

Jonathan Livingston Seagull Study Guide

Jonathan Livingston Seagull by Richard Bach

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Overview

Jonathan Livingston Seagull is concerned with a young seagull's efforts to rise above the ordinary. In a flock where individuality is frowned upon, Jonathan finds himself a loner and an outcast.

After performing feats of tremendous courage and skill, Jonathan is expelled from the flock. This gives him the freedom to develop his skills, and in so doing he reaches a higher plane of achievement, a heaven of sorts. The lessons that Jonathan learns in his travels reflect both a greater peace of mind and a freedom to be himself. Jonathan continues the cycle, by returning to the flock and teaching its ambitious members the lessons that he has learned from Sullivan Seagull and Chiang, the Elder Gull.

About the Author

Richard Bach was born June 23, 1936, in Oak Park, Illinois. He attended Long Beach State College for a year, and on October 15, 1957, he married Bette Jeanne Franks, with whom he had six children. The couple was divorced in 1971. Bach served in the Air Force as a pilot from 1956 to 1959 and again from 1961 to 1962. From 1961 until 1964 he was an associate editor of *Flying* magazine. He is currently a freelance writer, air-show pilot, and mechanic.

Until 1972, Richard Bach was the little-known author of three books in praise of flying and many articles in flying magazines. Then, with the fame of Jonathan Livingston Seagull he became a barnstorming author who spoke for popular consciousness. The cause of the change, Bach said, was a "voice" that he heard in 1959 that spoke the words "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" and then proceeded to dictate the book up to the point where Jonathan is ostracized by the flock. Then the dictation stopped, and it was eight years later that Bach woke one night knowing how to finish the story.

Although the story was serialized in *Private Pilot*, it fit no clear niche in the publishing marketplace. The manuscript was submitted to over twenty-five publishers before being accepted. Published without fanfare in 1970, it languished for eighteen months before catching the attention of the drug subculture and eventually becoming required motivational reading throughout business and industry. Illustrated with delicate photographs of seagulls, the book became a popular "coffee table book," and its simple language facilitated a large number of translations.

Bach's three earlier books—*Stranger to the Ground* (1963), *Biplane* (1966), and *Nothing by Chance: A Gypsy Pilot's Adventures in Modern America* (1969)—were celebrations of flying, and were critically well-received, and Bach was compared with Antoine St. Exupery as a rhapsodic writer pilot. *Stranger to the Ground* was commercially successful, selling 17,000 copies.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull reawakened the general public to the powerful metaphor of flight. Though many critics decried its cliches and truisms, the book's message lent itself to inspiring and justifying individual endeavor, from meditation to engineering.

The book rose to the best-seller list through the back door, and remained there for nine months. It sold over a million hardback copies, breaking the record set by *Gone with the Wind*. The subsequent sale of paperback rights for \$1.1 million set another publishing record.

Among the mixed reviews, some critics complained that the allegorical structure of Bach's book could mean whatever anyone chose it to mean. However, critics also regarded the flight passages as distinctively evocative and predicted that the book would long remain popular. Bach elaborates on the success of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* in two other best-selling books—*Illusions: Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* and *The Bridge Across Forever: A Love Story*.



Plot Summary

Jonathan Livingston Seagull follows the adventures of a rebellious young seagull learning that there is more to life than filling one's belly. He learns to fly in ways no gull ever has, and then he learns in heaven the meaning of life as perfection and unity with the Great Gull beyond time and space. He returns to Earth to teach this truth to willing young gulls over the objections of the stodgy gull establishment.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull is a freethinking young gull, not content just to fill his belly with scraps scavenged from the fishing boat like the rest of the Breakfast Flock. He wants to experience the freedom of flight enjoyed by other bird species. Opposed by everyone, including his own family, Jonathan experiments, often disastrously, until he figures out the dynamics of flight and practices its techniques to perfection. Enthusiastic to share his discoveries with the rest of the Flock, Jonathan is surprised to be condemned for unorthodoxy by the Elders and exiled to the Far Cliffs. Further refining his flying abilities makes his long, solitary life satisfying, but he remains troubled that he cannot share the truth with others. Two shining gulls appear to him in old age, and after testing their flying prowess, he accepts their offer to convey him to new heights and a new home.

In "heaven," Jonathan learns from a mentor, Sullivan, that he is a rare gull, able to understand that there is more to life than food and prestige in the Flock. This is just a first step in the afterlife, with movement dependent on continuing learning and application. With Sullivan as his encouraging instructor and the kindly Elder Chiang as his guru, Jonathan masters the technique of transporting himself across space by realizing that he lives everywhere and in all times. The Flock in heaven holds Jonathan in awe, a status he finds embarrassing. Chiang's last commandment is that Jonathan work on perfecting kindness and love, which only makes Jonathan yearn more to return to Earth. He feels that he is a born instructor and that love demands the truth be shared with some willing gull. Jonathan and Sullivan argue the question of whether Jonathan is better off because the Elder Chiang refrained from returning to Earth and thus was available for him in heaven, or whether Jonathan might have arrived in heaven even better prepared had he met Chiang on Earth. Jonathan decides he must return.

Within six months back on Earth, Jonathan gathers six followers, but he is frustrated that they desire only practical flight lessons and none of the philosophy he has attained in heaven about their true nature as ideas of the Great Gull. The Council proclaims that anyone who dares join Jonathan will fall under the fearful ban, but Jonathan wins two bold converts. An outer circle of curious but cringing listeners gather around them, and Jonathan proclaims the gull's right to fly free despite the claims of ritual, superstition and the limitations imposed by the Law of the Flock. Only the law leading to freedom is valid, Jonathan proclaims.

The Flock decides that Jonathan must be either the unique Son of the Great Gull or thousands of years ahead of his time. While denying and scoffing at thought of the former, Jonathan sees the latter as a very depressing prospect. Jonathan's most



promising pupil, Fletcher, dies in a sacrificial accident, crashing into a cliff to avoid hitting a novice who wanders into the path of his high-speed dive. Jonathan offers Fletcher the choice of continuing his own growth on a higher plane of reality in heaven or returning to instruct the Flock. Fletcher chooses the latter. When part of the Flock seeks to kill Fletcher as a destroying devil, Jonathan transports him to safety and instructs him further. Before being transfigured and vanishing, Jonathan tells Fletcher to keep finding himself until he is unlimited and warns not to let others spread silly rumors about him, a seagull that just likes to fly. Fletcher loves the Flock as he suddenly perceives them - subject to no limitations - and his race to learn begins.



Part 1

Part 1 Summary

The Breakfast Flock of 1,000 seagulls surrounds a fishing boat, but Jonathan Livingston Seagull practices flying slowly, apart from the others. Despite fierce concentration, he stalls and falls, which for a seagull brings disgrace and dishonor. Jonathan, no ordinary bird, tries again. Most gulls want to know no more about flight than how to get their food. Even Jonathan's parents are dismayed at his daily experimentation. He wonders why he can stay in the air longer with less effort when he flies low over the water. Mother asks why he cannot be like other gulls and leave low flying to pelicans and albatross. Why does he not eat? Jonathan is bone and feathers, but he does not mind.

Jonathan climbs to 1,000 feet to begin a full power dive. Every time he flaps his left wing to push over into a vertical dive, he rolls violently and tumbles. He tries and fails ten times at 70 miles per hour, and he decides the key must be holding the wings still at high speed. He tries again from 2,000 feet, holding his wings full out and stable as he passes 50 mph. It works, and Jonathan sets a gull speed record of 90 mph. As he begins his pullout, though, he loses control and hits the brick-hard sea. Jonathan regains consciousness well after dark and floats, feeling his wings heavy as lead. His failure is even more of a burden to bear. He wishes vaguely he could just sink to the bottom and end it all.

