Fate is the Hunter Study Guide

Fate is the Hunter by Ernest K. Gann

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Ernest K. Gann, the author of the autobiography, learned how to fly in the earliest days of aviation. He attended flight school and was trained as one of the first commercial pilots in the United States of America. He flew commercial routes in New England for a few years prior to World War II. Then, throughout the war, he flew as a civilian pilot for the Air Transport Command. After the war, he found the return to short flights in New England somewhat boring and joined a startup company flying between California and Honolulu. Although he enjoyed working for the company, it failed. He then worked for another company performing unscheduled long flights in the South Pacific. During this period the Korean War was fought, and Gann once again flew the men and materiel of war. After the Korean War Gann continued flying for a few more years until he felt that his own fate with death was approaching; to avoid death, he retired from flying.

The autobiographical text is arranged chronologically and is told with an open, bluff voice that has the ring of experience and honesty. Gann examines his own life and his own minor role in the developing field of commercial aviation prior to, throughout, and after World War II and the Korean War. The autobiography features anecdotes and descriptions of dozens of other aviators who are specified only by last name. In the introductory matter, Gann notes that several names have been deliberately altered. The text is presented with a vague sense of historical time; no specific dates are mentioned throughout. Thus, the book must be historically fixed in time solely by the references made to world events—the surrender of Germany and, later, Japan in World War II, the appearance of various models of aircraft in commercial circles, the occurrence of the Korean War, and so forth.

The autobiography is tightly themed around the notion of fate: that is, accidents happen when they are fated and do not happen when they are not fated. The prologue illustrates the point when Gann makes a minor altitude correction for no apparent reason and the action unquestionably saves his life. The text presents many other similar incidents. The chapters are subsequently presented chronologically: Gann goes to school and obtains commercial certification; he is assigned as co-pilot on commercial flights; he works alongside several experienced pilots and gains experience and credibility until he is an accomplished pilot in his own right. Gann then considers the philosophy of flight and discusses several memorable events in detail. For example, one flight to Greenland is presented in remarkably poetic language. Gann's autobiography then continues with another lengthy section of factual events, including flights during and after World War II, inter-war flights, and flights during and after the Korean War. Throughout this entire prolonged period, Gann's luck is good and his fate holds out. He then describes in detail one unsettling event—two planes suffer the same mechanical failure: one of them crashes with a loss of all hands, but Gann's plane lands safely. Clearly his fate is forestalled, but he wonders for how long. In the end, Gann flies alongside a veteran co-pilot and studies the man. As he does so, Gann comes to realize that his personal fate is only partially within his own control—he has flown too far and too long, he has escaped too many tight spots, too many others have died—and soon enough his fate will claim him. At that moment, he determines to quit the life of a pilot

and the autobiography quickly concludes. Far more than just an autobiography, the book is widely appreciated as an authoritative monograph on the early history of aviation.

Prologue "The Tip of the Arrow - an Undesired Rendezvous in the Night"

Prologue "The Tip of the Arrow - an Undesired Rendezvous in the Night" Summary and Analysis

Ernest K. Gann, the author of the autobiography, learned how to fly in the earliest days of aviation. He attended flight school and was trained as one of the first commercial pilots in the United States of America. He flew commercial routes in New England for a few years prior to World War II. Then, throughout the war, he flew as a civilian pilot for the Air Transport Command. After the war, he found the return to short flights in New England somewhat boring and joined a startup company flying between California and Honolulu. Although he enjoyed working for the company, it failed. He then worked for another company performing unscheduled long flights in the South Pacific. During this period, the Korean War was fought, and Gann once again flew the men and materiel of war. After the Korean War Gann continued flying for a few more years until he felt that his own fate with death was approaching; to avoid death, he retired from flying.

Ernest K. Gann, the author, pilots a commercial airliner alongside Beattie, his co-pilot. A general sense of unease afflicts both men but after checking and re-checking all their instruments, there is no apparent problem. Gann turns on the headlamps and looks around the plane to discover that everything is in perfect order. He turns off the headlamps and notes the airplane's position and altitude—the plane is 50' vertically above its planned altitude. Gann corrects the altitude by a mere 50' and seconds later another aircraft streaks by, missing Gann's craft due only to the altitude correction. Gann and Beattie are stunned. Contacting the nearest air-traffic controller, they learn that the other airplane is not on any planned route. This event symbolizes what Gann refers to as being stalked by fate—a trivial altitude correction at a random moment of time saves not only his life, but also the lives of the passengers aboard. There was no particular reason to make the correction when he did—in fact; the disparity in actual and planned altitude was so slight that there was no real reason to make the correction at all. Yet, due to fate, the correction was made and a mid-air collision was avoided.

Chapter 1 "The Innocents - and of the Facts of Aerial Life"

Chapter 1 "The Innocents - and of the Facts of Aerial Life" Summary and Analysis

Gann attends flight school with nine other men—Gay, Lippincott, Sisto, Watkins, Mood, McGuire, Owen, Charleton, and Carter. They already know how to fly small airplanes, but most of them are self-taught and have little practical experience. The flight school teaches them the methods and practices used by American Airlines to fly larger aircraft—primarily Douglas DC-2s and DC-3s—on commercial routes. The school is taught by Lester and McIntosh. Lester, the classroom instructor, is himself a commercial pilot but is unable to fly due to severed physical wounds suffered during an airplane crash. He is a driven man and expects perfection from his students. McIntosh performs secondary training. Like Lester, he demands precision skills and holds high standards. Gann gets acquainted with his fellow students during several weeks of instruction. Gann goes aloft with McIntosh on many occasions, flying small training aircraft, and then flying the larger DC-2 and DC-3 airplanes. He comes to like the easy-flying capability of the new DC-3 and finds the DC-2 to be a cantankerous and difficult machine.

Chapter 2 "A Novitiate - Tangled and Stumbling in the Robes of His Order"

Chapter 2 "A Novitiate - Tangled and Stumbling in the Robes of His Order" Summary and Analysis

After graduating from commercial flight school, the students receive their assignments. Gann is sent to Newark airport and assigned to area AM-21, which encompasses several standard commercial flight paths from Newark to the surrounding areas, including Cleveland. At Newark, Gann flies with McCabe, the chief airport pilot—McCabe assesses Gann's skills and personality during the flight. Gann is dismayed that the demonstration flight is made in a DC-2 and he does not put on a very competent performance. McCabe causes Gann to take off and land several times, and Gann manages to botch nearly all of the landings. After the demonstration flight, McCabe assigns Gann to fly with Ross.

Gann spends some time talking with Robbins. Robbins is the airport coordinator and flight scheduler for Newark; as such, he is perpetually busy but also knows all of the pilots and co-pilots. Gann asks about Ross, and Robbins says that he is a good man and a superb pilot. Robbins explains that Gann's AM-21 flight path will entail making 2 ? round trips each week, carrying commercial passengers and U.S. Postal Service airmail between Newark and Cleveland.

Later in the day, Gann finally meets Ross. Ross is immaculately clean and his clothes are perfectly creased and pressed. He has long legs, a powerful build, and wears expensive black ankle boots. Ross moves with an easy grace and unconscious authority. When Ross learns that Gann is not an army-taught pilot, he reveals that he, too, was not army-taught. Gann finds Ross likable and apparently easy-going.

Chapter 3 "Humility Learned - In Which a Master is Tolerant"

Chapter 3 "Humility Learned - In Which a Master is Tolerant" Summary and Analysis

Gann is assigned to fly a route in area AM-21. His flight plan takes him from Newark to Wilkes-Barre, then to Syracuse, then to Rochester, then to Buffalo, then to Erie, and finally to Cleveland. When weather permits, the airplane—a DC-2—lands at every airport on the route. Generally, the weather is difficult and landing is often exciting and prolonged.

On the first flight, the plane lands at Wilkes-Barre. One of Gann's responsibilities as co-pilot is to deliver bags of mail to the various landing locations. He is unable to locate the mailbag for Wilkes-Barre and causes the flight to be delayed until a technician looks for the bag in the tail compartment. Embarrassed, Gann sorts out the cargo mess he has made searching for the bag in the wrong compartments while Ross takes off without his co-pilot. After Gann regains the cockpit Ross has him fly to Syracuse and perform the landing. Gann concentrates, but botches the landing and drops the plane onto the runway with a bone-jarring thud.

Determined to demonstrate his technical ability, Gann prepares to raise the landing gear after the next take-off. In order to redeem his lackluster performance, he determines to snap up the gear with rapidity the instant Ross gives the signal. Unfortunately, Gann is so intent upon watching Ross' hand that he mistakes a small twitch for the signal and jerks up the landing gear before the airplane has completely left the runway. Ross reacts instantly and somehow manages to keep the heaving plane aloft. Gann is ashamed and realizes that he had a lot to learn. Ross—nearly dead from Gann's foolish maneuver—is surprisingly tolerant. Gann concludes the chapter with a poetic description of the terrain beneath AM-21 and a catalogue of additional pilots who routinely flew the route.

