshall Miles Teaches Logical Bridge that I felt was a far superior way to teach the game. Would it be that Boehm would provide a similarly excellent beginner's book using the Socratic methods of the Professor and Student!

Henry Sun, book reviewer