A strange voice sounds in Jonathan's head, announcing that Jonathan is a seagull, limited by nature, not having charts for brains or a falcon's short wings. He must forget his foolishness, join the Flock and be content to be a gull. The voice fades, and Jonathan agrees, vowing to make everyone happier by being a normal gull. Grateful to have learned about laborsaving low-altitude flight, he makes good on his vow, climbs painfully to 100 feet and presses for shore. No longer will he challenge or fail. He will just stop thinking.

The hollow voice warns Jonathan that seagulls never fly in the dark, but he is enjoying the beauty and peace. The voice insists that if gulls were meant to fly at night, they would have owl eyes, charts for brains and falcon wings. Jonathan blinks, and both his pain and resolutions vanish. He has the answer. If he folds most of his wings and flies just by the tips, he will have falcon wings. Jonathan climbs to 2,000 feet, thinks briefly about failure and death, draws his forewings in tightly and falls into a vertical drive. He passes 100 mph and still finds the wing-strain acceptable. With the faintest twist of the wingtips he eases out of the dive and shoots over the waves at 140 mph in perfect control. He contemplates the speed of diving from 5,000 feet. Jonathan feels no guilt at breaking his promise, because, once one touches excellence in learning, promises are unnecessary.

At sunrise, Jonathan is practicing from 5,000 feet, above the fishing boats and the Breakfast Flock, feeling alive, delighted and proud to have his fear under control. He



pulls in his wings and plunges toward the sea. At 4,000 feet, he reaches terminal velocity, 214 mph, and knows that if his wings unfold at this speed he will be shredded. Speed is power, joy and pure beauty. Jonathan begins his pullout at 1,000 feet, with the gulls and boat in his path. Unable to stop and knowing that collision means instant death, he shuts his eyes. The Gull of Fortune smiles that morning, and Jonathan sails through the Flock, eyes closed. No one is killed.

Jonathan expects that his triumph will mark a new age for him. He flies out to his practice range and tries a dive from 8,000 feet, to discover how to turn. A single wingtip feather, he finds, moved a quarter of an inch, achieves a smooth sweeping curve at tremendous speed, but more than one feather causes a spin out. Jonathan flies the first aerobatics of any seagull on earth, discovering the loop, slow roll, point roll, inverted spin, gull bunt and pinwheel. As Jonathan joins the Flock on the beach that night, he realizes gulls do not have to settle for a drab life. They can lift themselves out of ignorance and become creatures of excellence, intelligence and skill. They can learn to fly. Jonathan wants no acclaim for his breakthrough, just the chance to teach other gulls to fly. The Council of Gathering, however, summons him to "stand to Center for Shame" on charges of reckless irresponsibility and violating the dignity and tradition of the Gull Family. Jonathan's knees go weak. His feathers sag, and he hears a roaring in his ears. This is impossible. The Council must be wrong. He becomes an Outcast, banished to the Far Cliffs. The Elders hope Jonathan will live long enough to realize that life is unknown and unknowable, other than that one must eat and live as long as possible. Gulls never speak back to the Council Flock, but Jonathan defends himself as the most responsible of gulls, having discovered the higher purpose for their lives that will free them from 1,000 years of scrabbling for fish heads. He wants only to show them how to be free. The gulls close their ears and turn their backs on Jonathan.

Jonathan spends the rest of his days alone, but he flies far beyond the Far Cliffs. His greatest sorrow is the other gulls' refusal to believe in the glory of flight, open their eyes and see. Jonathan learns a streamlined high-speed dive that reaps fish schooling ten feet below the surface. He discovers how to sleep in the air so that he can cover 100 miles overnight, to soar above heavy fogs to reach the sunlight and to ride winds inland to dine on insects. What he had hoped for the Flock, Jonathan alone enjoys. He is not sorry for the price he has paid. He discovers that boredom, fear and anger shorten gulls' lives, and he lives a long life.

One evening, two radiant, gentle, friendly gulls that fly skillfully, wingtip-to-wingtip, join Jonathan as he glides along. When they effortlessly pass Jonathan's tests, he asks who they are. His brothers, they reply, come to take him higher and to take him home. Jonathan declares that as an Outcast he has no home, and his aged body can no longer bear him higher than a few hundred feet. They assure him that he can because he has learned. One school is finished and another about to begin. Jonathan realizes they are right, gives one last look around and disappears into a perfect dark sky with his two star-bright companion gulls.

With Jonathan's disappearance from this world at the end of Part 1, the readers see the allegory of the story. Jonathan has discovered new possibilities that are empirical;



altitude, speed and control can be measured, described and, therefore, taught. He has also discovered practical possibilities, opening new food sources, and above all fun ones, which sustain him. Jonathan is frustrated to be condemned without a hearing and outcast so that he cannot share his discoveries with anyone who might share his outlook. In the end, Jonathan finds his only companions in the mysterious visitors who help him pass over into the next phase of existence.

Part 1 Analysis

Part 1 establishes an allegory of the meaning of life. Clearly, seagull physiology fits them for a particular evolutionary niche that guarantees the survival of the species, and individual gulls guarantee their individual survival by hunting food. Some look a bit higher and battle for preeminence within the Flock. That seaside humans look down on gulls as urbanites do pigeons is implied, and gulls' envy of other bird species' adaptations is acknowledged. Jonathan, though, a freethinking young gull, feels that there simply has to be more to life. By creative thinking and extensive, painful practice, Jonathan hits upon a way of transcending his destiny. Still, he is cut off from sharing his liberating and practical message by a stubbornly orthodox clique of Flock Elders. Personally, Jonathan lives contentedly in exile, but he is sad that he cannot communicate to the masses his liberating message. Gull mythology, it appears, accepts the existence of an ill-defined afterlife, and readers see Jonathan mature enough in solitary old age to surrender to mystical guides in hopes of experiencing whatever "heaven" turns out to be. The two shining gulls recall the gospel stories of Jesus' transfiguration on Mount Tabor, where Moses and Elijah explain to him his destiny. This will prove important in Part 2, because it is one of the biblical scenes that suggest first-century Judeo-Christianity is somewhat open to the concept of reincarnation or the transmigration of souls.



Part 2

Part 2 Summary

"So this is heaven," Jonathan smiles, noticing his body growing as bright as his companions' bodies. It feels like a gull body, but it flies far better than his old one ever has. Delighting in pressing power into his new wings of polished silver, Jonathan sets a goal of attaining twice the speed and performance, but he is not disappointed when the best he can reach is 273 mph. He believes that heaven ought not to have natural limits, but he is not disappointed. The escorts depart, wishing him happy landings. Jonathan flies toward a jagged shoreline inhabited by so few gulls that he wonders again at heaven and why he suddenly feels tired. He remembers the saying that gulls never tire in heaven. Memories of earth are fading, and details are blurring, beyond fighting for food and being an Outcast. Jonathan feels welcome although none of the dozen gulls say a word. He notices that they have an elegant technique for landing, but he is too tired to try it out and falls asleep. In the days ahead, Jonathan learns more about flying than he had in his old life and realizes that his fellow gulls share his love of flight. They are magnificent birds that practice advanced aeronautics every day. Only occasionally does Jonathan remember using wings in the fight for food.

One day, Jonathan telepathically asks his instructor, Sullivan, why there are so few gulls here, and Sullivan declares that Jonathan is a one-in-a-million bird, not requiring multiple lives to get the first idea that there is more to life than eating, fighting and gaining power in the Flock. Some need 10,000 lives, then another 100 before they learn about perfection and finally 100 more before to realize that their purpose is to find perfection and show it forth. Even here, the lesson is the same. If you learn nothing, the next world is unchanged, with the same limitations and lead weights to overcome. Jonathan has learned this quickly and arrived here directly. Jonathan and Sullivan take to the air and fly in formation through difficult maneuvers.

