

Jonathan Livingston Seagull Called 'Enticing'

— by Dee Wilson
Feature Editor

Although Richard Bach's newest novel Jonathan Livingston Seagull is placed in the juvenile section of the library, it is far from being juvenile in content or in meaning. Richard Bach has created a delightful story which will amuse children in its tale of the flights of a seagull somewhat pompously names what pompously named Jonathan Livingston; yet, the book has a much deeper meaning than this surface tale of adventure which will arouse the emotions of every adult.

Bach's bestseller should be a companion to St.-Exupery's *Little Prince*, for both books create fantasy worlds, in which the truthful significance of these make-believe worlds emerge to touch the hearts of all adults. Bach shares more than a technique of writing with St.-Exupery, for he too is a former Air Force pilot. It is appropriate that he should write about flying, for this is his first love. He brings a knowledge of the principles of aerodynamics and aerobatics to his book, which centers upon the efforts of a seagull to perfect his natural ability to fly.

From the beginning, the reader is aware that Jonathan Livingston is no ordinary seagull. The book opens with Jonathan alone in mid-air, practicing his flying, and this is the way Jonathan remains throughout the greater part of the book, a loner, attempting to discover new heights in the experience of flying. Jonathan finds it difficult to accept the premise for his *raison d'être* as being to eat and stay alive. He can't bear the shrieking of the gulls as they fight for the more delectable tidbits, treating each other without respect. Hoping to appease his concerned parents, Jonathan attempts to conform, to behave according to

the accepted dictums of the Flock. However, Jonathan fails, returning once more to his former preoccupation with the technique for controlled speed.

Jonathan practices hourly, suffering from doubts about the limitations of his own nature. He faces repeated failure in his attempts to fly swiftly at great velocities. One day after a near fatal attempt at dive-bombing, Jonathan inadvertently stumbles upon the clue to high speed flying, shortened wings. His excitement at his discovery is a feeling shared by all humans who have excelled at something new, who have participated in discovering a new idea that may free men's souls. Jonathan Livingston, as his name connotes, has found a new meaning to life because of his breakthrough in the world of flying. He is the first seagull to fly aerobatics; and it is through this new dimension that Jonathan hopes to enlighten and free the rest of the flock. Excited and exhilarated, Jonathan roars through the center of the Breakfast Flock one morning at a supersonic rate of 212 miles per hour. Jonathan finds that instead of being rewarded for his new discoveries, he is accused of irresponsibility, a crime requiring banishment to the Far Cliffs.

Jonathan Livingston had found a higher purpose to life, he had a better *raison d'être*. but, the Flock refused to listen but, the Flock refused to listen. This, I think is the central point of the book, the fact that we as human beings refuse to accept any discovery which would free us from our self-imposed bondage. Jonathan Livingston stumbles upon a technique of flying which would alter the whole society and pattern of living of the Flock, but they ignore his discovery. The first part of the book ends with Jonathan's ascension into a higher realm than earth, led there by two "Star-bright" gulls.

In this second world which

Jonathan believes to be heaven, gulls speak via telepathy; and, he is further instructed in the art of aerodynamics by Sullivan, a seagull of higher knowledge. While here, he comes to the realization that the matter of greatest significance in life is not necessarily acceptance by others, but perfection in that which gives one greatest happiness, in his case, flying. Even in this higher world Jonathan retains his uniqueness, learning quickly and skipping over several stages, on his way to perfection. Always inquisitive, Jonathan emboldens himself to speak to Chiang, the oldest and wisest seagull in this realm. Chiang informs him that heaven is not a tangible place but a condition of the mind and soul.

Once Jonathan reaches a state of perfection, he has created a heaven within his own soul. Chiang explains that reaching this state of perfection requires realizing one is bound only by limits he imposes upon himself, not by any tangible restraints. Slowly, under the guidance of the Elder, Jonathan comes to understand that he can do anything he desires. He can even attain "perfect speed" by acknowledging the fact he is not caged by his physical body. Jonathan frees his soul and thus becomes perfect. Chiang departs soon after Jonathan acquires this capacity, admonishing him to concentrate upon the principle of love. Hounded by his words, Jonathan decides to return to earth to teach others the freedom to be found in the truths

Chiang has revealed to him.

In part three, Jonathan descends to earth with several pupils, also outcasts of the rigorously structured seagull society. Jonathan has his pupils practice over the resting area of the Breakfast Flock so that all birds can view their skills. Jonathan's Tom Sawyer trick works, soon attracting other young seagulls to his training sessions -- seagulls who ignore the Flock's law of no communication with outcasts. He teaches his curious students not only how to fly, but more importantly he instructs them in how to be free. As the days go by, the elders of the Breakfast Flock become more disgruntled, their dislike heightened by the increase in young members listening to the instructions of Jonathan. They hope for some type of disaster which will discredit the teachings of this former outcast. Their hope is fulfilled by the disastrous accident of Fletcher. Fletcher, one of Jonathan's more promising students, flies straight into a cliff. He survives this fatal accident, panicking the Flock. Fletcher's sudden return to life, creates electric fear which spreads rapidly through the Flock. Jonathan and Fletcher are forced to escape to safety via Jonathan's capacity for perfect and instantaneous speed.

The book concludes with the return of Fletcher to carry forward the program of learning instigated by Jonathan. Jonathan

fades into transparency, imparting some words of advice before he leaves. He admonishes Fletcher to keep finding himself, a little more each day, to search for the true, unlimited Fletcher seagull. Fletcher realizes as Jonathan had previously come to know, that his only impediment to freedom is himself -- his personal fears and prejudices. Thus, Jonathan Livingston becomes more than a seagull. He is the symbol of freedom for all human souls, caged by their natural limitations.

Richard Bach has created a fantasy world of seagulls which reflects our own world. He writes of a permanent human problem, the search for freedom; however, Bach uses a seagull and the sphere of flying as a greater metaphor for the universal quest for freedom. The book is written with the contemporary world in mind because it defines the human problem of spirituality. Jonathan frees himself of all restrictions, both those imposed by himself and those laws of society which hindered his quest for the unlimited and therefore for the perfect Jonathan Livingston. Jonathan Seagull affirms the worth of all life in his discoveries of a deeper meaning in life than mere consumption. Every human heart soars and plummets downward with Jonathan's attempts at flight. Bach relates the exhilaration of flying in such a convincing manner that the reader feels he too has been in flight.

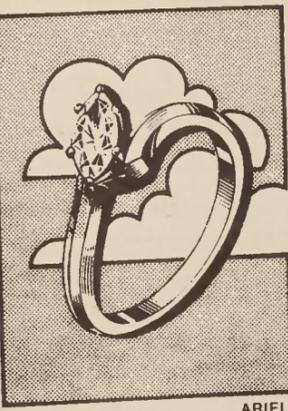
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