Chapter 4 "A Captain - At Work"

Chapter 4 "A Captain - At Work" Summary and Analysis

Over the next several months, Ross becomes increasingly demanding, and often verbally insults Gann when he repetitively makes the same mistake. Gann learns that Ross grew up in Massilon, Ohio, in a particularly tough neighborhood and easily accepts the fact due to Ross' dominating personality. He considers requesting a transfer to escape Ross' relentless demand for perfection but decides that the honor of flying with Ross—the best pilot on the route—outweighs the drawbacks. Ross is widely acknowledged as a master of the DC-2, and he trusts his co-pilot and shares landings and take-offs on a 50/50 basis. These qualities are rare in most pilots.

AM-21 frequently experiences heavy and sudden thunderstorms. Gann recalls flying through severe weather and learning many tricks from Ross—everything from acclimating the eyes to lightning flashes to positioning the seat for maximum visibility through a rain-soaked windshield. Gann's flying ability rapidly improves and Ross begins to use various obnoxious but Zen-like techniques to force Gann to develop unshakable confidence and concentration.

Chapter 5 "The Seasoning - Where the Mind is Honed and Sweat is Found to Mix With Ice"

Chapter 5 "The Seasoning - Where the Mind is Honed and Sweat is Found to Mix With Ice" Summary and Analysis

From time to time Gann is temporarily assigned to fly with other captains. He occasionally acts as co-pilot on a Newark to Chicago flight of a DC-3. He finds the DC-3's long range appealing and likes the easy comfort with which the newer-model plane flies. However, he also realizes that his shorter AM-21 route with many stops is giving him tremendous experience in taking off and landing. Gann learns minor tricks from all of the pilots he flies with.

After several months with Ross, Gann is re-assigned to Keim. Keim is of medium height and is stocky, carrying some extra weight around his middle. He has a strong neck and broad shoulders and sports curly red hair on his big head. Keim wears a moustache and was army-trained. He is an expert navigator and has an uncanny sense for weather. Gann finds Keim to be domineering and arrogant. Keim makes various demands and expects Gann to be wholly subordinate.

Gann notes with pleasure that the airline business is rapidly expanding; this suggests that he will not be a co-pilot forever, but will soon be promoted to pilot. He notes that the new La Guardia airport has recently opened (1939) and has set the bar very high for national commercial aviation. Note that Gann's reference to the airport as La Guardia is incorrect—from its opening in 1939 through 1947 it was actually known as New York Municipal Airport.

On one occasion, Gann flies as co-pilot for Hughen, an older but very experienced pilot. The flight is from Nashville to New York and is scheduled for a DC-3. At the last moment, a DC-2 is substituted and Gann feels disappointed that the long flight will be made in an older airplane; he does not realize that the substitution will become an event of critical importance. On the flight, the plane enters a freezing cloud. Hughen is clearly worried through Gann remains somewhat aloof. Ice begins to form on the winds and fuselage and the plane rapidly loses speed and altitude. Gann rapidly becomes concerned and then frightened as the ice-removal devices begin to fail. Hughen pilots the craft with impressive ability and diverts for a clear airport. Visibility is nearly zero and the plane's engines, laboring heavily under the weight of ice, consume fuel at an alarming rate. The engines begin to sputter and Hughen explains that the air intakes are beginning to ice over. Using an experienced pilot's trick, Hughen deliberately backfires the engines, causing flaming exhaust to eject from the carburetors and out through the

air intakes. The fiery pressure waves blow the forming ice away from the engine intakes. The propellers continually ice up and then fling blocks of ice into the fuselage, creating an eerie and dangerous-sounding racket. The plane finally arrives at Cincinnati airport with virtually no fuel remaining and a windshield covered in thick ice. Unable to see except out the side window, Hughen nonchalantly circles into a perfect no-visibility landing with only a few gallons of fuel remaining. Gann, relieved to be on the ground, is amazed at Hughen's ability and experience. Later, in the lounge, Hughen casually remarks that the DC-2 is a formidable ice-carrier; a DC-3 would certainly have stalled and crashed under the same load of ice. The event therefore symbolizes what Gann refers to as being stalked by fate—a chance substitution of planes results in his survival.

Chapter 6 "Of Numbers - and Their Power to Reduce the Presumptuous Quickly"

Chapter 6 "Of Numbers - and Their Power to Reduce the Presumptuous Quickly" Summary and Analysis

Gann notes that pilots are deliberately and calculatingly modest about their abilities. Their modesty is just a bluff as they are all jealous and professional men who are immensely proud of their abilities and accomplishments. Gann then notes that two pilots and two co-pilots are killed in two crashes during the period, even as he continues to fly with other pilots. Finally, he is promoted to pilot. He finds it intensely satisfying even though he knows it will not long last and he spends a considerable effort greeting passengers and playing the gracious host. AM-21 happens to be short on pilots, but other areas have a surplus. Thus, he is eventually reduced again to co-pilot as more experienced men transfer to the area. Realizing that he will remain a co-pilot for a considerable time if he remains in AM-21, Gann begins to look around for other opportunities.

Airline pilots are assigned a seniority number after they complete school—Gann's is 267. Employees gain tenure advantage solely by their seniority number. An employee with a number lower than Gann's 267 is automatically senior to him; thus, if the two men were to fly together, Gann would be the co-pilot. In many portions of the text, Gann mourns his ridiculously high number or comments jealously on another man's lower number.

Chapter 7 "Gypsies - Doubtful of Station and Intentions"

Chapter 7 "Gypsies - Doubtful of Station and Intentions" Summary and Analysis

As World War II looms, the United States becomes determined to gain ascendancy over German influence in South America. Germany has strong ties in the area in many venues, one of which is aviation. South American aviation facilities are, to say the least, poor to non-existent and Germany's airplanes are robust and capable. The United States arranges to take over many air routes by agreeing to provide Lockheed Lodestars—newer commercial airplanes—to South American countries at no cost. Brazil agrees and requests that the airplanes be delivered to Rio de Janeiro.

On his first shuttle flight, Gann travels over the Andes Mountains, through a high-altitude pass. The trip is particularly strange as Gann and his co-pilot suffer from the effects of anoxia on much of the voyage. Gann recalls the detached mental carelessness and bewildering visual disturbances of hypoxia. When he arrives, he locates a German Junkers 86 that he had been instructed to bring back to the United States on his return trip. Unfortunately, the plane has been abandoned and the engines are full of dust. Gann surveys the plane and determines not to tempt fate—it is probably un-flyable, is certainly in a dangerous state of disrepair, and is completely unfamiliar. He decides that prudence is the better part of valor and leaves the plane abandoned.

On another flight, Gann and his co-pilot travel across the trackless jungle and can only wonder if they are proceeding in the correct direction. There are no navigational beacons and no radio response from their destination. Finally, they find a landmark river but cannot see the airport. They—at random—decide to head south along the river rather than north. Fortunately, the airport is south and they land with only a few gallons of fuel remaining. The event therefore symbolizes what Gann refers to as being stalked by fate: a random decision proving the difference between a safe landing and crash-landing in a likely un-survivable jungle. He reflects that Cooper and Owens—two other pilots—were recently killed in a crash.

On Gann's next flight, he avoids the Andes and flies an alternate route over the ocean. He lands in San Juan for refueling and first hears the terse news report of the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor—The United States of America is at war. He continues transporting the plane to Belem and then continues onward. As his co-pilot flies, he studies the colorful and distinctive aerial charts of South America. He decides to fetch some more charts and, quite at random, and while standing in the passenger compartment to retrieve the maps, happens to look out the window just as the engine's oil-line erupts and black oil spumes out of the aircraft. He rushes into the cabin and performs an emergency engine shutdown. The stricken craft returns to Belem where a thorough mechanical investigation concludes in inconclusive results: the plane is

mechanically sound. Gann and his co-pilot continue the trip and deliver the aircraft without further incident. Gann realizes that the loss of oil was so rapid that had he not actually seen the event occur, the entire oil supply of the plane would have drained before the alert semaphore would have illuminated. The event therefore symbolizes what Gann refers to as being stalked by fate—a random, unlikely, and unscheduled trip to the passenger cabin alerts him to a bizarre problem and therefore saves his life.