One evening, Jonathan takes courage and approaches the Elder Gull, said soon to be moving beyond this world. Kindly Chiang has grown empowered by age, can outfly any gull in the Flock and knows skills that others are only gradually learning. Jonathan asks whether this world is not heaven after all and what happens next. Is there a heaven? Chiang acknowledges that Jonathan is learning again and confirms that heaven is not a place or time, but means being perfect. Learning that Jonathan enjoys speed, Chiang tells him that he will begin to touch heaven when he touches perfect speed beyond any limit. Perfect speed is "being there." To prove this, Chiang vanishes and reappears fifty feet from Jonathan in the flicker of an instance. Then he vanishes again and appears at Jonathan's shoulder. "It's kind of fun," Chiang says. Jonathan is dazzled and forgets to ask about heaven, wanting instead to know how Chiang does that, what it feels like and how far he can go. The Elder declares that he can go - and has gone - to any place or time he wishes. Strangely, most gulls scorn perfection and slowly go nowhere. Those who put aside travel for perfection go anywhere instantly. Jonathan is anxious to conquer another unknown, and Chiang offers to begin immediately. A strange glow fills



Jonathan's eyes. Chiang observes him closely as he says that the key is knowing that one has already arrived. One must stop seeing oneself as trapped in a body, and one must know that one has lived everywhere at once across space and time.

Jonathan works fiercely day after day but cannot transport himself a feather's width. Chiang tells him to forget about faith. Flight requires only understanding how to fly, and the same is true here. One day it strikes Jonathan with great joy to realize, "I am a perfect, unlimited gull!" Jonathan and the Elder are standing on a different seashore on a different planet. Jonathan lets out a screech of delight, "It works!" This is the first sound he has made since leaving Earth. Chiang says that Jonathan only needs to work on control. When they return after dark, the other gulls look on Jonathan with awe, having seen him disappear, but he declares himself a newcomer needing to learn from them. Sullivan declares that Jonathan has less fear of learning than any gull in 10,000 years. The Flock falls silent, and Jonathan is embarrassed. Chiang offers to begin teaching him travel into the past and future, which is the most difficult, powerful and fun travel of all. It will prepare him to know the meaning of kindness and love. As the Elder's special student, Jonathan progresses rapidly, taking in ideas like a streamlined feathered computer. Then, one day after a class, Chiang vanishes. His feathers turn too bright for any gull to look upon, and his last words are an admonition to Jonathan to keep working on love.

Jonathan finds himself thinking about Earth. Had he known one percent of what he now knows, his life would have been much different there. He wonders if there might be a gull back there struggling to break out of his limits and learn the meaning of flight. Perhaps one has been made an Outcast for trying. The more Jonathan works on his kindness and love lessons, the more he wants to go back to Earth. Despite his lonely past, Jonathan feels he is a born instructor and that love means sharing the truth with a willing gull. Sullivan, however, is skeptical. What makes Jonathan think that any gulls will be interested? He quotes the proverb, "The gull sees farthest who flies highest." Earth's gulls are planted on the ground, 1,000 miles from heaven, and they cannot even see their own wingtips. It is better for Jonathan to remain here, teaching new gulls already high enough to understand him. Sullivan wins the debate when he asks where Jonathan would be if Chiang had returned to other worlds.

Jonathan continues working with bright young gulls, but the old surety returns that one or two gulls on Earth must be capable of learning. What if Chiang had come to him as an Outcast? He tells Sullivan that he must return, and he gets no argument. Sullivan will miss Jonathan. Jonathan rebukes him, saying that friendship transcends space and time. They are sure to see one another once or twice in the middle of Here and Now. Sullivan laughs at the crazy bird and bids him farewell. Jonathan knows himself no longer to be bone and feather but the perfect idea of freedom and flight, limited by nothing.

Fletcher Lynd Seagull is young but knows that no gull has ever been more harshly or unjustly treated by the Flock. Even mosquitoes can fly, he thinks, soaring over the Far Cliffs. How can gulls be too blind to see the glory of flight? Fletcher does not care what they think. He will show them by becoming a pure Outlaw and making them sorry. A



startling voice comes into Fletcher's head, and he stumbles in midair. Jonathan tells him not to be harsh towards gulls that hurt only themselves. Forgive them in order they may understand. Jonathan glides effortlessly an inch from Fletcher's wingtip, brilliantly white. Fletcher fears that he has gone mad or died. Jonathan asks soothingly if he wants to fly. If Fletcher will forgive the Flock and learn, he will be able to go back and help them. Fletcher says that he wants this. Jonathan summons Fletcher to begin with level flight.

Part 2 Analysis

Part 2 examines Jonathan's experience in "heaven." He arrives to find limitations that gull mythology clearly does not anticipate, but strangely, he is not disappointed. He receives an instructor, Sullivan, who reveals the basic facts. Most gulls require 10,000 reincarnations before they learn to appreciate flight, a realization that has remarkably come to Jonathan in a single lifetime. Jonathan also finds a guru, Chiang, who reveals that heaven is neither place nor time, but a state of perfection in which one realizes he is one with everything. Chiang teaches Jonathan to transcend space and sets him on the path to transcending time - which Chiang declares great fun - before disappearing in a blaze of glory reminiscent of biblical descriptions of the Prophet Elijah and Jesus Christ. Several times in the Gospels, Jesus suggests that he is Elijah or one of the prophets come back to earth, but orthodox Christianity joins orthodox Judaism and Islam in dismissing the transmigration of souls.

For Bach, writing in 1970, with Eastern concepts being popularized by the Beatles and brought together in the eclectic New Age philosophy, it is natural to combine familiar Western images with systematic reincarnation, drawn from Hinduism and Buddhism. The two faiths differ on the details of how or why it works, particularly over whether past-life experiences are purged between iterations or are cumulative in achieving the final enlightenment. Lowly gulls apparently do not retain much if anything, and they do not come back as different species. At any rate, Chiang's insistence that the key to getting out of the endless cycle lies in practicing kindness and love is nearly universal in world religions. Realizing that he is a born teacher and yearning to help any young, outcast gulls that might be struggling to take the first step, Jonathan fits the pattern of a Buddha figure, but the imagery in Part 3 more readily suggests that he is a Christ-figure. Jonathan and Sullivan debate where instructors are most needed, at the beginning, making recruits, or later, expediting the development of proven candidates. Jonathan decides he must return to Earth. Appearing in the mind of a young outlaw, Fletcher, as the messengers of heaven came to him at the end of Part 1, Jonathan becomes the guru. Part 2 has confirmed Part 1's intuition that perfection is the essence of life and the key to true freedom.



Part 3

Part 3 Summary

Watching young Fletcher, Jonathan sees a blazing desire to learn to fly. Fletcher passes his instructor at 150 mph, pulls into a sixteen-point vertical slow roll, breaks up at thirteen and barely recovers. Jonathan explains that Fletcher needs to be smooth and runs through the maneuver with him. At the end of six months, Jonathan attracts six other students, all curious Outcasts, who find performing easier than theory. Jonathan lectures them on how precision flying is a step towards expressing their true nature as ideas of the Great Gull, but they fall asleep, exhausted from practice. Not even Fletcher believes the flight of ideas is as real as the flight of wind and feather. In many ways, he tells them that their whole body is nothing more than thought in a form they can see, but it comes out as pleasant fiction.

