



What's All This Flap About a Seagull?

A NEW BOOK, *JONATHAN LIVINGSTON SEAGULL*, IS MAKING MOST OF THE BEST-SELLER LISTS. EVEN CHRISTIAN BOOKSTORES SELL THOUSANDS OF COPIES. BUT SHOULD THEY?

BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Last summer, while on vacation in the mountains of North Carolina, a friend (who describes herself as a "seeker of truth") handed me two books to read. One, *The Seth Material*, was a collection of utterances from the mouth of an occult medium. Within 30 seconds I discerned its nature and put it aside.

The other book was *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, a tiny hardback which within a few months has sold over one million copies, breaking all records since *Gone with the Wind*. It seemed to be nothing more than an illustrated parable concerning a seagull who learned aerobatics. I settled down in a rope hammock stretched between two white oaks and began to read.

I was captivated. As a pilot I love books on flying, and this one was especially fascinating, for the author had the uncanny ability to take me with him as he dipped and looped in the form of his thinking-talking seagull, Jonathan.

As I read I began to realize that Jonathan had all the essential qualities of a great spiritual parable. Jonathan is a seagull who yearns to fly better and faster than any other gull. His mother and father both discourage him, one telling him to act like the other gulls and the other telling him life is hard. But Jonathan, to paraphrase Thoreau, beats his wings to the sound of a different drummer. Not satisfied with the routines of seagullery, pecking and squawking for a few morsels of fish, he sacrifices the carnal nature to learn how to do things no other seagull can do, aerobatics.

However, the elders of the Flock do not look kindly on Jonathan's new discoveries and warn him not to break with tradition. But Jonathan refuses to obey the voice of men when a higher "voice" is calling. He wants to learn to dive, but is told by the elders that since gulls have long wings

they can never dive and should be content to flap about at low altitudes. Jonathan makes the incredible discovery that if he partially folds his wings, he can dive like a falcon. In one blinding burst of speed he hits 214 m.p.h. ("terminal velocity"), pulling out of a screaming dive right in the middle of a gull-gathering, scattering the traditionalists into a feather-flying-flurry.

I lay in my hammock chuckling in delight as I pictured a new Spirit-filled Christian coming back into his staid church "walking and leaping and praising God." My, how such things ruffle feathers.

The inevitable business meeting on the beach followed. And Jonathan, although he naively expected to be honored for his new discoveries, is instead cast out of the Flock. It sounded too familiar to be funny.

Then the book changed. No longer was it a well-written parable with spiritual overtones. It became something else, almost sinister. Alone Jonathan practiced: night navigation, slow rolls and high speed dives. Eventually two radiant gulls appeared and ushered him to some special place which sounded like Heaven, only it wasn't. Later, he returned to the Flock and through a series of miracles and healings tried to show the other gulls how to fly. They wanted to call him the son of the Great Gull, but Jonathan insisted there was no Great Gull, only the idea of perfection. Self-perfection, he says, is everything. Finally Jonathan left, counseling his many disciples to love the Flock.

Every free-spirited Christian should be able to identify with the first part of the parable. Jonathan, like Augustine, Luther and Wesley, broke the bondage of tradition and routineness and went on to the higher things of God. But subtly, yet with satanic cleverness, the book shifts its emphasis to finally become a melange of occult messages. Jonathan is no fallen

flyer needing God's help. Indeed, there is no God, only the message of Scientology which insists on the power of self above everything—all mixed up with the Hindu idea of perfection.

Author Bach used to be a reader in the Church of Christ, Scientist, and Christian Science is one of the strongest strains in Jonathan. Mary Baker Eddy taught that evil, death and birth are illusory. Her philosophy, like Jonathan's, projected man as a timeless being and taught that health can be achieved, not through the touch of Jesus, but by man's realization of God's perfectness for his life.

A little background research on Bach's life gave more understanding. Back in 1959 Bach, a freelance aviation writer, was strolling near the beach in California when he heard a voice saying, "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." (John Livingston is the name of a great racing pilot of the 1930's). Bach turned, but no one was there. Shaken, he returned to his room, sat on the bed and asked the "voice" to explain. Again he heard the voice and grabbing a pen, Bach began to write furiously—the story of Jonathan. Precisely at the moment when the gull was cast out of the Flock, the voice stopped. For weeks Bach tried to end the story himself, but could not. He tucked it away for eight years.

In the meantime, Bach began a soft flirtation with the occult which ended with him sulking in occult bookstores and eventually, even consulting mediums.

Then, in the winter of 1967, Bach awoke at 5:00 a.m. from a strange dream. Another vision was materializing, only this one had heavy undercurrents of spiritism. It was the rest of the parable, heavy with occult symbolism and accompanied by what experts call "automatic writing." While it was obvious that the spirit who dictated the first half of the book was benign, the spirit dictating the rest of the book had definite underworld tendencies, for the remainder

of the story is a terrifying jumble of Christian Science, theosophy, Scientology and Jung psychology.

Those who know Bach say that Jonathan is simply an extension of his confused yearnings to be set free; yearnings, by the way, which have led him to desert his wife and six children since he could no longer live with the impingements of marriage, resign his commission with the Air National Guard rather than trim his mustache, and even withdraw from the Church of Christ, Scientist (not because he disagrees with their teachings, but because he has come to hate all religious labels).

It wasn't until November of last year, when *Time* magazine published its in-depth story on Bach, that the rest of the pieces began to fall in place. *Time* (Nov. 19, 1972) stated that one of Bach's favorite consorts was Jane Roberts, a medium, who receives messages from the spirit world and especially from a character who identifies himself through her as "Seth."

There it was, *The Seth Material*, the book that had been handed me along with Jonathan last summer. "They go together," my friend had said. But it took six months to realize just how much truth there was in that simple statement.

In commenting on Bach and Jonathan, *Time* stated, "The book clearly speaks to some kind of need in America for words of inspiration that do not instantly turn to ashes on the tongue. The Catholic Mass has been largely shriven of ritual mystery. Protestant sermons are soggy with sociology . . . Even against what seems to be common sense, it is essential to believe in the possibilities of individual endeavor. There, suddenly, stands *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, an Horatio Alger in feathers."

Time, like *Jonathan*, is partially right. But the answer does not lie in Eastern religions, Science of the Mind, or even the power of positive thinking. The answer lies in being set free through Jesus Christ.

Freedom," says Bach, "is everything." The meaning is unfortunately missed (and misused) in his book. Jesus said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). But He also said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life . . ." (John 14:6).

I remembered those trees holding up my hammock. *They'd like to be free, too, I thought, liberated from the roots that hold them down. But for them to be set "free," would mean they would die. Freedom does not lie in the liberation of the mind, rather it lies in the transforming of the mind and the submission of the heart to God as revealed in Jesus.*

"There is a way," says the writer of Proverbs, "which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Proverbs 14:12).

So, unfortunately, I am forced to say about a beautifully-written, but obviously Satan-inspired book, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*: It is for the birds. Leave it alone.