In discussing the event with mechanical engineers later, Gann realizes that the plane had been sabotaged. Someone with a mechanical inclination had purposefully introduced water into the airplane's oil reserve. As the engine temperature climbed, the water had vaporized and rapidly increased the oil-line pressure until a rupture occurred. Clearly, the German-American power struggle for South America had tangentially touched upon Gann's survival. The chapter is long and particularly well written, and illustrates Gann's experiences aloft over the Andes and South American jungle as being compelling.

Chapter 8 "Rule Books Are Paper - They Will Not Cushion a Sudden Meeting of Stone and Metal"

Chapter 8 "Rule Books Are Paper - They Will Not Cushion a Sudden Meeting of Stone and Metal" Summary and Analysis

Sickened by malaria, Gann returns to convalesce in the United States. While he recuperates, several pilots receive their war activation letters. The airline business booms in the war economy and Gann is appointed as a pilot flying a route in AM-21; his friend Mood is also a pilot on AM-21. Gann is invited to attend a special school, run by McIntosh, on celestial navigation. Along with some other pilots, he attends the school for about a month. It is then disbanded and—seemingly—comes to nothing.

After a few months, Gann is extended an offer to fly a cargo plane to Presque Island, Maine. Understanding that the trip is a one-off affair, he readily agrees. Once he reaches Presque Island, he gradually realizes that he has been, more or less, assigned to the base on a semi-permanent basis. Although he is a civilian pilot, he is utilized by the United States Armed Forces to shuttle equipment between developing military installations. He is assigned to a C-47, a modified and militarized version of a Douglas DC-3. The plane is crewed by a pilot, Gann; a co-pilot, Johnson; a wireless radio operator, Summers; and a flight mechanic, Tetterton. The four men train briefly and then are assigned to fly a heavy load of steel radio masts to Goose Bay, a remote base consisting of little more than a freshly bulldozed landing strip.

Faced with a thick fog that eliminates visibility, they decide to perform an instrument-only take-off. No one is familiar with standard cargo-loading procedures, however, and as the plane gathers speed and leaves the ground the heavy load of steel radio masts slides to the tail of the plane, causing it to go into a steep climb and nearly stall. With Gann and Johnson fighting the controls, Summers and Tetterton haul the tons of steel masts upward against the sloping floor of the cargo bay until the plane's flight attitude becomes safe. Gann will thereafter remember to ensure that his cargo is sufficiently lashed down. They reach Goose Bay without further incident.

Chapter 9 - "Valhalla - the Tortuous Route Thereto"

Chapter 9 - "Valhalla - the Tortuous Route Thereto" Summary and Analysis

Goose Bay is a new base and consists of little more than a landing strip cut into the pristine northern wilderness. Gann feels ashamed at the mechanization taking place in such a remote, beautiful location. However, he also realizes that with the war, logistics will be complicated and the northeastern locations offer excellent staging areas. Goose Bay initially features no navigational assists and the local weather is cranky and unpredictable.

After Gann lands, he discovers that his load of steel masts is in fact destined for Greenland. With time only to gulp a few cups of coffee, receive basic destination instructions, and catch a few hours of sleep, Gann and his crew enplane and continue. The next morning they begin a 1,300-mile trip without navigational support and into unknown weather conditions. The plane, heavily laden with equipment and fuel, averages something like 115 mph.

As the rest of the crew sleeps, Gann flies solo for several hours and contemplates the nature of human trust, appreciates the beauty of nature, and enjoys the despondent feeling of isolation and loneliness. After a nerve-wracking but largely typical cross-Atlantic flight, they reach their destination. Visibility is poor and the cloud banks are very low so they fly along only a few score of feet above the water, skimming the tops of icebergs. They fly along a coast of cliffs and craggy fjords using visual navigation and are full of wonder at the incredible splendor of raw nature. Finally, they land at a tiny base called Bluie-West-One.

Chapter 10 - "A Lonely, Unloved Ship - Finding Hazard the More Bitter When Matched With Trifles"

Chapter 10 - "A Lonely, Unloved Ship - Finding Hazard the More Bitter When Matched With Trifles" Summary and Analysis

Gann and his crew expect to have some food, sleep, and return to Goose Bay. Such is not their fate, however. They are informed that their plane has been unloaded and reloaded with cargo destined for Reykjavik, Iceland. Gann begins to enjoy the freewheeling experience of flying for the military without the strictures and procedures of commercial aviation. He also enjoys the freedom of being a civilian pilot. With time only to gulp some coffee and receive verbal navigation instruction, the crew boards the plane and takes off.

They spiral up through heavy clouds, using instruments only, until they achieve 11,000 feet and leave the cloud cover. The massive ice fields and high peaks of Greenland are overwhelming and visually deceptive. They clear the spine of Greenland and are soon again flying over water. On the approach to Iceland the thick cloud cover descends nearly to the water and Gann drops the plane down to a scant forty feet above the choppy frigid waters. Gann is particularly tense about finding a strange airport at an unknown destination in bad weather using military code-book communications. After a tense approach, they successfully land at Reykjavik and unload many cases of toilet paper and a few other random pieces of equipment. The British Royal Air Force informs them that their coded messages had been outdated and fighters had been searching for them; thus, their very-low approach happened to make them safe. Finally, after nearly three days, the crew turns in to proper bunks and sleeps.

Chapter 11 - "The Numbers - In a Wicked, Vengeful Mood"

Chapter 11 - "The Numbers - In a Wicked, Vengeful Mood" Summary and Analysis

Gann continues to fly the C-47 out of Goose Bay, hauling cargo for the military effort. A new aircraft, the C-87, is also introduced. It is larger than the C-47 and has four engines, a greatly increased cruising range, a higher altitude, better fuel capacity, and a much larger cargo capacity. Unfortunately, it is a very unreliable and cantankerous aircraft, which is nearly impossible to fly with even light icing. The C-87 is used for cross-Atlantic airlifts while the C-47 is used for shorter hauls. While the C-47 is crewed by three men, the larger C-87 is crewed by five, including a navigator and a flight engineer. Most crews are assembled from relatively inexperienced civil volunteers. Gann, like most pilots, flies both aircraft, usually between Presque Island, Goose Bay, and Prestwick, Scotland. The crews of the planes are like vagabonds, living in no permanent location. Their flight bags and cockpits become their homes and their crewmembers are their only friends and families.

One day Gann and his crew are scheduled to fly a C-87 on a trans-Atlantic route; they are excited because, once again, they will stop at Greenland. They arrive at the hangar to discover that O'Connor, a senior pilot, has claimed the larger airplane and they are to fly a C-47 on a series of shorter flights. Disappointed, Gann writes a sarcastic note to O'Connor and departs on his flight.

They later learn that O'Connor ran into ice and weather on his return flight and his flight was lost. His presumably crash site is unknown. A search and rescue mission is quickly organized and dozens of planes fan out over the vast Nova Scotia region. Encouragingly, a radio message is received from O'Connor—he informs the base that he has crash-landed without casualties and gives a concise verbal description of his immediate vicinity. Gann flies a C-47 in search of O'Connor's downed C-87. He and the other pilots are dismayed to discover that their compasses are relatively useless due to aberrant magnetic fields in the area. After the first day of searching, O'Connor remains lost.

This event once again symbolizes what Gann refers to as being stalked by fate—a happenstance crew substitution results in his assignment being boring but safe, while the replacement crew crash lands in a vast frozen wasteland. While Gann searches for O'Connor he realizes that it could be a much more personal story. The 'numbers' in the chapter title refers to the seniority numbers of the civilian pilots; O'Connor's lower number allowed him to select Gann's previous flight assignment.

Chapter 12 - "Cold - Exhausting, Unrelenting, Murderous Cold"

Chapter 12 - "Cold - Exhausting, Unrelenting, Murderous Cold" Summary and Analysis

On the second day of searching O'Connor is located by radio beacon. His downed craft is nearly equidistant from the three closest air bases; therefore, C-47 transports will be of little use in routinely flying supplies to him. The next day two C-87s are commandeered and Gann, flying one of them, locates O'Connor's downed airplane. Supplies are dropped and other aircraft vector to Gann's position and drop their supplies. One airplane attempts a landing and, upon impact, tumbles hopelessly deep into drifted snow. Over the next several days additional supply drops are conducted and then worsening weather prevents anyone from reaching O'Connor's distant position. Massive snowfall completely alters the landscape, obliterating previously used guide features. Compasses continue to remain useless, and the trip itself is dangerous as is made clear when one C-87 is forced into an emergency landing at an unfinished airstrip. Gann repeatedly mentions the incredible cold—often scores of degrees below zero—and the dangerous flying conditions.