A month later, Jonathan announces that it is time to return to the Flock, but young Henry Calvin Gull objects they are unwelcome. Jonathan responds that they can go wherever they wish, and he takes flight eastward to the home grounds of the Flock. The students are torn, knowing the unbroken Law of the Flock bans Outcasts from returning, but they cannot allow Jonathan to face hostility alone. Rather self-consciously, Fletcher tells them that they are already outside the Flock and can be of more help there than here. The eight, flying in a tight double-diamond formation, reach the Flock's Council Beach, and they pass over at 135 mph in inverted formation. The Flock, 8,000 strong, silently watches the aerobatics and slow landing, with Jonathan delivering his usual post-flight critique. Word that they are returned Outcasts spreads confusion through the Flock, but some young gulls are so impressed with the demonstration that they do not care.

Within an hour, the Word of the Elder goes out, ordering the Flock to ignore the Outcasts on pain of falling under taboo themselves. Jonathan ignores backs turned on him as he continues practice sessions directly over Council Beach, pressing his students to the limit of their ability. Little Martin William Seagull is singled out to prove his ability, and he surprises himself at being a wizard of low-speed flight. Charles-Roland Gull flies the Great Mountain Wind to 24,000 feet and is determined to do better. Fletcher conquers his sixteen-point vertical slow roll and adds a triple cartwheel, catching attention on the beach. Jonathan flies with them, teaching and simply enjoying himself through storms that make the grounded Flock miserable. Jonathan's students begin listening to his crazy, incomprehensible ideas and see that he has good ideas as well. Gradually, a circle of curious listeners surrounds the nucleus by night, fearful of being seen with Jonathan in daylight. In a month, Terrence Lowell Gull crosses the line and asks to learn to fly, and he is condemned as an Outcast. The next night, the crippled Kirk Maynard Gull begs to learn how to fly. Jonathan accepts him and tells him that the Law of the Great Gull sets him free of his infirmity. Maynard cries loudly, "I can fly! Listen!" as he rises effortlessly over the sleeping Flock.



By sunrise, nearly 1,000 birds are looking curiously at Maynard and trying to understand Jonathan's simple words about the gull's right to fly free despite what ritual, superstition or other limitations - including the Law of the Flock - say. Only the law leading to freedom is valid, Jonathan proclaims. A voice of doubt objects that they are special, gifted and divine birds, but Jonathan points out that his pupils are as ordinary as anyone, except that they understand what they truly are and are practicing it. The pupils, other than Fletcher, are unaware that this is what they are doing. The crowd grows every day, questioning, idolizing and scorning.

One morning after practice, Fletcher reports that the Flock is saying Jonathan is either Son of the Great Gull or thousands of years ahead of his time. Jonathan sighs and asks what Fletcher thinks. The student says this kind of flying has always been available, so it has nothing to do with time. They are ahead of fashion, though. Jonathan replies that is not half as bad as being ahead of time.

A week later, Fletcher is demonstrating high-speed techniques to a class of new students when a young bird glides into his path. To avoid the novice, Fletcher snaps left and crashes into a cliff at 200 mph. The rock is like a hard door into another world, and he finds himself adrift in a strange sky, forgetting, remembering, afraid, sad and terribly sorry. Jonathan's voice comes to him, as when they first met, telling him flying through rock is an advanced technique. Jonathan identifies himself dryly as the Son of the Great Gull. He says Fletcher obviously has not died but merely changed his level of consciousness abruptly. He may stay and learn at this higher level or return to work with the Flock. The Elders are startled by this disaster, for which they have been hoping. Fletcher chooses the latter and awakens to find himself surrounded by the whole Flock of 4,000. Some say he has been resurrected by the Son of the Great Gull. Others say that he is a devil come to break the Flock. The cry "Devil!" galvanizes the Flock, and as they close in to destroy Fletcher, Jonathan transports him half a mile away to safety. Jonathan wonders why the hardest thing for a gull to understand is that it is free. Fletcher wonders how Jonathan did that. Like everything else, Jonathan says, it just takes practice.

Fletcher asks about one of Jonathan's old sayings, that loving the Flock is not sufficient reason to return and help it. How can one love a mob that wants to kill you? Jonathan advises to love the good in every gull and help them see themselves. That is what love means, and it is fun when you get the knack of it. Jonathan reminds Fletcher how he was ready to fight the Flock to the death as a young Outcast, building a bitter hell for himself on the Far Cliffs. Now he is building his own heaven instead and leading the Flock in its direction. Fletcher is afraid. Surely Jonathan, not he, is the instructor. Jonathan says there are other flocks needing instructors more. Fletcher confesses himself a plain seagull, not the only Son of the Great Gull. Jonathan tells Fletcher to keep finding himself until he is unlimited and to practice being himself. Jonathan's body shimmers in the air and goes transparent. Before vanishing, he warns not to let them spread silly rumors about him, a seagull that just likes to fly. Fletcher will see the way to fly if he trusts his understanding rather than his limiting eyes.



Fletcher flies up to greet a brand-new group of eager students, and he begins by teaching about freedom and how the body is nothing more than thought. They do not want to hear philosophy. They want to learn how to fly a loop. Fletcher sighs and starts over with level flight, realizing that Jonathan was no more divine than he. He tells Jonathan mentally that he will appear on his beach out of thin air and show him how to fly. Looking at his students, he sees them as free of limits and loves them. Fletcher's race to learn has begun.

Part 3 Analysis

Part 3 follows Jonathan's career as an accomplished guru, demonstrating to the Flock the marvels of flight with a chosen band of Outcasts. Soon, the curious gather in fear of the authorities, and two actually convert, defying official threats against them. The reader can easily see in this section the gospel stories of Jesus of Nazareth wandering the Galilee, proclaiming the message, "the Kingdom of God is within you." The gulls - even the inner circle - do not understand Jonathan's philosophy, but some master his practical techniques of flight. Great aeronautical accomplishments impress the Flock, while the Council hopes some disaster will discredit Jonathan. The sacrificial death and resurrection of one outstanding student, Fletcher, only enhances the small clique's reputation. The question of where the master's value is greatest reoccurs, and Fletcher chooses to continue teaching on Earth rather than perfecting himself in the next world. Jonathan remains at Fletcher's side, using Chiang's technique of transportation to deliver Fletcher from the beaks of a gull mob that decides Fletcher is in fact a devil bent on destroying the Flock. Jonathan has been elevated to the unwanted role of misunderstood but revered Son of the Great Gull, a Christ-like figure to whom Fletcher plays the role of Lazarus, the man raised after four days in the grave. In the Gospel of John, this miracle precipitates the final conflict that results in Jesus' crucifixion. In this story, however, there is no such denouement. Fletcher merely succeeds his master as teacher of the Flock when Jonathan, like Chiang (and Elijah), is transfigured in light and vanishes, leaving Fletcher to learn the lesson of earlier teachers that no one can absorb lofty philosophy without mastering the simplest practical lesson of Level Flight. Shortcuts are impossible.



Characters

Jonathan Livingston Seagull (Jon)

The book's protagonist, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, first appears as a freethinking young gull, not content with filling his belly with scrap fish. He wants to experience the freedom of flight enjoyed by other bird species. Opposed by everyone, including his own family, Jonathan experiments, often disastrously, until he figures out the dynamics of flight and practices its techniques to perfection. Hoping to share these revelations with others, Jonathan is surprised to be condemned for unorthodoxy by the Elders and exiled to the Far Cliffs. He further refines his flying abilities during a long, solitary but satisfying life, lamenting only that he has not been able to share the truth with others. Two shining gulls appear to him in old age, offering to take him to new heights and a new home. In "heaven," Jonathan learns from a mentor, Sullivan, that he is a rare gull, able to understand there is more to life than food and prestige in the Flock. This is just a first step in the afterlife, with movement dependent on continuing learning and application.

