My Magic Years
with Topalov
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Thinkers Publishing 2019
Key to Symbols

! a good move  
? a weak move  
!! an excellent move  
?? a blunder  
!? an interesting move  
?! a dubious move  
□ only move  
N novelty  
⟳ Lead in development  
⨀ Zugzwang  
= equality  
∞ unclear position  
∞∞ with compensation for the sacrificed material

± White stands slightly better  
♀ Black stands slightly better  
± White has a serious advantage  
♀ Black has a serious advantage  
← White has a decisive advantage  
→ Black has a decisive advantage  
→ with an attack  
↑ with an initiative  
⇌ with counterplay  
∆ with the idea of  
○ better is  
≤ worse is  
+ check  
# mate
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Preface

by Veselin Topalov

In the second half of 2010 my manager Silvio Danailov told me he had received an email from a young French GM, offering his cooperation. We asked him to send an example of how he works, an analysis of some opening variation. Romain sent a file with an improvement in the Najdorf and I liked it. In my experience a young player willing to work hard is more valuable than a renowned but unmotivated GM, regardless of playing strength. Later I met Romain personally during the Chess Olympiad in Khanty-Mansiysk and we agreed on a training session in Salamanca.

Looking back, I would say our first sessions were the most fruitful. That’s logical, as in 2010 it was easier for humans to find good ideas more quickly than computer engines than it was in 2014, the same way that in 2018 it is easier than it will be in the years to come.

Of all our discoveries, I am most proud of the move 14.Ba4! played against Nakamura during the Melody Amber rapid and blitz tournaments in Monaco, a very deep idea which was very well developed by Romain. Lots of beautiful lines have still to be revealed. Also the strong novelty 12.Ne5! from the last round of the same event against Aronian gave me a big advantage, although the result was a loss.

Often, the quality of the work of trainers or seconds has nothing to do with the final result. I don’t think they’re responsible for what happens during time trouble in a blindfold game or in the fifth hour of a long and tense struggle.

What was also very important was that we had the good luck to anticipate the new move 9.c5!? played by Morozevich in Zug in 2013, knowledge of which gave me an important point. So an otherwise original and fresh idea turned out a fiasco for my opponent. Another excellent discovery in Lanzarote was 9.Be5!?, played against
Kramnik. This surprise allowed me to get a huge advantage only a few moves later, something almost impossible in such a well-studied opening as the Queen's Gambit. There were many other improvements and some of them have still not been played.

Our last serious training was in the winter of 2014 when I prepared for the Candidates Tournament in Khanty-Mansiysk. I believe I prepared very well, but the problem was that results came much later than needed. However, as I’ve already said, I don’t think Romain can be blamed for my loss against Svidler with the black pieces, for example. We found a great idea, revived a line with a bad reputation and I got an edge out of the opening, only to spoil it completely and lose. As a result the Candidates was a disaster me, but I would say my good play in the tournaments which followed in 2014 and 2015 was largely due to the work we did in Lanzarote in the winter of 2014. For example the new move 7...g5!?, which gave me victory over Carlsen in Saint Louis a year and a half later in 2015, was prepared back then.

Romain crossed the 2700 benchmark in June 2014; I would like to think it was because he worked with me, not because he stopped working with me 😊.

This book is about how ideas are born during preparation, about what happens behind the scenes. Until Romain told me he was writing it I had no idea of his plans. I believe chess fans will like the honesty of the stories as nothing is hidden. I hope you enjoy it.

Veselin Topalov
Salamanca, October 2018

Photo Jean-Michel Péchiné (Europe Échecs)
Chapter 1

Topalov: A World Apart
Chapter 1

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Topalov: A World Apart
For the purpose of writing this book I decided to look at all the games Veselin has played from 1995 until the present, as there were many I didn’t know! I must say that, although seeing great moves from a 2800 player sounds normal, it was impossible not to be astonished by some of his games.