After the storm breaks supply flights resume again. The pilots use a new navigation trick and make the flight nearly entirely at night so that celestial navigation can replace the wandering compass needle. Gann makes a few more flights and is then transferred away. He relates that after three weeks the men are eventually all rescued without serious mishap. Dismayed at the thought of the plane sinking into the lake during the spring thaw, the army flies in a small tractor, constructs a rudimentary airstrip on top of the ice, and, incredibly, manages to get the aircraft airborne and recovered. O'Connor, undaunted by his prolonged stay in the wilderness, continued to serve with distinction during the remainder of the war.

Chapter 13 - "Heat - In Most Men There Lurks a Lesser Man, and His Presence Smells in the Sun"

Chapter 13 - "Heat - In Most Men There Lurks a Lesser Man, and His Presence Smells in the Sun" Summary and Analysis

Gann is transferred to Natal, Brazil, where he lives in a house alongside Keim. The atmosphere is hot, humid, and intensely unpleasant, and the house is full of all manner of insects and other vermin. Gann and Keim sack in their bunks, sweat, crack wise, and reminisce of better times and better weather. Gann tells Keim about his most recent long-distance flight but leaves out some salient details, which are later noted in the chapter.

Gann had flown a plane packed full of newly printed Chinese cash. Leaving Natal, Brazil, he had flow to Ascension Island; then Accra on the Gold Coast; then to Kano, Nigeria; on to El Fasher, Sudan; Khartoum; Gura, Eritrea; Aden; Salala, Arabia; Karachi; Gaya, India; and finally to Chabua, Assam, his final destination. He claims to have purloined a huge stash of the Chinese money and squandered it to enjoy the pleasure of many Chinese women—Keim dismisses the claims as bald-faced lies but is nevertheless willing to participate in the tall tale as a willing believer. While in Chabua, Assam, an old acquaintance of Gann's insisted that he must fly "the Hump" and arranged for him to make one round trip as a co-pilot. The trip requires a plane to pass over the spine of the Himalayan Mountains at 16,000' elevation amidst uncertain but nearly always dangerous weather. Gann flew the trip without incident, and then returned to Agra, India. In Agra, his airplane was seriously overloaded with fuel and equipment and he nearly crashed into the Taj Mahal; fortunately, his experience allowed him to avoid almost certain catastrophe and he continued home, eventually reaching Natal. A few days later Gann is pleasantly surprised when O'Connor also arrives at Natal.

Gann then reminisces about another experience at Chabua, Assam—one he did not share with Keim. After returning from his voyage across the Hump, Gann and another pilot sit on the runway in a jeep and watch planes taking off. One of the planes is handled poorly on takeoff and crashes, bursting into flaming wreckage a mere two hundred yards from them. Rather than react, they sit, stunned, as the fire spreads and the plane's cargo begins to explode. They sit and watch as rescue teams traverse the length of the runway and combat the flames, managing to pull four survivors from the wreckage, leaving behind three dead. Gann becomes very ashamed of his own inability to act and at his own perceived cowardice in the fact of danger. He later learns thirty-two men and four aircraft were lost on that day alone, attempting to fly the Hump.

Chapter 14 - "Fortune - Where is the Man Who Survives Without..."

Chapter 14 - "Fortune - Where is the Man Who Survives Without..." Summary and Analysis

O'Connor survives his Nova Scotia ordeal and goes on to fly many missions across the Hump. Gann is assigned to a Douglas C-54 and makes long-haul missions. On one trip he flies a C-54 and moments after takeoff one, then two, then three engines begin to sputter and misfire. Gann realizes the plane is in serious trouble and will likely crash; he immediately begins to return to the airport as the three engines behave erratically. After a scant three minutes aloft, he manages to set the plane down without incident.

On the ground, he learns that some design engineers had replaced the spark plugs in three of his four engines with a spark plug of a new, 'better', design. The fourth engine had not been modified due to a fortunate lack of time. This event once again symbolizes what Gann refers to as being stalked by fate—a matter of a few minutes of flight time allowed one engine to function; momentary sputters from the other three engines allowed the plane to stay aloft; Gann's flying ability saved the day.

Over the next several months, Gann and the other pilots come to know global weather patterns and global geography. They are no longer so impressed by smaller, regional, systems. He makes many trans-Atlantic flights and can recognize most locales by sight. Even as the months go by, many pilots are killed in accidents, including Gay, a fellow-student in Gann's original flight school. During this time, Gann also meets Sloniger, a fellow pilot with the astounding seniority number of one. Gann, like everyone else, is immensely impressed by Sloniger's unapproachable number of hours aloft. Eventually, Gann is transferred back to Natal and begins again to fly the dreaded C-87. He has 5,622 hours, 39 minutes, of logged flying time and, he notes, very good luck.

Chapter 15 - "A Hole - So Small, but of Exquisite Design"

Chapter 15 - "A Hole - So Small, but of Exquisite Design" Summary and Analysis

For many months, Gann flies C-54s on long-haul missions. His crew is usually composed of Robertson as co-pilot, LaFrenier as navigator, Bradford as radio operator, and Millington as flight engineer. On one occasion, however, his crew was composed of Ditmeyer as radio operator and Braseman as flight engineer. Shortly after taking off from a socked-in Steensville, Newfoundland, with a load of passengers, the crew was unable to switch off the airplane's high-pressure hydraulic system. Within a few minutes, Gann sees a fight indicator illuminate, indicating a small forward baggage compartment is aflame. Relatively quickly, the cabin of the aircraft fills with dense smoke. The crew fights the fire as Gann performs an emergency turn, heading back to Steensville. Gann realizes that the must land, and must land very quickly—airborne fire is surely catastrophic. However, Steensville is entirely overcast and visibility is nearly non-existent. As Gann performs an instrument approach, he is overjoyed to see a tiny hole in the weather, directly over the runway. He makes a nearly suicidal steep spiral turn down through the clearing and lands the burning aircraft with an amazing display of skill. The fire is soon put out; Gann, the crew, and the passengers all owe their life to his masterful piloting and the tiny hole in the cloud cover. This event once again symbolizes what Gann refers to as being stalked by fate—a rare and happenstance opening in the clouds allows Gann to land the burning plane before it crashes.

Chapter 16 - "A Pretender - How One Fine Man is Ill-Used by Fate and Another Dares Deceive It"

Chapter 16 - "A Pretender - How One Fine Man is Ill-Used by Fate and Another Dares Deceive It" Summary and Analysis

Gann logs many long flights between Greenland, Scotland, France, the Azores, North Africa, Brazil, and Bermuda. As the war continues, other pilots die in accidents, including Watkins who apparently dies in a controlled flight-into-terrain accident. Then, Germany surrenders; Gann has logged 6,572 hours, 27 minutes of flight time by the fateful day. He has the dubious distinction of flying General Mark Clark from Paris to Chicago; he has the notable distinction of flying many loads of wounded men from Europe to the United States. Then the Japanese surrender and the war is over. Gann takes a leave of absence but misses the sky. He temporarily returns to AM-21 but finds the regional area and short flights stilting. Keim, having survived the war, is involved in an automobile accident. Gann visits him in the hospital and finds him in good spirits and apparently sound health. Gann then quits American Airlines, surrendering his seniority number, and takes a job, alongside Sloniger, with a newly founded airline transiting between California and Honolulu. Gann flies a very fancy and expensive plane. One of the other pilots on the airline is Dudley, a loud-talking man who oozes confidence but is, in fact, completely incompetent. After making a single trip with Dudley, Gann insists that Sloniger administer a flight test. The test is a comedy of errors and Sloniger grounds Dudley. Dudley balks and a government inspector administers a second flight test. Dudley's performance is so abysmal that the inspector demands an immediate surrender of his license. Dudley cannot comply because, in fact, he is not licensed! Several years later Dudley earns his license but, still incompetent, crashes his aircraft upon takeoff. Although he survives, several passengers do not.

Chapter 17 - "A Certain Embarrassment - ...the Urge to Shift Blame Becomes Even Uglier When the Accused Has Left the Feast"

Chapter 17 - "A Certain Embarrassment - ...the Urge to Shift Blame Becomes Even Uglier When the Accused Has Left the Feast" Summary and Analysis

Gann pilots a flight out of San Francisco, bound for Honolulu. He is captain of a DC-4A that has been fitted with four brand-new Dash-13 engines at a total refit cost of eighty thousand dollars. The first officer is Drake, the second officer is Hayes, the radio operator is Vaclavick, the flight engineer is Snow, and one of the stewardesses is Grimes. While Gann's flight reaches cruising altitude, he reflects that other pilots are flying similar planes at similar altitudes to disparate destinations. By this time, Hughen is a chief pilot with his airline, and Johnson—Gann's favored old co-pilot—is a pilot. At nine thousand feet one of the four fuel gauges flickers, and Gann reflects that the DC-4A's already complicated fuel supply system has been greatly modified, and greatly complicated, to feed the fuel-hungry Dash-13s. The flight reaches ten thousand feet, then gains and loses another one hundred feet to achieve the step, an attitude of flying which is comfortable and efficient.