With Sullivan as Jonathan's encouraging instructor and the kindly Elder Chiang as his guru, Jonathan masters the technique of transporting himself across space by realizing that he lives everywhere and in all times. The Flock holds Jonathan in awe, which he finds embarrassing. Chiang's last word is for Jonathan to work on kindness and love, but this only makes him yearn to return to Earth. Despite his lonely past, Jonathan feels that he is a born instructor and that love means sharing the truth with some willing gull. He and Sullivan argue whether Jonathan is better off because Chiang had not gone back to Earth and thus was available in heaven, or whether he might have arrived in heaven better prepared had he met Chiang on Earth.

Within six months back on Earth, Jonathan gathers six followers, but he is frustrated that they want only practical lessons, not his philosophy about their true nature as ideas of the Great Gull. The Council announces that anyone who joins Jonathan will fall under the ban, but he makes two converts and gathers an outer circle of curious listeners. Jonathan proclaims the gull's right to fly free despite the claims of ritual, superstition and the limitations imposed by the Law of the Flock. Only the law leading to freedom is valid, Jonathan proclaims. The Flock decides Jonathan is either the Son of the Great Gull or thousands of years ahead of his time. When Fletcher dies in a sacrificial accident, Jonathan offers him the choice of continuing his own growth on a higher plane of reality or returning to instruct the Flock. When part of the Flock seeks to kill Fletcher as a destroying devil, Jonathan transports him to safety. Before being transfigured and vanishing, Jonathan tells Fletcher to keep finding himself until he is unlimited and warns not to let others spread silly rumors about him, a seagull that just likes to fly.



Sullivan

Jonathan's instructor in his second life, Sullivan reveals to Jonathan that most gulls require 10,000 lives to reach the state Jonathan has achieved in but one and proclaims that no other gull has shown more aptitude for flight. Sullivan plays a backseat role while the kindly Elder Chiang teaches Jonathan the mysteries of transcending space and time, but after Chiang's transfiguration, Sullivan tries to dissuade Jonathan from returning to Earth in search of some gull to help learn to fly. Sullivan wins the debate temporarily by asking where Jonathan would be had Chiang returned to other worlds, but he eventually gives in to Jonathan's compulsion to return. When Sullivan says he will miss Jonathan, the pupil rebukes him, saying that their friendship transcends space and time.

Chiang

Chiang is the kindly Elder Gull in Jonathan's second life, whom Jonathan boldly approaches to learn the secrets of improving and strengthening with age rather than deteriorating. Chiang is rumored to be on the verge of moving forward to yet another plane of reality when he accepts Jonathan as his special student. Chiang confirms that heaven is neither a place nor a time, but a state of perfection in whatever one most enjoys. Fun lies at the center of Chiang's teaching. Before being transfigured in light and disappearing, Chiang teaches Jonathan to transcend space and begins him on the path of transcending time as well. Chiang's last commandment is for Jonathan to work on perfecting kindness and love. Jonathan and Sullivan debate whether Chiang has been more useful to Jonathan in the second life, when Jonathan has advanced to the level at which he can profit from his advanced teachings, or whether he might have helped Jonathan arrive in heaven in a more advanced state by taking him under his wing as an Outcast on Earth. After this debate, Jonathan heads back to minister to a small Flock.

Fletcher Lynd Seagull (Fletch)

Jonathan's first pupil, Fletcher is a young gull that knows no gull has ever been more harshly or unjustly treated by the Flock. An apt pupil, and the only one willing to listen to his master's baffling philosophy, Fletcher rallies the reluctant students to accept that they are already outside the Flock. They are not subject to the arbitrary Law of the Flock and can be of more help among the Flock than at a distance. Once, demonstrating high-speed techniques to a class of new students, Fletcher crashes into a cliff at 200 mph, evading a novice flier who straggles into his path. Fletcher finds himself in another world, adrift in a strange sky, forgetting, remembering, afraid, sad and terribly sorry. Jonathan's voice comes to him, as when they first met, telling Fletcher that he has not died and offering him the option of learning at this higher level of consciousness or returning to work with the Flock. Fletcher chooses the latter and finds himself proclaimed either resurrected by the Son of the Great Gull or a devil come to break the Flock. Jonathan transports Fletcher bodily out of the claws of a murderous mob of gulls. Fletcher succeeds Jonathan as instructor when Jonathan moves on to other flocks,



having convinced his pupil that he is no more divine than Fletcher. Fletcher quickly learns the lesson that teachers must always start with basics.

Charles-Roland Gull

Jonathan's pupil Charles-Roland Gull flies the Great Mountain Wind to 24,000 feet and is determined to do better.

Henry Calvin Gull

Jonathan's pupil Henry Calvin Gull objects to returning to the Flock on the grounds that the Law of the Flock forbids Outcasts from associating themselves with obedient gulls.

Kirk Maynard Gull (Maynard)

Jonathan's ninth pupil, Maynard flies despite a crippled wing, gaining great attention in the Flock.

Martin William Gull

Jonathan's pupil, challenged to prove his flying ability in practice sessions over Council Beach, Martin is surprised to discover himself a wizard of low-speed flight.

Terrence Lowell Gull

Jonathan's eighth pupil, and first convert on Council Beach, Terrence crosses the line and is immediately condemned as an Outcast.



Objects/Places

The Council Beach

The area where the Council Flock deliberates and condemns Jonathan to exile for his experiments in aerodynamics is called the Council Beach. On this beach, Jonathan, returned from heaven to gather and teach Outlaw disciples, vindicates his teachings and begins proclaiming his message of the gulls' freedom to be more than the rulers allow them to be.

The Council Flock

The governing body of the seagull Flock, the unchallengeable Council Flock condemns Jonathan for reckless irresponsibility and violating the dignity and tradition of the Gull Family after his historic aeronautic flight. It exiles the new Outcast to the Far Cliffs.

The Far Cliffs

The traditional place of exile for Outcasts from the Flock, the Far Cliffs lie west of Council Beach and are where Jonathan gathers his first six followers.

The Fishing Grounds

The offshore waters where the Flock mass at meal times to scavenge for scraps, assuming there is nothing more to life than filling one's body, are called the Fishing Grounds. Jonathan usually flies at a distance from them, practicing his techniques and being mocked.

The Flock

The Flock is some 4,000 gulls that subsist on fish scraps collected around the fishing boats and accept that there is no higher reason to fly than to fill their bellies. Elders police their activities strictly, keeping them in line with the Law of the Flock for fear of being exiled.

The Great Gull

The Great Gull is the universal essence of being a gull, in which all individual gulls participate to the extent that they free themselves from rote feeding and fighting.



Heaven

Gull mythology apparently holds that "heaven" - the afterlife - receives all gulls and has no limitations. Transported there in old age and well advanced in flight techniques, Jonathan sees that neither is true but is not disappointed. Jonathan quickly learns more than in his first life, and details of life on Earth begin fading as soon as he goes over and accelerates with time. He learns telepathically that it takes most gulls over 10,000 lifetimes to learn and live by the truth that there is more to life than eating, fighting and gaining power in the Flock. Heaven is itself but a step towards a higher afterlife, determined by one's attitude and performance. The Elder Chiang tells Jonathan that heaven is not a place or time, but a state of perfection at whatever one most values. The key is knowing that one has already arrived and no longer seeing oneself as trapped in a body, but as living everywhere at once across space and time.