Topalov is one of the kings of practical decisions in chess. He regards chess as more a sport than a science. If he thinks an idea will work over the board, the notion of risk is irrelevant to him. He wants to be on the attack and believes an objectively inferior position isn’t necessarily bad if his opponent needs to find several difficult defensive moves. “If that’s the only move for my opponent, let’s enter the line and see if he sees it!” is his philosophy.

He never liked peace over the board or routine play. The moments where he has refused to repeat moves or has sacrificed something strictly out of intuition are countless.

In short, Topalov’s aim has always been to hit hard and bring his own touch to the game, and I think he has succeeded!

I would like to open this book with what might be the most beautiful game Topalov has ever played: a masterpiece against Garry Kasparov, at the Euwe Memorial, Amsterdam 1996.

\[\text{Topalov, Veselin (2700)}\]
\[\text{Kasparov, Garry (2775)}\]
\[\text{Amsterdam 1996}\]


\[\text{Position after: 9. 0-0!?}\]

The sharpest line: White invites Black to take the e4-pawn, otherwise he will play e4-e5. The other option is 9. \text{Qf3.}

\[9... \text{cxe4 10. \text{xe4 xe4 11. f5 e5 12. h5 e7}}\]

\[12... d5\]
Chapter 1: Topalov: A World Apart

For the purpose of writing this book I decided to look at all the games Veselin has played from 1995 until the present, as there were many I didn't know! I must say that, although seeing great moves from a 2800 player sounds normal, it was impossible not to be astonished by some of his games.

Topalov is one of the kings of practical decisions in chess. He regards chess as more a sport than a science. If he thinks an idea will work over the board, the notion of risk is irrelevant to him. He wants to be on the attack and believes an objectively inferior position isn't necessarily bad if his opponent needs to find several difficult defensive moves. "If that's the only move for my opponent, let's enter the line and see if he sees it!" is his philosophy.

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The sharpest line: White invites Black to take the e4-pawn, otherwise he will play e4-e5. The other option is 9. Qf3.

9... Ncxe4 10. Nxe4 Nxe4 11. f5 e5

12. Qh5 Qe7

This is the main move here nowadays. Two days after this game Nigel Short used this improvement to beat Topalov himself: 13. Rxe4 Qxe4+ [14... 0-0!? 15. g4 Qxd4+ 16. h1 e4 is also playable.] 15. e3 0-0 16. Qxd4 exd4 17. Qxd4 f6. White has compensation for the exchange, but isn't better: 18. c5?! e8 19. d1 h8 20. xd5 d7 0-1 (46) Topalov, V (2700) – Short, N (2665) Amsterdam 1996.

13. Qf3

Position after: 13. Qf3

13... d5

13... exd4? 14. e1–

14. c6! Qc7 15. d5!

Nowadays engines find this move quickly, but they weren’t so helpful back in 1996!

15. b4? xb3 16. xb3 b5! 17. d5 c6 followed by ...b7 would be excellent for Black.

15... a5

The human move, trapping the knight on c6.

After 15... d7 Black's life would be no fun: 16. b4

16. Qf3

Position after: 16. Qf3

16... e7 [16... b6? 17. xf7+!! xf7 18. d5 c6 19. h5+ g8 20. f6–] 17. h5! [17. xf7+? xf7 18. d5 d8 19. h5+ g8–; 17. c4 c6 18. d5 xd5 19. xd5 b5] 17... f8sq [17... 0-0 18. f3 c8 19. h6! f6 20. af1 g3 with a winning attack.] 18. e3 and White has huge compensation for the pawn.

16. g5!

(see diagram next page)

The key move. White wants to play d8! Of course Black can't get rid of the g5-bishop by playing ...f6 because of h5+. 
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16... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{a}6?}}\)

16... \(\text{\textbf{d7}}\) was the only move, though if White finds the most challenging reply, Black needs a heroic defence.