As the flight passes beyond the Farallons an engine backfires and the fuel feed is adjusted. Another engine then backfires, and then another. Gann causes the carburetor heaters to be engaged and pumps alcohol to the engines to eliminate potential icing. The engines calm for a few minutes but then begin to backfire again—then all four engines simultaneously quit. As Gann desperately manipulates the controls, the engines catch again and begin an anemic performance. After some moments, he realizes that the engines will run reliably only on full rich mixture and only at highest speed. He drops the landing gear and flaps to slow down and heads back to San Francisco. A hair-raising landing at high speed is accomplished without incident and the frightened and angry passengers are deplaned.

A mechanical review of the engines reveals nothing extraordinary and a test flight with a skeleton crew and a few mechanics is taken—the cranky engines again refuse to run properly. Eventually engineers from the engine manufacturer are dispatched. They condescendingly imply that Gann simply does not know how to fly an airplane. Another test flight with a skeleton crew and many engineers is conducted. Again, the cranky engines balk and sputter once cruising altitude and speed is achieved. Gann then condescendingly inquires if the frightened engineers have seen enough, and safely returns them to the ground. Eventually the consensus is reached that the DC-4A's

poorly designed fuel system is incapable of feeding the Dash-13 engines; at great cost the plane is eventually refitted with its older Dash-8 engines, and flies thereafter without incident.

Gann reflects on four of his associates, pilots and co-pilots, who are killed during the period of engine investigation. All deaths were ascribed to 'pilot error' but Gann obviously feels this is a gross injustice and oversimplification. Gann concludes the chapter by noting that in such cases "fate was the hunter" (p. 347), a passage which yields the title and one of the primary themes of the autobiography.

Chapter 18 - "Tragedy and Escape - There is a Degree of Mercy Beyond Which Any Man is Rude to Inquire"

Chapter 18 - "Tragedy and Escape - There is a Degree of Mercy Beyond Which Any Man is Rude to Inquire" Summary and Analysis

After World War II, the aviation industry enjoyed a huge increase in profitability and prestige. Many small companies were established and many quickly failed; the safety of many of the smaller companies was questionable. Within one five month period, seventeen pilots and co-pilots were killed in accidents.

On one flight, Gann was piloting a DC-4A, bound from Honolulu to Burbank. Over the course of several hours, the aircraft suffers a series of strange but not ominous vibrations. Grimes, the intelligent and attentive stewardess, complains of a bizarre shaking motion in the tail section. Gann and his crew investigate but eventually decide that one of the engines must be running roughly. Gann is anxious to reach land and, contrary to common practice, does not reduce speed in the face of the uncertain vibration. Throughout the remainder of the flight Grimes continues to complain, the crew continues to inspect, and Gann continues to wonder what could be wrong—if anything. He performs a personal physical inspection of the plane, concludes it must not be serious, and flies as normal. He lands the plane in Burbank and deplanes most of his passengers before continuing on to Oakland. He is scheduled to leave the next day on a sailing vacation and, anxious to be home, causes more fuel than usual to be loaded so that he can sustain maximum speed throughout the short flight. While on the ground he is informed that Coney and Willingham, also flying a DC-4A, had just been killed in a bizarre crash. He flies to Oakland, lands the plane, stands around anxiously while both mechanics and engineers perform an inconclusive inspection, and then leaves for his sailing vacation.

When he returns from vacation, three weeks later, he is informed that his vibrating plane had been missing a critical bolt; the loss of the same bolt had caused Coney and Willingham to lose control and crash. Only an impossibly complicated series of events—flying at a certain speed, loading additional fuel, flying at a certain altitude—had allowed him to retain control. While the senior engineer implies that Gann has exceptional dumb luck, Gann reflects that men's fates vary according to unseen providence.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

The Honolulu-California airline slowly fails. Instead of flying luxury aircraft full of vacationers, Gann begins to fly over-crowded budget flights of questionable legitimacy. He eventually quits in disgust and, shortly after, the airline folds entirely. Gann then secures a position with a tenuous airline run by a man named Nelson. The airline operates as a sort of tramp-airplane service in the South Pacific, taking cargo and passengers on unscheduled long-haul, cross-water trips. The airline's solvency is variable from day to day, and Gann frequently finds himself on furlough. In addition to the airline, Nelson operates a bewildering confabulation of business ventures, most completely unrelated. Gann's seniority number with the new airline ensures that he is often co-pilot to far less experienced pilots—a situation which makes everyone uncomfortable.

The Korean War briefly changes the fortunes of Nelson's airline as business in war goods transportation booms. Gann regularly flies as a pilot but feels an unpleasant dyja vu when hauling wounded and materiel. During the period, Gann is based at Wake Island. On one trip, Gann's plane is exceptionally sluggish; he is overjoyed when he safely lands after several hours. He later discovers that the plane had been loaded with mail twice; thus, he hauled 20,000 extra pounds of cargo.

On one fateful flight, a man named Howe serves as Gann's co-pilot. Because of seniority numbers, Gann is the commander, and yet Howe is a legend in the field and has vastly more experience than Gann. During the long flight through the night, Gann studies Howe's chiseled face and sees within it his own possible future. He does not like what he sees—although he greatly admires Howe—he also feels the pressing burden of fate long escaped. Having logged now nearly ten thousand hours aloft, Gann feels sure that his own fate is rapidly approaching. After they land, Gann tells Howe that he intends to quit the piloting business.

Characters

Gay, Lippincott, Sisto, Watkins, Mood, McGuire, Owen, Charleton, and Carter

Lester and McIntosh

Ross

Keim

Dunn, Hunt, Shoff, Lewis, Konz, Brooks, and Mitchell

Scroggins, Moore, Fey, Sandegren, Cooper, Owens, Brown, Miner, Shank, Nygreen, Miller, Pedley, Reppert, Hunt, Charleton, Stiller, McClure, Carpenter, Dryer, Brand, Golden, Gay, Watkins, Bethel, Smith, Snowden, Bamberger, McCauley, Eitner, Stroud, Brigman, Steen, Fox, Campbell, Leatherman, Abernathy, Holle, Anderson, Miner, Sprado, Weber, Tansey, Sparrow, Ham, Ring, Haskew, Canepa, Hearn, Day, Weeks, McKeirnan, Coney, Willingham, Hart, McCoy, Hein, MacKinnon, Davidson, Zundel, Vaughan, Humes, McMillan, Griesback, Monsen, Foster, Warren, Irwin, Pfaffinger, Kuhn, Reid, Indicello, Foster, St. Clair, Grossarth, and Penn

Lieutenant-Colonel "The Fish" Hassel

O'Connor

Dudley

Sloniger

Nelson

Objects/Places

Douglas DC-2

The Douglas DC-2 was a 14-seat fixed-wing, twin-propeller driven airplane produced from 1934 through 1936; approximately 150 DC-2s were produced. The DC-2 was the first airplane to demonstrate that commercial passenger air travel could be comfortable, reliable, and safe. The DC-2 is the first airplane that Ernest Gann was assigned to co-pilot and he soon learned the various idiosyncratic aspects of the pioneering design. Although much harder to fly than the DC-3, the DC-2 was also more reliable under extremely adverse conditions such as heavy wing ice. The airplane was powered by twin Wright Cyclone engines and could achieve a maximum speed of 210 mph, although typical cruising speeds were much slower

Douglas DC-3

The Douglas DC-3 was a 21-to-32-seat fixed-wing, twin-propeller driven airplane produced from 1936 through 1945; approximately 10,500 were produced. The DC-3 was in many aspects an evolution of the earlier DC-2 though it was larger and featured amenities such as optional sleeping berths and onboard kitchen facilities. The increased range of the DC-3 also made long-distance travel possible without frequent stops for fueling. During World War II, many DC-3s were adapted for wartime use and served with distinction in many theaters. Various models were produced explicitly for military service, including the C-47, C-53, R4D, and Dakota. Some DC-3s continue in commercial use to the present. The airplane was powered by twin Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp engines and could achieve a maximum speed of 237 mph, although typical cruising speeds was about 170 mph.

Lockheed Lodestar

The Lockheed Lodestar was a commercial fixed-wing, twin-propeller driven aircraft produced in 1939 through 1945; relatively few were produced but the design was widely adapted to military use during World War II—only about 600 Lodestars, including all variants, were built. Intended to compete with the Douglas DC-3, the Lodestar never achieved notable commercial success. Prior to the United States' engagement in World War II, Gann and others flew several Lodestars to South America to deliver them for foreign commercial airline use. The airplane was powered by twin Pratt & Whitney Hornet engines and could achieve a maximum speed of 265 mph, though typical cruising speeds were slower.