The Law of the Flock

The Law of the Flock is a strict code, never challenged, that keeps gulls in their place as scavengers of the sea. Anyone who dares oppose it is exiled to the Far Cliffs without hope of return, and anyone that interacts with Outlaws falls under the ban.

Outcasts

Any gull that breaks the arbitrary Law of the Flock becomes an Outcast. Outcasts can never return to the Flock. Jonathan spends long years as an Outcast, perfecting the flight techniques that gained him his exile, and his first convert on returning to Earth is Fletcher, a bitter young gull that knows no gull has ever been more harshly or unjustly treated by the Flock.

Wings

Long gull wings are suited to soaring mid- to high-altitude flight, while pelicans and albatross easily glide at slow speed over the surface of the water, and falcons can dive at high speed and pull out at the last moment. Jonathan studies the dynamics of the wing in flight and learns to pull in his upper wing to use the tip as a falcon wing. He derives great pleasure from the experience and opens for himself new food sources underwater and inland.

Setting

Not surprisingly, Jonathan Livingston Seagull takes place at the seashore.

Jonathan, however, is always at a distance from the rest of the flock. After being declared an outcast, Jonathan follows two strange gulls up into the sky, flying higher and faster than he ever has.

He comes to a place that he thinks of as heaven; here he learns to overcome the barriers of space and time. He learns that "The gull sees farthest who flies highest."

The novel is illustrated with photographs of the seashore and seagulls by Russell Munson that add to the atmosphere of the novel. Some of the photographs of gulls in flight were taken from an airplane and accentuate the beauty and exhilaration of flying. By setting most of the story in the air, Bach suggests a universality of locale, which allows readers to apply the story to almost any circumstance.

Social Sensitivity

Jonathan Livingston Seagull is especially notable for eliciting in the reader an optimistic vision of life. The story collects the many socially important themes into a fable of values appropriate to audiences from junior high school onward.

In one sense, Jonathan Livingston Seagull portrays an antisocial individualism that eventually contributes to society. Jonathan's progress toward perfection begins only when he is ostracized from the flock. He lives then as an airborne hermit until he meets with the supersociety, an elite flock of gulls who, like Jonathan, concentrate on perfect speed. Jonathan finally returns to the flock to teach other gulls what he has learned.

Individuals, according to the book, are ultimately immortal ideas inhabiting an illusory physical universe designed to let them work at becoming perfect. They will find true companionship in heaven; earthly society is merely a means of attaining heaven. Jonathan's return to help young gulls illustrates the charity he acquires by climbing to perfection alone. Individuals can be alienated from society without feeling lonely or unproductive, if they follow the advice Bach paraphrased for an interviewer: "Find what you love to do, and do your darndest to make it happen." These individuals will contribute to society only after they have achieved their own perfection.

Fundamental to the book's social concerns is its effect on readers. For some, the personification of seagulls, so selfconscious and childish as to shatter all suspension of disbelief, introduced fifty minutes of boredom and discomfort.

Other readers find themselves motivated and inspired by a book that reflects their desire for success, freedom, perfection, and love. These readers can soar among their fantasies and examine their private hopes while guided by the text's abbreviated hints. In this way, the book mirrored, and perhaps helped create, the "Me Generation" of the 1970s.



Techniques

Bach's descriptions of flight, exhibiting an acute metaphorical awareness of aerodynamics and sensation, reflect years of writing for pilots. His precision spills over into the reader's consciousness of theme words and lends them authority.

The stereotyped value words, actions, and dialogue work like symbols because they are incomplete. The loose style affords meanings vague enough to coax the reader into many automatic conjectures. The characters, without limiting detail, can suggest many parallels. Undefined value words can suggest whatever fits the reader's personal definitions. The setting, being mostly air, distracts very little from a wide range of interpretation. The plot — leave society, learn, return — has classic roots and is not specific enough to deny the reader's associations.

The allegory built on stereotypes is brief and approximate: Like an exaggerated impressionistic painting, it casts light in many directions but lets the viewer decide what is illuminated.

Literary Qualities

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This precision gives a sense of authority to the general thematic words that Bach uses.

The stereotyped values, actions, and dialogue work like symbols because they are incomplete. Bach's loose style affords meanings vague enough to coax the reader into many automatic conjectures. The characters, without limiting detail, can suggest many parallels. Undefined value words can suggest whatever fits the reader's personal definitions. The setting, being mostly air, distracts very little from a wide range of interpretation. The plot—leaving society, learning, returning—has classic roots and is open enough to allow a wide range of reader associations.

Bach's allegory of stereotypes resembles an exaggerated impressionistic painting; it casts light in many directions and lets the viewer decide what is illuminated. The story builds on the traditional symbolism of flight, air, heaven, individual, and social group. Stories of flight, with their connotations of escape, freedom, control, intelligence, and sexual fulfillment, date from long before the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus.

Themes

Themes

More specific than Bach's advice is the book's implication that if one does what he likes and ignores everything else, he will be fulfilled and transcend even death with few problems. Stated directly, this message seems naive and impossible. But as the book heightens and oversimplifies, the reader can complicate the meaning as he wishes, accepting the allegory conditionally and concluding that its emotion-laden implications might well be true.

One reason the reader might do this is that the book's themes are presented mystically. As the story progresses, the reader may, largely subconsciously, call up his own connotations of the many value words sprinkled through the book — speed, love, excellence, discovery ("breakthrough"), time, and knowledge. These names accumulate energy and merge into a diffuse unity at the end. As he reaches perfection, Jonathan finds it applying to virtually everything: perfect speed, love, honor, freedom, wisdom, truth, self-esteem, beauty, spirit, immortality, and so on. At this point many readers feel a heightened self-knowledge and a sentimental certainty of painless success. This mystical identification seems apocalyptic and uplifting.

Broadly applied, the book's allegory collates diverse religious beliefs. Mary Baker Eddy's teachings in Christian Science (which Bach was reading during the years he wrote the book) include the illusoriness of birth, death, and evil, and the principle that the true person is the abstract, eternal "soul."

(Ironically, the Christian Science Monitor refused to run ads for the book — suggesting that the metaphysics may be heretical.) Hinduism teaches that perfection is the goal of life, and Buddhism that the heavens are multiple; but a willful "proud" self such as Jonathan's runs counter to both the Eastern religions and Christianity, for Jonathan resembles a Faust without Satan, or some legendary American pioneer whose life consists of continual discovery.

Perfection

Through the Elder Chiang, Jonathan learns that most gulls, strangely, scorn perfection and as a result go slowly nowhere. By contrast, those who put aside travel for perfection can go anywhere, instantly. Perfection is the essence of gull heaven, in whatever area the individual gull feels most passionately about. In Jonathan's case, this is refined aeronautic maneuvering and above all the attaining of record speed surpassing what a gull's wings are designed to sustain. In heaven, Jonathan learns from his instructor, Sullivan, that he is a one-in-a-million bird, attaining in a single lifetime the realization that there is more to life than eating, fighting and gaining power in the Flock. Most need 10,000 lives to accept the premise, then another 100 before they learn about perfection



and 100 more before to realize the purpose of their lives is to find and strive for perfection. Even in what gull mythology calls "heaven," which is not a place or time, the lesson is the same. Learn nothing, and the next world is unchanged, with the same limitations and lead weights to overcome. Once he has understood and mastered by patient practice the techniques needed to transcend time and space, Jonathan returns to Earth to help other Outcasts attain perfection and advance to the next level of being.