A) 17. \(\text{\textbf{xf7+}}\) just fails: 17... \(\text{\textbf{xf7}}\) 18. \(\text{\textbf{h5+}}\) \(\text{\textit{\textbf{g8}}}\) 19. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{e6}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{e8}}\) 0-1 Degraeve, J (2551) – Ninov, N (2500) Béthune 2006.

B) 17. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{f6?}}}\) doesn't make Black's life particularly difficult: 17... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{g6}}}\) [17... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xc6?}}}\) 18. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{fxg7}}}\) \(\text{\textit{\textbf{gxg7}}}\) 19. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xf7+}}}\) wins easily.] 18. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{e7}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{e6!}}\)

and Black wants to go ...\(\text{\textit{\textbf{xe7}}}\) and ...\(\text{\textit{\textbf{f5}}}\). Of course White has some compensation, but the game is very un-

clear: either side could lose within a few moves! For example 19. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{h4}}}\) [19. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{h4}}}\) \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xe7}}}\) 20. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{fxe7}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{f5}}\) 21. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{f6}}}\) \(\text{\textit{\textbf{c5+}}}\) 22. \(\text{\textbf{f2}}}\) \(\text{\textit{\textbf{d4}}}\) 23. \(\text{\textbf{d1}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{xd5}}\) 24. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{hxh8}}}\) \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xe7+}}}\) 19... \(\text{\textbf{xe7}}\) [19... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{g5?}}}\) 20. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xe6}}}\) \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xe6}}}\) 21. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{exg5}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{xe7}}\) 22. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{fxe7}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{g8\textinfty}}\) 20. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{fxe7}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{f5\textinfty}}\).

C) 17. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{e7!}}}\) Wow! Scary stuff, but Black is fine with accurate play.

C1) 17... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{f6?}}}\) 18. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{h5+}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{xe7}}\) [18... \(\text{\textbf{d8}}\) 19. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{g6}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{e8}}\) 20. \(\text{\textbf{e3\textinfty}}\) 19. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xf6+}}}\) [19. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{ff7+??}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{d8}}\) 20. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xf6+}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{c8\textinfty}}\) 19... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{gx6}}}\) [19... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xf6}}}\) 20. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{h4+g5}}}\) 21. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{fxg6+}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{g7}}\) 22. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{f7+}}}\) 20. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{f7+}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{d8}}\) 21. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xf6+}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{c8}}\) 22. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{hx8}}}\) \(\text{\textit{\textbf{d8}}}\) 23. \(\text{\textbf{f6}}\) is crushing for White.

C2) 17... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xe7}}}\) 18. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xe7}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{f6!}}\) [18... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xe7}}}\) 19. \(\text{\textbf{f6+}}\) \(\textit{\textbf{d8}}\) 20. \(\textit{\textbf{fxg7}}}\) \(\textit{\textbf{e8}}\) 21. \(\textit{\textbf{xf7\textinfty}}\) 18... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{b6}}}\) 19. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{f6\textinfty}}}\) 19. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{e6!!}}}\) and Black holds: 20. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xe6}}}\) [20. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xd6}}}\) \(\text{\textbf{xd6}}\) 21. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{xe6}}}\) \(\textit{\textbf{xe6}}\) 22. \(\textit{\textbf{fxe6}}\) 0-0-?] 20... \(\text{\textit{\textbf{exe7}}}\) 21. \(\text{\textit{\textbf{h5+}}}\) \(\text{\textit{\textbf{d8}}}\) 22. \(\text{\textbf{d5}}}\) \(\text{\textit{\textbf{c8?}}}\) White has compensation, but Black is
Black needs a heroic defence.

White finds the most challenging reply, particularly difficult: 17... g6! [17... wins easily.] 18.

and Black wants to go ...

A)

B)

Béthune 2006.

Degraeve, J (2551) – Ninov, N (2500)

18. Bxc6? 18. fxg7...f5. Of course White has some com-
d7 was the only move, though if
Ba6?
R h5+
Q
Position after: 16.

Position after: 17. Bxf7+?

