Despite his vivid narrative, Frank Brady fails to explain why the Jewish-born Bobby Fischer became a rabid anti-Semite.

‘Nobody has single-handedly done more for the US than me,’ Bobby Fischer proclaimed in a radio interview broadcast on September 11, 2001. “When I won the World Championship in 1972, the United States had an image of a football country, a baseball country, but nobody thought of it as an intellectual country. I turned that all around.”

A teenage prodigy, raised in Brooklyn, Fischer may have been the greatest chess player in history. He was also arrogant, petulant, paranoid, reclusive and rabidly anti-Semitic.

In *Endgame*, Frank Brady, a professor of communications at St. John's University in New York and the founding editor of *Chess Life*, draws on family archives, interviews with dozens of chess champions, recently released KGB and FBI files and a relationship with Fischer that spanned several decades in a compelling, sympathetic, rueful and richly detailed biography of a master who became a monster.

With consummate skill, Brady re-creates the chess world (with its arcane rules and quirky cast of characters) that Fischer entered – and conquered. In his first formal game in Europe, he reveals, the 15-year-old Fischer faced Milan Matulovic, a Yugoslavian master, who became infamous for moving a piece, realizing he was making a mistake, returning it to its original square, and saying “*J'adoube*” (I adjust). Under the laws of chess, both players knew “*J'adoube*” must be uttered before the piece is touched, (“*pièce touchée, pièce jouée*” – if you touch a piece you move it) or the player risks a forfeit. After a firstgame loss, Fischer informed Matulovic that he’d no longer accept any more “*J'adoubes*” – and won the match.

Fischer’s genius for the game, Brady demonstrates, was composed, perhaps in equal parts, of preparation and inspiration.

As he settled in for a bath, Fischer placed a chess set, a chess book and a container of milk on a door from a discarded cabinet laid across the tub. He devoured advanced works, learning foreign languages so that he could absorb the commentary as he replayed the games.

By 13, Fischer was a regular at the Manhattan Chess Club, staying there 12 hours a day, seven days a
week, in the summer – and all year long, three years later, when he dropped out of high school. And he remembered virtually every game he played, watched or read about. Introduced to Andrei Lilienthal, an elderly Russian grand master, Bobby stuck out his hand and said, “Hastings, 1934/35: the queen sacrifice against Capablanca. Brilliant!” Despite his vivid narrative, Brady does not solve the two great mysteries of Fischer’s life.

Why did he abandon competitive chess after he wrested the World Championship from Boris Spassky in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1972? Why did Fischer, who was born Jewish, become anti-Semitic? As world chess champion, Fischer turned down title defenses that would have yielded him millions of dollars, insisting on rule changes unacceptable to the International Federation of Chess. In 1975, “without moving a pawn,” Anatoly Karpov succeeded him. Brady dismisses the idea, advanced by grand master Robert Byrne in *The New York Times*, that Fischer was petrified of losing.

Given his mania about making money, however, the explanations Brady prefers – that he feared being taken advantage of and that, as a great artist, he felt that he had a right and responsibility to shape, create and alter the way the game was played – are not persuasive.

Even more puzzling is Fischer’s hatred of Jews. Although not religiously observant, his mother, Regina Wender Fischer, with whom he had a pretty good relationship, was Jewish.

Although the identity of Bobby’s father is uncertain, he may have been Jewish as well.

Bobby attended a Jewish kindergarten and appears to have received bar mitzva gifts.

Beginning in the late ’50s, however, rumors circulated that Fischer was anti-Semitic.

In the 1970s – and for the rest of his life – Fischer openly denounced Jews as Satanists embarked on a conspiracy to take over the world. He endorsed the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. He insisted that the Holocaust was fabricated by Jews. “Unfortunately, we’re not strong enough just to wipe out all the Jews at this time,” he announced. “So, what I believe we should do is engage in random killing of Jews.”

A cold warrior, convinced that the Soviets, who dominated the world of chess, had conspired to deprive him of his title, Fischer often equated Jews and communists.

Although he wasn’t delusional, did not have hallucinations and often exhibited rational – and even charming – behavior, Brady believes that Fischer had lapsed into paranoia: “Plagued by a temporary storm in his mind,” venom against Jews “just spewed out and he couldn’t – nor did he want to – control it.”

The “public’s intrusive gaze,” Brady suggests, had caused him to lead “a reclusive, almost hermetic life.” His anti-Semitism, he speculates, was due to an accumulation of factors, including, distaste for his mother’s Jewish friends; antagonism toward officials of the American Chess Foundation, many of whom were Jewish; the neo-Nazism of E.

Forry Laucks, an early patron; and the influence of the Worldwide Church of God.

Perhaps. But, he – and we – might be better off not trying to explain the inexplicable and the inexcusable.

To chess players, Brady concludes, Fischer’s legacy “may simply be the awe that his brilliance evoked.”

If so, shame on them. Like everyone else, they should never forget that the game of life matters most. In that game, which should measure champions by what they do to (and for) others, Fischer wasn’t worth even a pawn.
The writer is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.