Reincarnation

Jonathan Livingston Seagull maintains that gulls return to Earth as often as necessary until they realize that there is more to life than eating, fighting and gaining power in the Flock and are able to move on to a higher plane of existence. It appears there is no accumulation of knowledge from incarnation to incarnation. Those advancing clearly have their memories of Earth gradually but rapidly purged, so most gulls require 10,000 life cycles to accept the premise, then another 100 before they learn about perfection and finally 100 more before to realize and act upon realizing the purpose of their lives. At that point, they are transfigured and begin learning higher lessons about being part of the universal Great Gull. In Part 2, Jonathan and his heavenly mentor, Sullivan, debate when guidance is most valuable in a gull's existence, to hasten its advancement to the next level. Sullivan insists a guru like Chiang accomplishes the most when a gull student has reach a level high enough to understand the philosophy of life, while Jonathan feels tutoring at the early level will allow more gulls to advance beyond the Earth earlier on. He and his successor, Fletcher, both learn by bitter experience that gulls are more willing to accept useful techniques than advanced theory, which merely confuses and frustrates them. Simple Level Flight must come first, and few are willing to buck the system and accept even that. Even with a mentor comes back from the great beyond, few are willing to accept the shortcut.

Fun

Pure fun, which plays little if any part in humankind's organized religions, repeatedly appears as a goal in and of itself in *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. Even before he is taken under the wing of Sullivan and the Elder Chiang, Jonathan exults in overcoming the limitations of gull physiology by learning to skim the waves slowly like pelicans and albatross and diving at high rates of speed like falcons. Even in lonely exile at the Far Cliffs, Jonathan finds fun in flight. Chiang incorporates fun in his teaching methodology, declaring after he vanishes and reappears fifty feet from Jonathan in the flicker of an instance, then vanishes again and appears at his shoulder, "It's kind of fun." This dazzles Jonathan, and he forgets to ask fundamental questions about heaven, wanting instead to know how Chiang does that, what it feels like and how far he can go. Once Jonathan masters with great effort the technique of transporting himself through space, Chiang offers to begin teaching him travel into the past and future, which is more difficult and powerful, but also the most fun of any kind of travel. In addition, it will prepare Jonathan to know the meaning of kindness and love. When Jonathan has become Fletcher's teacher back on Earth, he stresses loving the Flock even when the mob

wants to kill him. Loving the good in every gull and helping them see their true selves is what love truly means, and it is fun once one gets the knack of it.

Style

Point of View

Jonathan Livingston Seagull is narrated in the third person past tense by an omniscient witness to events in the life of gulls on Earth and in heaven. The narrator knows what is in the gulls' minds and hearts and understands and interprets how most go through the motions of surviving unaware that life means more than that and how a chosen few realize flight is fun and liberating in and of itself. The narrator accompanies the young, freethinking Jonathan on his flights of discovery and in his search for perfection. When Jonathan is seemingly defeated in explaining his revelations to the Flock, the narrator follows his acceptance of exile to the Far Cliffs. He sees Jonathan accept that a greater life is possible and accompanies him to heaven, where gull mythology is proved inaccurate. The perfection Jonathan seeks is the key to a life free of time and place, in unity with the Great Gull. Finally, the narrator examines how the teacher succeeds and fails in helping the few that have ears to hear and eyes to see the truth of life.

Setting

Jonathan Livingston Seagull is set on an unspecified beach over which some 4,000 gulls feed and fight, unaware there is more to life than flying. It seems likely (but is not stated) that it occurs in modern times, when fishing boats ply the offshore waters using modern techniques. Rebellious young Jonathan is exiled to the Far Cliffs, the traditional place where Outcasts end their days in ignominy. Jonathan is a one-in-a-million gull that achieves perfection in a single incarnation on Earth. Part 2 is set in gull heaven, which turns out to not a place or time but an elevated state of being where learning begun on Earth is accelerated and where time and space are transcended. In Part 3, Jonathan returns to Earth in search of young Outcasts whose development in flight he can speed up, and on Council Beach he demonstrates techniques and gathers followers. He leaves his followers in the care of a charismatic disciple, Fletcher, when he is transfigured in light and transported to another, unspecified, world.

Language and Meaning

Jonathan Livingston Seagull is written in flowing English, often filled with rich descriptions of the dynamics of flight. Images from the New Testament abound, including the transfiguration in blazing light of several key characters. The abiding theme of reincarnation (or the transmigration of souls) and lack of a crucifixion of the misunderstood and maligned itinerate preacher, Jonathan, prevent us from taking the book as an allegory of the founding of Christianity. Following beliefs of Hinduism and Buddhism, gulls must keep coming back, most for 10,000 lifetimes or more, until they learn that flight is more than the means of filling their bellies. Heaven, the philosopher-gulls teach Jonathan, is not a matter of space and time, but of perfection that



transcends everything and absorbs the individual in the reality of the Great Gull, a concept more attune with the Nirvana of Eastern philosophies than with the Christian concept of striving to be perfect as the personal Father in heaven. There is no more unity of thought about the mechanism of eternity in *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* than there is among world religions, but the essence of religious thought is clear: there must be more to life than mere physical survival.

Structure

Jonathan Livingston Seagull, an exceedingly short work, is divided into three numbered parts. Part 1 follows the gull Jonathan through his first and only life on earth. His life is rare among gulls, which do not strive to understand that life is more than filling one's belly and fighting for preeminence in the Flock. Jonathan masters the techniques of flight and savors a life of freedom in exile. Part 2 follows Jonathan to heaven and the processes by which he realizes heaven is not what gull mythology suggests. He decides he must return to Earth to help the tiny minority of gulls that might accept higher truth to fly. Part 3 follows Jonathan's public ministry to the gulls, gathering and teaching a small group of followers to fly and trying to teach them higher things. Jonathan is transfigured before his chosen successor and disappears into another, unspecified world. The structure follows a definite path of self-discovery, outside illumination and return to share the revelations.



Quotes

"He narrowed his eyes in fierce concentration, held his breath, forced one ... single ... more ... inch ... of curve ... Then his feathers ruffled, he stalled and fell.

"Seagulls, as you know, never falter, never stall. To stall in the air is for them disgrace and it is dishonor." Part 1, pg. 12.

"When he came to, it was well after dark, and he floated in moonlight on the surface of the ocean. His wings were ragged bars of lead, but the weight of failure was even heavier on his back. He wished, feebly, that the weight could be just enough to drag him gently down to the bottom, and end it all." Part 1, pg. 21.

"Get down! Seagulls never fly in the dark! If you were meant to fly in the dark, you'd have the eyes of an owl! You'd have charts for brains! You'd have a falcon's short wings!" Part 1, pg. 23.

"'Jonathan Livingston Seagull! Stand to Center!' The Elder's words sounded in a voice of highest ceremony. Stand to Center meant only great shame or great honor. Stand to Center for Honor was the way the gulls' foremost leaders were marked. Of course, he thought, the Breakfast Flock this morning; they saw the Breakthrough! But I want no honors. I have no wish to be leader. I want only to share what I've found, to show those horizons out ahead for us all. He stepped forward." Part 2, pg. 38.

"Jonathan Seagull spent the rest of his days alone, but he flew way out beyond the Far Cliffs. His sorrow was not solitude, it was that other gulls refused to believe the glory of flight that awaited them; they refused to open their eyes and see." Part 1, pg. 40.

"'Home I have none. Flock I have none. I am Outcast. And we fly now at the peak of the Great Mountain Wind. Beyond a few hundred feet, I can lift this old body no higher.'" Part 1, pg. 53.

"Where had he heard that? The memory of his life on Earth was falling away. Earth had been a place where he had learned much, of course, but the details were blurred - something about fighting for food, and being Outcast." Part 2, pg. 59.

"'No, Jonathan, there is no such place. Heaven is not a place, and it is not a time, Heaven is being perfect.' He was silent for a moment. 'You are a very fast flier, aren't you?'