Black is already lost!

17... f6 18. Cf7 G8 19. e3 g6 20. Gg5!

Position after: 20. Gg5!

What a magical knight!

20... Gg7

20... fxg5 21. f6! H8 22. f7+ Dd8 23. Dxg5++

21. fxg6 Hxg6 22. Ff7+

Black can do nothing but sacrifice his queen. It took White some time to convert, which is normal, but the rest of the game isn’t too relevant.

I give it here just in case you would like to see it to the end!

22... Hxf7 23. Fxf7 Dxf7 24. Xc5 dxc5 25. ad1 e7 26. d5 g4 27. H4 e4 Gg7 28. fd1 xd1 29. xd1 e6 30. f5 f7 31. e1 b6 32. h4 Gd7 33. f1 d6 34. f2 c7 35. f3 e7 36. e4 f7 37. g4 e7 38. e4 Xg4+ 39. Xxg4 d8 40. a4 f8 41. c3 d7 42. c8 e8 43. He6+ f8 44. g4 f7 45. h5 d7 46. h6 d6 47. d5 e7 48. f5 Xxh6 49. b7 e4 50. b8+ f7 51. xb6 e3 52. e6+ e8 53. xe3 d6 54. e4 g5+ 55. f4 d7 56. b7+ e6 57. c8+ f7 58. c7 h5 59. gxh5 xh5 60. xa5 d6+ 61. e4 f5+ 62. d5 e7 63. c7 h6 64. a5 d6+ 65. e5 f6 66. e8 1-0

This game shows that one can recognize Topalov’s style of play in his opening preparation.

You can imagine what kind of instructions he gives to his seconds: “Be creative and aggressive!”.
In 2005, he became World Champion in San Luis, Argentina. A few months prior to winning the title, he won a stunning game against Vishy Anand, which is symbolic of everything Veselin loves about chess: sacrifices, intuition – and blood. It gives me pleasure to continue the book with this game.

11... h6? is exactly what White was hoping for: 12. \( \text{xf7} \) \( \text{xf7} \) 13. \( \text{e5} \) \( \text{g8} \) 14. \( \text{h3} \) \( \text{c8} \) 15. 0-0-0 (or even just 15. 0-0) and White has both dynamic and positional compensation: look at Black’s development!

12. \( \text{d5} \) \( \text{exd5} \) 13. \( \text{cx} \)

Here Black has already to make an important decision: and Anand made the right one!

13... h6!

A) 13... 0-0? would already be the decisive mistake: 14. 0-0-0 \( \text{h6} \) [14... \( \text{xd5} \)? 15. \( \text{c3} \) \( \text{g6} \) 16. \( \text{c4} \)–] 15. \( \text{h4} \!\)
A very important idea that became possible as a result of Black making the mistake of castling. 15... cxd5 [15... cxd5 16. hxg5 17. hgx5 b3 17. h7#] 16. c3 and with the d6-threat and b5 coming next, targeting the d7-knight, the black position is on the brink of collapse.

B) 13... cxd5? 14. b5+ f8 [14... c6 15. xf7 xf7 16. e5+] 15. xf7! [15. 0-0=] 15... xf7 16. f5+ f6 17. g5+ g8 [17... f8 18. e6++] 18. e6+ f8 19. f7#

C) 13... cxd5? 14. 0-0-0!

is quite bad for Black: 14... c8 At least escaping from the d-file. [Just giving up the bishop is not enough either: 14... xf3 15. xf3 0-0 16. c3 e8 17. g5 g6 18. g2 c6 19. he1 and White wins material.] 15. c3 xf3 16. xf3 c6 17. e1 and Black's position is a nightmare, since 17... 0-0?! is met by 18. g5 g6 19. xe7 xe7 20. xf6+–.

