



The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine

By Tom Standage

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On an autumn day in 1769, a Hungarian nobleman named Wolfgang von Kempelen attended a conjuring show at the court of Maria Theresa, empress of Austria-Hungary. So unimpressed was Kempelen by the performance that he declared he could do better himself. Maria Theresa held him to his word and gave him six months to prepare a show of his own. Kempelen did not disappoint; he returned to the court the following spring with a mechanical man, fashioned from wood, powered by clockwork, dressed in a stylish Turkish costume?and capable of playing chess.

The Turk, as this contraption became known, was an instant success, and Tom Standage's book chronicles its illustrious career in Europe and America over the next eighty five years. Associated over time with a host of historical figures, including Benjamin Franklin, Catherine the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, Charles Babbage, and Edgar Allan Poe, Kempelen's creation unwittingly also helped to inspire the development of the power loom, the computer, and the detective story. Everywhere it went, the Turk baffled spectators and provoked frenzied speculation about whether a machine could really think. Many rival theories were published, but they served only to undermine each other.

Part historical detective story, part biography, *The Turk* relates the saga of the machine's remarkable and checkered career against the backdrop of the industrial revolution, as mechanical technology opened up dramatic new possibilities and the relationship between people and machines was being redefined. Today, in the midst of the computer age, it has assumed a new significance, as scientists and philosophers continue to debate the possibility of machine intelligence. To modern eyes, the Turk now seems to have been a surprisingly farsighted invention, and its saga is a colorful and important part of the history of technology.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

The Turk was the name given to a chess-playing automaton created by Wolfgang von Kempelen in order to impress the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria-Hungary. In 1770, von Kempelen demonstrated the Turk and so began a series of performances that would continue for 85 years, throughout Europe and eventually in the United States. Technology correspondent for the Economist and author of *The Victorian Internet*, Standage details the appearance and seeming construction of the automaton, following its existence and influence up through its destruction in a fire. He also provides a fine description of the fascination with automata and magic that was so prevalent in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. At the time, no one was able to determine how the Turk performed such feats; a fully operational replica was finally built by a Hollywood stage designer in 1971. Standage concludes this intriguing work by comparing the Turk with developments in computer chess playing in the latter half of the 20th century and also relates it to the broad artificial intelligence field. This book should appeal to a wide range of readers. Hilary Burton, Lawrence Livermore National Lab, Livermore, CA

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review It's a shame that most people these days have never heard of Wolfgang von Kempelen's magnificent machine called the Turk, because it really was a marvelous creation. In the middle of the eighteenth century, automatons were all the rage: mechanical ducks and elephants; pictures with moving parts; even human simulacra that could write, draw, and play musical instruments. And then there was the Turk, an automaton that could, it appeared, play chess--not just move pieces around a board, but also plan and execute strategies and outwit some of Europe's finest chess players. The Turk had a career that lasted more than eight decades: Benjamin Franklin played a match against it; Edgar Allan Poe wrote about it; Charles Babbage, the great-grandfather of the computer, was fascinated by it. But was it a genuine automaton? Or was it, as the Turk's many critics claimed, a hoax, a simple trick dressed up as a scientific wonder? Standage, who is also the author of the delightful *Victorian Internet* (1998), chronicles the life and times of the Turk, charting its ups and downs, showing the machine's impact on the world (the Turk was, in a way, the inspiration both for the computer and the modern detective story). Saving the best--the truth about the Turk--for last, he keeps us on the edge of our seats, wondering about the secret to this magical device.

History as seen from an unusual angle; thrilling stuff. *David Pitt*

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Review

an absorbing historical yarn... -- *Christian Science Monitor*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

John Augustine:

Here thing why this particular *The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine* are different and reliable to be yours. First of all examining a book is good nevertheless it depends in the content of it which is the content is as scrumptious as food or not. *The Turk: The Life and*

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Allen Grimm:

The reason why? Because this The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine is an unordinary book that the inside of the book waiting for you to snap it but latter it will jolt you with the secret it inside. Reading this book next to it was fantastic author who write the book in such wonderful way makes the content interior easier to understand, entertaining method but still convey the meaning thoroughly. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this nowadays or you going to regret it. This excellent book will give you a lot of benefits than the other book have such as help improving your skill and your critical thinking technique. So , still want to hold up having that book? If I were being you I will go to the guide store hurriedly.

Shelia Sepulveda:

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