"'I ... I enjoy speed,' Jonathan said, taken aback but proud that the Elder had noticed.

"'You will begin to touch heaven, Jonathan, in the moment that you touch perfect speed. And that isn't flying a thousand miles an hour, or a million, or flying at the speed of light. Because any number is a limit, and perfection doesn't have limits. Perfect speed, my son, is being there.'" Part 2, pgs. 64-65.



"Jonathan held in thought an image of the great gull-flocks on the shore of another time, and he knew with practiced ease that he was not bone and feather but a perfect idea of freedom and flight, limited by nothing at all." Part 2, pg. 88.

"...eight ... nine ... ten ... see-Jonathan-I'm-running-out-of-air-speed ... eleven ... I-want-good-sharp-stops-like-yours ... twelve ... but-blast-it-I-just-can't-make ... thirteen ... these-last-three-points ... without ... fourtee ... *aaakk!*" Part 3, pg. 101.

"They liked the practice, because it was fast and exciting and it fed a hunger for learning that grew with every lesson. But not one of them, not even Fletcher Lynd Gull, had come to believe that the flight of ideas could possibly be as real as the flight of wind and feather." Part 3, pg. 103.

"And though he tried to look properly severe for his students, Fletcher Seagull suddenly saw them all as they really were, just for a moment, and he more than liked, he loved what he saw. No limits, Jonathan! he thought, and he smiled. His race to learn had begun." Part 3, pgs. 126-127.

Adaptations

Hall Bartlett produced a motion picture version of Jonathan Livingston Seagull in 1973. It features beautiful cinematography and competent voice acting through the voices of James Franciscus, Juliet Mills, Hal Holbrook, Kelly Harmon, Dorothy McGuire, and Richard Crenna. Bach picketed the motion picture, declaring that it had distorted his book and lost its message.

Most viewers seem to find it utterly, almost painfully, boring.



Topics for Discussion

1. Jonathan comments, "I am a seagull. I am limited by my nature. If I were meant to learn so much about flying, I'd have charts for brains My father was right. I must forget this foolishness. I must fly home to the Flock and be content as I am, as a poor limited seagull." Why has Jonathan given up? What makes him try again?
2. Can you find any similarities between your aspirations and Jonathan's? If so, what are they?
3. What is the significance of Kirk Maynard Gull's learning to fly?
4. Is it justified that Jonathan is made an outcast for "reckless irresponsibility" and "violating the dignity and tradition of the Gull family"?
5. Why does Fletcher Gull not die when he hits the cliff?
6. What is the basis for Jonathan's decision to leave the flock a second time?
7. What sets Jonathan's skill apart from the other gulls in his flock? Is it purely physical? Why or why not?
8. Why is the book divided into three parts? Discuss Bach's intentions when doing this.



Essay Topics

Why does Jonathan seek to understand the dynamics of flight while most gulls are content merely to feed themselves?

Why do the Elders condemn Jonathan to the Far Cliffs?

How does Jonathan find heaven different from gull mythology?

How does Chiang influence Jonathan's thinking?

Is Fletcher right in remaining on Earth after his crash into the cliff?

Why do the Elders continue condemning Jonathan and his emerging movement to free gulls from their fetters?

How successful is Fletcher likely to be in his ongoing ministry to the gulls?

What is the Great Gull?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the lifestyle and habitat of seagulls. Are Jonathan's accomplishments extraordinary for such a bird, or is Bach taking liberties with science?
2. Read *Illusions: Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*. Are there differences between the freedom of a bird and the freedom of a pilot? Are the themes in the books similar?
3. Do Russell Munson's photographs add to the novel in any way? Take your own photographs of birds and write a story to accompany them.
4. *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* is said to be a book which has universal applications. Do you agree? Did you find some use for its message in your own life?

Literary Precedents

Stories of flight (with its symbolism of escape, freedom, control, intelligence, and sexual fulfillment) date from long before the Greek myth of Icarus and Daedalus.

Two other popular allegories (Pilgrim's Progress, 1684, and the tradition of Everyman, fifteenth century) illustrate how allegorical reading can seem natural when it fits the education of the readership. Adult fairy tales such as St. Exupery's *The Little Prince* (1943) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) illustrate that the appeal of simple figures is not new.

Success books, from Franklin's autobiography, through Horatio Alger's boys' stories, to Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) indicate that Jonathan's ambitions are widely reflected in the popular audience. Little books, such as *The Little Prince*, *The Prophet* (1923), and *Love Story* (1970), tend to use stereotypes and simple symbols in similar ways. Jane Roberts's Seth books include descriptions of "reality," which Bach largely agrees with, that explain the dictation phenomena of Jonathan Livingston Seagull and Seth.

Further Study

"Richard (David) Bach." In *Current Biography Yearbook, 1973*. Outlines Bach's career as "gypsy pilot" through Jonathan Livingston Seagull and the beginning of his fame.

Foote, Timothy. "It's a Bird! It's a Plane!

It's Supergull!" *Time* (November 13, 1972): 60-62+. Bach and the controversial popularity and meaning of Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

Gardner, Richard M. "Stereotypes and Sentimentality: The Coarser Sieve." *Midwest Quarterly* (Summer 1976).

Analyzes the relation between feeling and meaning in *Love Story* and ——. "Toward a Definition of Stereotypes." *Midwest Quarterly* (Summer 1985): 476-498. Explores the popularized allegorical technique of Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

Roberts, Jane. *The Nature of Personal Reality: A Seth Book*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974. Compares authorship by dictation for Bach and Roberts.

Swift, Jonathan. "'Not Another Jonathan, Please!': A Swift Reviews." *English Journal* 62 (May 1973): 725-742.

Pans then praises Jonathan Livingston Seagull for young audiences.

Related Titles

Bach elaborates his messiah theme in two other best-selling books. As Jonathan can be likened to a messiah, Donald Shimoda, in *Illusions: Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* (1977), is directly called that name, and Bach's wife, Leslie Parrish, in *The Bridge Across Forever: A Love Story* (1984) is a new kind of messiah, a "soul-mate."

Illusions depicts the messianic characteristics as they would appear in a barnstorming pilot. (Shimoda, for instance, speaks philosophically, and his windshield is always clean.) The book's style is much more polished than Jonathan Livingston Seagull's but Shimoda's language resembles Jonathan's as he says that all should be sons of God, who commands, "BE HAPPY."

While Jonathan is allegorical, Shimoda is a real friend of the narrator's seen in ultimate terms, and Leslie Parrish is portrayed as a cherished mate and savior. In both books, the perspective of Jonathan Livingston Seagull ("real" soul, illusory bodies, the imminence of the infinite and holy) casts event and character in the breathless, sacred light of superlatives. In *The Bridge Across Forever*, Bach, more clearly autobiographical than before, lovingly depicts his soulmate and his long battle to let go of his solitude and marry her despite his vows to remain alone.

A second group of Bach's related works concerns flying, also seen as a superlative among experiences. *Stranger to the Ground* (1963), a novel with Bach naming himself as the hero, opens with photographs of his fighter's instrument panels, then meticulously details a courier mission to deliver top secret documents from England to France. *Biplane* (1966, 1983), with a prelude by Ray Bradbury, nostalgically describes flying in an old open-cockpit plane; and *Nothing by Chance: A Gypsy Pilot's Adventures in Modern America* (1969) is about barnstorming in those old planes. Like the messiah books, these tread a line between fiction and autobiography. Their rhapsodies about flight found regular approval from critics. *A Gift of Wings* (1974), a collection from several hundred pieces Bach wrote for flying magazines about the "religion of flight," features many moving personal essays on the nuances of flight.



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