D) 13... cxd5?? loses right away to 14. c4+–.
g6+ g8 – if 19... f8 then 20. f5 wins – 20. xh6 f8 21. xg7 xg7 22. f5–] 18. c3 g8 19. h1e1 would be extremely difficult to handle for Black.

17. e1!

Again an inspired move, with the idea of going e6! The engine gives White sufficient compensation for a draw with various other options (17. g6+, 17. c4 or even 17. b1), but this is definitely the trickiest continuation for Black.

17... a6!

Again the best move by Anand. Black develops and aims for counterplay with ...b4.

A) Black could also try to develop his kingside first. After 17... f8 the game might objectively be a draw, but look at the kind of defence Black would have to find: 18. g6+ [18. xh6 gxh?? 19. g6#] 18... g8 19. xh6 f7 19... c7 20. e6! is worse as White threatens xd6.] 20. e6! (Δ f5)

20... c6! The only move according to the engine. 21. f5 e5 [21... e7? 22. xe7! xe7 23. xg7–] 22. xe5? [22. g5 f3 23. g6 e5 is a fun perpetual.] 22... xe5 23. xg7 h8 24. xf7 g8 25. e7 h7 26. g5 e4 27. e6 e1+ and Black has perpetual check.

B) 17... e8 18. g6+ g8 19. c4 is just bad for Black: the tension on the e-file is not to his advantage!

18. e6!!

Position after: 18. e6!!
This rook is untouchable, as the d5-pawn has been for several moves. White will play \( \text{c3} \) next and Black's position will just collapse.

18... \( \text{b4!} \)

Best again!

A) 18... \( \text{g8} \), pretending that he might want to take the e6-rook, doesn't help much, as after 19. \( \text{c3} \) Black would still be very brave to take it: 19... \( \text{xe6?} \) 20. \( \text{dxe6} \text{c7} \) 21. \( \text{c4+} \).

B) 18... \( \text{c7} \) 19. \( \text{c4} \) is also extremely dangerous for Black: White threatens \( \text{xd6} \) and \( \text{f4} \), while \( \text{c3} \) can also be the next move.

C) Of course not 18... \( \text{xe6?} \) 19. \( \text{dxe6+} \) and \( \text{xa6} \) next.

19. \( \text{xb4!} \)

19. \( \text{g6+!} \) \( \text{g8} \) 20. \( \text{c4} \) was definitely the other option.

20. \( \text{c4} \)

20. \( \text{c6} \) would regain some material, but that’s not what White wants: 20... \( \text{b8!?} \) [20... \( \text{xe6} \) leads to another crazy line: 21. \( \text{dxe6} \text{g8} \) 22. \( \text{e7} \text{c7} \) 23. \( \text{c4+} \text{h7} \) 24. \( \text{f3} \text{hg8} \) 25. \( \text{g6!} \) and Black is in trouble, for example 25... \( \text{b5?} \) 26. \( \text{f5} \text{bc4} \) 27. \( \text{f8+} \text{h8} \) 28. \( \text{h7+!} \text{exh7} \) (see diagram next page)]
29. \( \text{g6}\)\#.] 21. \( \text{xd6} \) \( \text{d7} \) and Black will counterattack on the c-file.

20... \( \text{b5} \)?

Jumping the gun! Black should have kept this key move for later.

20... \( \text{g8} \)! was correct. It seems that Black holds if he can play like an engine: 21. \( \text{f5} \) [21. \( \text{g6} \) \( \text{xe6}\)! 22. \( \text{dxe6} \) \( \text{c8} \) Black is ready to take on c4 with (counter) check whenever White plays e6-e7. 23. \( \text{f5} \) \( \text{f8} \) 24. \( \text{e1} \) \( \text{e8} \) 25. \( \text{b1} \) \( \text{xc4} \) 26. \( \text{bxc4} \) \( \text{e7}\infty \)]

21... \( \text{b5} \) 22. \( \text{xd6} \) \( \text{f8} \) 23. \( \text{d3} \) \( \text{xf5} \) 24. \( \text{xf6} \) \( \text{xf6} \) 25. \( \text{xf5} \) \( \text{c3}\infty \).