C-47 Skytrain or Dakota

The C-47 was a military transport developed from the Douglas DC-3 airliner. Like its commercial predecessor, the C-47 was a fixed-wing, twin-propeller driven aircraft. It was produced in numerous configurations throughout the war; perhaps 10,000 total planes were built and they were used by several allied air forces. The craft was powered by twin Pratt and Whitney Twin Wasp engines and could achieve a maximum speed of 224 mph, though its typical cruising speed was 160 mph. The modified fuselage allowed carrying of increased payloads. Gann notes that the stripped-down interior was utilitarian and uncomfortable. He also notes that the planes were tricky to fly with even minor wing icing. The planes generally included a long-range wireless radio and were initially crewed by four men—a pilot, a co-pilot, a radio operator, and a flight mechanic. After the initial stages of the war, the flight mechanics were eliminated from the standard crew.

C-87 Liberator Express

The C-87 was a military transport developed from the B-24 Liberator bomber. Like the B-24, it was a fixed-wing, four propeller driven aircraft. It was produced in several configurations during the war; 287 were purpose-built during the war though additional C-87s were created by field-configuration of B-24s. The craft was powered by quad Pratt and Whitney Twin Wasp engines and could achieve maximum and cruising speeds superior to the C-47. Gann severely criticizes the C-87 as difficult to fly, poorly designed, very unreliable, and nearly un-flyable with even minor wing icing. The planes generally included a crew of five men—a pilot, a co-pilot, a radio operator, a navigator, and a flight mechanic.

Douglas C-54 Skymaster

The Douglas C-54 Skymaster was a military transport derived from the earlier commercial Douglas DC-4. It was a fixed-wing, four propeller driven aircraft that was produced in dozens of configurations during and after the war; 1,170 were built. The craft was powered by quad Pratt and Whitney R-2000-9 radial engines and could achieve a maximum speed of 275 mph and sustain a cruising speed of 190 mph. The airplane was probably the most widely used transportation aircraft in World War II and was universally liked by crew and pilots.

Douglas DC-4A

The Douglas DC-4 was a fixed-wing, four propeller driven aircraft that was produced in several commercial and numerous military configurations during and after World War II; approximately 1,700 were built. The craft was typically powered by quad Pratt and Whitney R-2000 engines; Gann refers to additional engines being used on the aircraft including the Dash-8, which worked well, and the Dash-13, which proved incompatible

with the DC-4A's complex fuel-supply system. The airplane could achieve a maximum speed of 280 mph and sustain a cruising speed of 227 mph. Its range of over 4,000 miles made it highly suitable for commercial long-haul service. The airplane was the most important commercial type during its period of production and was liked by crew and pilots. However, relatively few new aircraft of this type were built after the war because so many wartime surplus airframes were available at relatively cheap prices. Many commercial specimens were notable for the degree of luxury they afforded passengers.

AM-21

AM-21 is a geographical aerial area designation that specifies the locale of Newark to Cleveland. Gann's first commercial assignment is as an American Airlines co-pilot flying a route in AM-21. He later spends many thousands of hours flying over the area. AM-21 is notorious for having unpredictable weather and severe winter storms. Gann's usual route along AM-21 consists of stops in Newark, Wilkes-Barre, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Erie, and Cleveland.

The Hump

The Hump is the informal name given to the eastern Himalayan Mountains that separate India from China. During World War II, allied pilots shuttled materiel and men across the Hump to supply the Chinese Government. Flying over the Hump required an aircraft to achieve a cruising ceiling of 16,000 feet. Local weather was unpredictable and usually very dangerous. On one day while Gann was at a local airbase, 32 men and 4 airplanes were lost during 'standard' operations flying over the Hump.

Pan American

Pan American World Airways was the dominant international airline of the United States from 1930 and continuing throughout the period of the text. It was the unofficial flag carrier of the United States of America for most of its existence and, as such, enjoyed much preferential treatment and governmental assistance. The airline used its considerable political influence to eliminate potential rival airlines and, in Gann's view, competed unfairly with other established companies attempting to break into the long-haul and cross-ocean markets. It is the most-frequently cited airline in the text and is usually mentioned with a slightly negative connotation.

Themes

Fate

From the title to the Epilogue, the autobiography is themed around the notion of fate—accidents happen when they are fated and do not happen when they are not fated, and one's fate cannot be avoided. The prologue introduces the concept when Gann makes a minor altitude correction for no apparent reason and the action unquestionably saves his life. Similar incidents are liberally sprinkled throughout the remainder of the text.

Throughout the entire prolonged time period of Gann's flying his luck is good and his fate holds out. Even so, he goes through many troubling and dangerous episodes and many of them are near misses. In Chapter 18 Gann describes in detail one unsettling event—two planes suffer the same mechanical failure: one of them crashes with a loss of all hands, yet Gann's plane lands safely. Clearly, his fate is forestalled but he begins to wonder for how long. In the Epilogue, Gann flies alongside a veteran co-pilot and studies the man. As he ponders life, Gann comes to realize that his own personal fate is only partially within his own control—he has flown too far and too long, he has escaped too many tight spots, too many others have died—and soon enough his fate will claim him. At that moment, he determines to quit the life of a pilot and the autobiography quickly concludes.

Flying

The text is an autobiography, but the period of time considered and the topics included are entirely limited to those times and events focused on flight. Thus, Gann's pre-flight life, his post-flight career, and any family life are nearly wholly erased. Aside from rare allusions to a non-aviator existence, one might assume that Gann spent his entire life aboard an aircraft. Ironically, this view happens to be correct for some limited periods of Gann's life—for example, Gann notes that he literally lived aboard aircraft during most of World War II.

Because of this focus, the dominant theme of the text is flight and flying. In nearly every scene of Gann's autobiography he is flying, getting ready to fly, or discussing some aspect of flight with an acquaintance. Nearly every anecdote related occurs aboard an airborne aircraft; the few that do not are still directly related to flight in some manner. Gann enumerates models of aircraft, comments on their good or bad points, and describes their flying qualities; indeed, he nearly anthropomorphizes airplanes. Nearly every person—minor or major—mentioned in the text is a pilot, co-pilot, flight navigator, flight radio operator, flight mechanic, or flight attendant. The development of the autobiography is coupled to the development of airlines and flying, and Gann's personal story is essentially told as a series of flights and adventures aboard airplanes. When Gann concludes that the time to stop flying has arrived, the autobiography concludes.

Faith in the Pilot

One of the dominant themes in the first half of the autobiography is the unshakable faith that passengers place in the pilot of an aircraft. On many occasions, Gann boards an airplane, surveys the commercial passengers, and enters the cockpit wondering how they find the capability for such unlimited trust and faith. In one textual passage he walks forward through the passenger cabin and notes an unusually high number of babies—one even nursing at the breast. Gann is almost frightened by the overwhelming sense of responsibility engendered by such faith from mothers—he actually considers it somewhat napve. On the same trip various mechanical difficulties occur and Gann is amazed that the passengers are not only oblivious to the apparent danger but deplane completely satisfied with their journey.

As Gann's skill as a pilot increases and his experience takes on the air of authority, his attitude begins to change somewhat. He begins to feel warranted in the trust placed in him because his knowledge, skill, and experience in fact will allow him to safely traverse the route even in the face of minor mechanical failures. On numerous occasions, in fact, Gann concludes a flight with a missing engine, low fuel, hampered visibility, or other difficulty. Thus, the passengers still exhibit unshakable faith—but Gann has come to believe himself as deserving of the faith. This theme plays curiously with the dominant theme of fate—the two are not always logically compatible. That is, Gann notes that experienced and skillful or not, a pilot cannot escape his fate and the fate of the passengers is shortly but necessarily inextricably linked with that of the pilot—"since their passengers, who were innocent of the controls, also failed to survive, it seemed that fate was the hunter" (p. 347).

Style

Perspective

The autobiography is related from the subjective first-person point of view as is typical for the form. Gann reflects upon his career and life with the knowledge of a master but he is able to present material from his early career with a surprisingly fresh voice. Thus, his recounting of the tribulations of flight school is simultaneously informative and humorous and notably lacks any condescending attitude toward being schooled in the basics of flight.

Gann's career spans a significant portion of aviation history and development and he is clearly a master of the subject. Nevertheless, the topic is presented without the haughty opinion of a master and is remarkably free of jargon and other technical issues. Indeed, the strength of the autobiography is found in the easy accessibility that it offers to a technical and complex subject. The reader is not expected to understand the intricacies of flight or airline operations and, when such details are important, they are provided and explained in easy terms. The text is also enjoyably free of any political or personal bias and Gann's perspective is as refreshing as it is proficient.

Tone

The autobiography is presented in a personal style akin to standard journalistic English. Events generally are presented in an unemotional and professional manner, which allows a great deal of confidence to be placed in the narrative structure. The narrative contains a large amount of subdued but insightful humor and, in general, is extremely enjoyable and imminently accessible. The book is written, structured, and presented as a statement of personal involvement in and perception of the global development of aviation. The events in the book took place on a global scale although they unmistakably bear a view focused on the United States of America. The author is aware of the historic nature of the over-arching developments described in the book, and therefore presents his own infrequent personal bias and feelings as such rather then attempting to justify them by presenting them as facts.

The text is related in the first-person point of view and therefore is subjective; Gann relates his autobiography on his own terms. As such, events of importance in his personal opinion are given extensive treatment in the text. Gann does provide some objective information about individuals or particular events, but also usually provides his subjective interpretation alongside. The autobiography is simultaneously personal and informative. Gann typically treats friends with gentleness and usually glosses over the poor behaviors and boorish traits of others—Dudley being a notable exception. He presents throughout the narrative several scenes which he labels as moments of fate; they are, for Gann, moments in his life which are beyond personal control and yet

symbolic of one's fate. These moments naturally coalesce to form one of the text's fundamental themes.

Structure

The 390-page autobiography is divided into eighteen named and enumerated chapters and includes a brief prologue, a lengthy epilogue, and some brief but amusing endnotes. The autobiographical text is arranged chronologically and is told with an open, bluff voice, which has the ring of experience and honesty. Gann examines his own life and his own minor role in the developing field of commercial aviation prior to, throughout, and after World War II and the Korean War. The autobiography features anecdotes and descriptions of dozens of other aviators who are specified only by last name. In the introductory matter, Gann notes that some few names have been deliberately altered. The text is presented with a vague sense of historical time; no specific dates are mentioned throughout. Thus, the book must be historically fixed in time solely by the references made to world events—the surrender of Germany and, later, Japan in World War II, the appearance of various models of aircraft in commercial circles, the occurrence of the Korean War, and so forth. Clearly, the end of the text must be prior to the original publication date of 1961. Likewise, Gann's participation in the Air Transport Command is not specifically named as such within the text—the association is mentioned only in the reviews reprinted on the cover.

The structure of the book aids materially is its easy accessibility. The simple presentation of events as they occur allows for an engrossing and entertaining reading; there are no complicated plots or thematic developments to forestall understanding. The single major exception to the chronology is found in the prologue—the event described obviously occurs at some point during Gann's lengthy career, but it is impossible to determine precisely when.

Quotes

"Now, as Ross runs up the engines, I remove the safety pin from the gear lever. I watch Ross anxiously. I am pathetically eager to perform my co-pilot's duties quickly and efficiently. As he shoves the throttles forward and we start down the runway, I place my hand ready on the gear lever. I feel the tail lift. I bend down and slightly forward, my eyes fixed on Ross's hand, waiting for the signal. I believe that we already have good speed, but I am watching his hand, not the indicator. His hand moves as if to leave the throttles. Take-off noise level in a DC-2 cockpit is terrific. I am certain Ross has called 'Gear Up!' I yank up the gear lever.

"'Jesus! Man!'

"Ross fights the control wheel, jockeying it desperately.

"I glance at the air speed, then out the window. We are hanging in the air, sinking, then hanging again. Ross did *not* give a signal. Anxiety had duped me. I have deliberately pulled the gear out from under him!

"The entire ship shudders in agony, a sensation with is transmitted directly to my bowels.

"Then, just as suddenly, we are in smooth flight, and the ground falls away. In a magnificent display of flying skill, Ross has safely completed an abortive take-off.

"I cannot look at him—yet I must. This has been no minor error which can be erased with the end of a pencil. I have, with my foolish hand, endangered the lives of every soul on this airplane. No matter how innocent in intent, the deed is unforgivable. Sick to the depths of my being, utterly demoralized, I cannot find the simplest words of apology. I would not be displeased if Ross pulled out his mail gun and put a bullet through my offending hand. He would be more than justified. His pride is never to put a scratch on an airplane and I, in one accursed moment, have brought him perilously close to ruin.

"As we climb safely over the western hill the tautness leaves Ross's body. He raises a finger to his brow and flicks away invisible sweat. Then he meets my eyes, and the hard muscles about his jaw relax. I can see no anger in his face, not even accusation. Only his breathing, which is still quick, betrays the passing of a crisis. Fear is no stranger to him, and through much involuntary practice he has learned to extinguish it quickly once the torch is removed. He speaks slowly, enunciating each word with such care that the effect is comical, as he intends.

"'If you ever do that again, I'll cut you out of my will.'" (Chapter 3, pp. 48-49)

"In flight he was venturesome only to the minimum needs of the moment, and under no circumstances would he experiment or tempt his fate. His creed, torn as always from

the side of his mouth, was steadfast. 'One thing I'm sure about. If my ass gets there, so will the passengers.'" (Chapter 5, p. 74)

"The miserable numbers! They offered unwanted protection. They were chains, I felt, and they clanked but one dismal song—mediocrity. Yet how they could devise and fix our destinies. For Gay it might be said that the numbers set the appointment for his death. Had it been possible for us to exchange numbers I might have been the one who crashed into the river near Nashville, and it could have been Gay who lay listening to the mosquitoes in a slovenly town called Corumbb." (Chapter 6, pp. 114-115)

"The airlines no longer wistfully hoped for passengers to keep them alive. Seats to any destination were difficult to obtain, and even those long reserved were subject to priority surrender. The planes of our own line worked continuously, and Lester's school was said to be jammed with men training to fly them.

"And everywhere there was confusion and argument and alarums and pettiness. The hysteria of Pearl Harbor had yet to evaporate, and the echoing cry of indignation from the American people now sounded like a traumatic screech rather than a determined roar of anger. The true leaders did not yet have their bearings. The still-unyoked multitude milled in Babylonian turmoil as their pundits cast them adrift between selfish opportunism and impossible visions of nobility. The paradox affected every endeavor and it paraded in brash nudity through the erupting complex of aviation." (Chapter 8, p. 154)

"'The little island you see off the mouths of the fiords has a range station on it, but it's not reliable. So don't trust it with a letdown toward shore. The field which we call Bluie-West-One is sixty miles up the *correct* fiord just at the base of the icecap.'

"'Ah...'

"'You will not actually see the field until you have made the last turn around that cliff; then it will appear all of a sudden so you'd better have your wheels down a little early. It's a single runway with quite an incline. You always land uphill and take off downhill, regardless of the wind. You have to land whether you like it or not.'

"'But...'

"'If the weather is overcast you may have some doubt about being in the correct fiord.'

"Watching the film I could easily see how such embarrassment might occur. I could not detect the slightest physical differences between the fiords. Yet Boyd knew his airline pilots. He was a connoisseur cleverly displaying an irresistible collection of jewels. He knew that we gave constant lip service to the dictates of safety and howled like Christians condemned to the arena if any compromise was made of it. He knew that we were seekers after ease, suspicious, egotistic, and stubborn to a fault. He also knew that none of us would ever have continued our careers unless we had always been, and still were, helpless before this opportunity to take a chance." (Chapter 9, pp. 177-178)

"The C-87 had other built-in evils. It was a ground-loving bitch, and with heavy loads it rolled, snorted, and porpoised interminably before asserting its questionable right to fly. The failure of any one of the four engines on take-off was an extremely serious affair, a part of which was due to its hasty conversion from bomber to transport plane. The balance was never exactly right in spite of our constant experimentation. The flight controls were heavy and insensitive compared to other airplanes. This was particularly true at lower altitudes.

"The illumination in the cockpit was inadequate for intensive bad-weather flying. Small bouquets of tubular lights were placed haphazardly throughout the flight deck, and the quality of light produced gave us the blind staggers after hours at the controls. It was a cold, morguelike luminosity which seemed to pull our eyes slowly from our heads—when the system worked at all. For the entire installation displayed a faithless cunning which sometimes revealed only our tempers. All of the lights would often fail simultaneously in the middle of an instrument take-off. The shouts of rage from both pilots could easily be heard above the sound of the engines as we sought to persuade the C-87 to leave the ground and at the same time pound the lights back into commission. Smart co-pilots kept a flashlight handy.

"No one knew how best to winterize the C-87's we flew, which created a continuous series of minor crises. Landing gears would not go down when they were activated and sometimes they would not retract. On one occasion Dunn flew about for hours with one wheel up and the other down. This ludicrous, storklike attitude canceled the pauper's choice of a decent belly landing.