21. \( \text{xb5} \) \( \text{e7}\)?!?

Not a good move, but the position was bad already.

A) 21... \( \text{g8} \) 22. \( \text{c4} \) and White will play \( \text{f5} \). Black’s position is a disaster. As I said earlier, by playing \( \text{b5} \) too early, Black wasted an important bullet. Now the c4-bishop is entrenched.

B) 21... \( \text{xd5} \)? loses at once: 22. \( \text{g6}+ \) \( \text{g8} \) 23. \( \text{e8}\infty \).

22. \( \text{g6} \) \( \text{xd5} \)

Position after: 22... \( \text{xd5} \)

23. \( \text{xe7}+?\)!

Not spoiling all the advantage, but instead White could have forced Black to resign! My feeling is that Topalov thought he was winning at once and missed Black’s 25th move.

23. \( \text{e5} \) (\( \text{xd5} \)) 23... \( \text{b7} \) 24. \( \text{f5}+ \) and for example 24... \( \text{f6} \) leads to a nice mate: 25. \( \text{e6}+ \) \( \text{g6} \) 26. \( \text{d3}\# \).

23... \( \text{xe7} \) 24. \( \text{c4}+ \)

24. \( \text{d1}? \) was a bit easier: 24... \( \text{xg6} \) 25. \( \text{xd8} \) \( \text{xd8} \) 26. \( \text{c4}+ \) \( \text{f6} \) 27. \( \text{b2}+ \) \( \text{e5} \) 28. \( \text{f4}\infty \).

24... \( \text{f6}? \)

24... \( \text{e6} \)
Chapter 1: Topalov: A World Apart

Position after: 24... e6

25. xe7! The right way to win the queen. [25. xe6+?! xe6 26. e1+ f6 27. xe7 c8! and Black has chances.] 25... xc4 [25... xe7 26. e1+] 26. f5+! xe7 27. bxc4 d4 28. e1+ d6 29. d1+-

25. xh8 d4!

25... xh8? 26. d1 is hopeless for Black.

26. d1

Position after: 26. d1

It turns out White wins anyway!

26. b1?? f5--

26... a1+ 27. d2 d4+ 28. e1 e5+ 29. e2

29. f1?? h3+ 30. g1 xh8+

29... xe2+ 30. xe2 f5

30... g4+ 31. f3 xf3+ 32. xf3 xh8 33. d6++--

31. f7--

Position after: 31. f7--

White has an extra pawn and the initiative, which Topalov easily converted.

31... a5 32. g4 h4 33. h3 a7 34. d6+ e7 35. b6 c7 36. e5 g2 37. g6+ d8 38. f1 b7 39. xb7 xb7 40. xg2 d7 41. f8 d2 42. e6+ e7 43. xg7 xa2 44. f5+ f6 45. xh6 c2 46. f7 c3 47. f4 a4 48. bxa4 b3 49. g5+ g7

(see diagram next page)
And now a pretty finish...

50. f5! b2 51. f6+ Kg7 52. Nf5!

Black resigned as he gets mated with g6+, g7+, etc.

1-0

The new computer era is diminishing the possibility of this kind of idea, but the ‘Topi touch’ has never completely disappeared.

One would think that, in the years after this game with Anand, computers would have improved so much that such creativity had become impossible.

In Wijk aan Zee 2008, Topalov again proved this assessment wrong...

In this well-known position in the Moscow Variation, Topalov decided to go for a new idea: a piece sacrifice! The engine manages to solve Black’s problems here, but the question was whether Kramnik would be able to find these moves over the board, as it was almost certain that he wouldn’t be expecting the next move...

12. Qxf7!? 

A new move at the time. I remember Topalov smiling at the press conference, after showing the game, saying: 'Now I have to see if Ivan (Cheparinov, his second at the time) has more of these ideas!'.