"The pitch of the propellers was controlled electrically. At least once during a flight the mechanism was bound to freeze, which left us helpless to reduce speed properly or climb out of adverse weather. The transfer of fuel from the reserve tanks to the operating tanks was necessary on every flight of any duration. It was a nervous and an odiferous business. All smoking was stopped while the smell of high-octane gasoline marinated the entire airplane. We stopped smoking because the connecting hoses invariably leaked, some enough to make troublesome puddles on the floor. A high-octane wading pool is something you can't throw out the window. Throughout this eye-burning transfer process we also kept the radios silent, with the idea of preventing explosion. It never seemed to trouble any of us that the fuel transfer pump was also electric and gaily threw out sparks within a few feet of the hose connections.

"Finally, the C-87's had a heating system which was of two minds—both malicious. When it chose to function it produced a sirocco that left us gasping on the flight deck, while our few miserable passengers shuddered with cold. When the system refused every effort to make it work, we all shivered together. The reputations of the C-87's and the maledictions heaped upon them grew in accord with the outside air temperature, which was often fifty below zero." (Chapter 11, pp. 215-216)

"'You'll ruin your eyes.'

"A grunt. 'Screw my eyes.'

"'If you flunk your next physical it will give me much pleasure to say I told you so.'

"A grunt. 'I can see two fleas fornicate at a thousand yards.'

"'Then kill that mosquito on your toe.'

"Keim swings his magazine in the general direction of his feet, which sends the mosquito across to me. This pleases him so much he lights a cigar." (Chapter 13, p. 252)

"O'Connor moves into the light from the doorway and he is at once the oldest professional in the world. His gray hair is matted with rain and his whole body sags with weariness. This is a man who had come a long way, not just on this night, but on so many years of nights when his way of life kept him aloft. He is a scarred warrior, accustomed to discomfort, danger, and travail. He is not to be defeated; for having so many times emerged victorious, no other outcome enters his thinking. His home is in his flight bag, his wardrobe a rumpled uniform, and his office in the sky. Now, coming to a miserable house which he has never seen, in a foreign land he had found but this moment, the weather-worn symbol of us all.

"He squints up at the light and the rain spatters on his face. He halts, hesitating before the doorway, and his position is almost exactly the same as it was when I last saw him standing in the snow. Seeing me, he smiles, and his face becomes a thousand crinkles. He calls out hoarsely, 'What in the hell are you doing here?'" (Chapter 13, p. 273)

"Next, the heavy smoke in the cabin created understandable concern among the passengers. When it seemed they were very near panic, the sergeant in charge of the cabin told them there was really nothing to worry about since what they saw was only *carbon monoxide*.

"This statement, incredibly, broke the tension and the passengers relaxed." (Chapter 15, p. 306)

"All four engines quit simultaneously.

"The relative silence is stunning until the juices of fear throb through our veins.

"We start down toward the black sea.

"Our thoughts are identical. The thing which was never going to happen to us is now going to happen to us.

"I bank sharply back toward the Farallons. We might just stretch the glide and land close by—easier for the Coast Guard to find. Plus the yearning for land.

"'Emergency rich on all four!'

"'I've got 'em that way, Skipper!'

"'All on main tanks!'

"'So they be!' Bless you, realist Snow. Your voice has not a quaver in it.

"'Booster pumps on high!'

"'Right.' *Click, click, click, click.*

"'Vaclavick! On the horn! Send out a...'

"Send out a May Day... the losing of hope?

"But my order to Vaclavick is left unspoken, for hope has returned. The engines have caught, not with any integrity of power, but they are at least alive.

"'Vaclavick! Hold it!'

"'Aye!'" (Chapter 17, pp. 334-335)

"During this period Steen and Fox were killed trying a single-engine instrument approach at Moline. Then Campbell and Leatherman hit a ridge near Elko, Nevada. In both incidents the official verdict was 'Pilot error,' but since their passengers, who were innocent of the controls, also failed to survive, it seemed that fate was the hunter. As it had been and would be." (Chapter 17, p. 347)

"Then he spoke very slowly, clipping off each word as if he intended to impress them on my memory forever. 'I would look at you quite differently if I though you had planned what we eventually discovered. We had some long sessions with our slide rules and we found, my friend, that you had arranged the *only possible combination of power, speed, and weight* which would blockade the chances of unporting.'

"Later, when the wine had mellowed us both, I asked Howard if his slide rule could measure the fate of one man against another's." (Chapter 18, p. 369)

"At least let us admit that the pattern of anyone's fate is only partly contrived by the individual. And let us now remember that a wealthy gambler once said the essence of his success was in knowing when to quit.

"Ah, Howe, you of the iron face... when is when?

"I turned up the lights and once again the instruments took up their staring and Howe became only Howe. There was the sadness, the weariness, the near-resignation. He turned to me and smiled.

"'Nice night...'

"And from the special warmth in his eyes I thought he knew what I had been thinking. So I told him without any elaboration that I had a silly notion which I intended to honor. For me, when was now.

"And Howe seemed to understand.

"*Perhaps Howe understood better than I supposed my decision to set down the old flight bag for the last time. For fate allowed him only a little longer.*

"*He lived aboard a small boat in Ala Wai Harbor, Honolulu. He rowed away in his dinghy one day, bound on some minor errand. The dinghy was found. Howe was not.*"
(Epilogue, pp. 384-385)

Topics for Discussion

Would you rather serve as co-pilot for Keim or Ross?

Gann suggests that the nature of aviation changed markedly between 1939 and 1950. What are some of the things that he specifically mentions as having changed? Would you rather have been a pilot in 1940 or 1950? Why?

As a new co-pilot, Gann appeared to feel that his faults were manifest and troubling. Later, as a pilot, Gann was very tolerant of inexperienced and nervous co-pilots. Do you think that Ross found Gann to be troublesome and a boor?

The airlines used a person's seniority number, assigned at their time of initial employment, as the sole rationale for assigning roles. That is, the man with the lower seniority number was always pilot, regardless of actual experience. Do you think this is a good system of logistics? Why or why not?

Gann often suggests that engineers with slide rulers and administrators with policy manuals don't truly understand the nature of flight and flying. Yet Gann also admits that he does not very well understand the physics or mechanics of flight. Who do you think knows more about aviation? A pilot or an aeronautical engineer?

Of all the memorable mishaps that Gann relates, which do you think would have been the most frightening? Why?

Gann is able to enjoy the north-Atlantic scenery in very poetic terms but never forgets the danger present in such grandeur. Do you have a hobby or experience in an avenue of life that allows you to enjoy the splendor of nature? What thematic similarities between your personal experiences and Gann's descriptions of Greenland in Chapter 9 can you find?

Gann enumerates several aircraft and liberally comments on the flying attributes of several of them. Of all the airplanes considered which would you most like to fly in? Why? Which airplane would you approach with trepidation?

Gann relates flying General Mark Clark from Paris to Chicago and notes that it was presumably a great honor to be selected as pilot for the conveyance. He then states that it was a less agreeable but more memorable honor to convey loads of severely wounded soldiers to their homes. Discuss this aspect of Gann's personality and explain why you think he found General Mark Clark's trip inconsequential?

Chapter 12 is entitled 'Cold'; Chapter 13 is entitled 'Heat'. In both chapters, Gann was a pilot for the Air Transport Command of World War II. Discuss how the difference in temperature and environment influenced Gann's attitude toward the war and flying.

Chapter 15 is entitled 'A Hole - So Small, But of Exquisite Design.' Does the chapter title refer to the hole in the weather overcast or the hole in the hydraulic system of the

plane? Do you think that the title could refer to both of these small holes? How are the two holes symbolic of Gann's dominant theme of fate as the hunter of men?

On May 30th, two DC-4A planes lost the outboard hinge bolt on the left elevator. The plane flown by Coney and Willingham of Eastern Airlines crashed, killing the crew, two stewardesses, and forty-nine passengers including one infant. The other plane, flown by Gann, Drake, and Hayes, flew with a disturbing vibration and flight wobble but flew for hundreds of miles, landed, refueled, took off, flew for hundreds of miles, and landed again—all in safety. An in-depth analysis indicated that both planes should have crashed; only a string of improbable and random lucky circumstances caused Gann's airplane to stay aloft. Gann credits his survival to fate—how much fate do you see in events like these? Do you agree with Gann that for the most part an individual has only a limited ability to influence their own fate?

The text is entirely dominated by men—in fact, only one woman is named; Grimes, a stewardess. She is noted as being petite, sparing of cosmetics, unusually realistic, and forthright in manner—traits putatively in marked contrast to typical stewardesses who pursued cardboard romances and matrimonial progress. Do you find Gann's autobiography to be sexist?