

The Geoffrey Jenkins Files, Part 1: 1959-1966

by Wesley Britton

Books reviewed in this file: *A Twist of Sand* (1959); *A Grue of Ice* (1962); *A River of Diamonds* (1964); *Hunter Killer* (1966)

When the Geoffrey Jenkins estate commissioned the complete re-publication of the South African writer's 16 novels by iUniverse in 2009, some publicity focused on the connections between Jenkins and his friend, Ian Fleming. True, Geoffrey Jenkins is not exactly a household name while Fleming and his most famous creation are evergreen icons of international popular culture. True, Fleming and Jenkins worked together on the *Sunday Times*, Fleming wrote glowing reviews of Jenkins titles, and the two spent time swapping ideas about potential James Bond stories. In 007 circles, Jenkins is best known for the book no one has ever read, save for an unknown number of editors for Glidrose Publications, that being the legendary lost manuscript for the first intended Bond continuation novel, *Per Fine Ounce*.

But while these connections might indeed help raise awareness for the works of Geoffrey Jenkins, one possible inference might be that Jenkins is only of interest for his presence in Ian Fleming's shadow. No conclusion could be more unfair, even if Jenkins himself felt a strong influence by his friend. For one matter, Jenkins continued to pump out his thrillers long after the passing of Fleming, consistently earning a wide range of critical appreciation with more than credible sales in 23 languages. His books remained in print for decades, some were made into audiobooks and films. The subjects, styles, settings, and characters for Fleming and Jenkins are often as different as the proverbial apples and oranges. Jenkins was not primarily a spy novelist and his most famous character, who featured in only two books, is Commander Geoffrey Peace and Commander Peace is no Commander Bond. That's no disparagement. Peace, at least in his first outing, is as strong, resilient, and primitively brutal as 007 when need be. But his connections to British intelligence were only a small slice of his experience, most of that either at sea or on the coast of South Africa.

This might be part of the reason the reputation of Geoffrey Jenkins has suffered in the past two decades. As many of his adventures can't be classified as spy dramas, he is barely mentioned in studies or discussions of the espionage genre. Alongside the popular underwater stories of Clive Cussler, many Jenkins books were essentially sea adventures although, unlike Cussler, many Jenkins titles were best categorized as mystery or detective or a more elusive pigeon-hole for reviewers. More importantly, databases of critical studies and anthologies for writers in English focus on American and British writers—African-based Geoffrey Jenkins was almost a genre unto himself.

So the intention here is to give potential readers useful glimpses into the Jenkins canon to perhaps get a handle on which books they'd like to read in the new century. After all, I presume few fans will be interested in all 16 titles but might like to sample some of the

better choices. Some books are classic adventures—others are forgettable artifacts of the old pulp thriller genre. Some hold up very well after all these years—others are more than dated. Some are richly descriptive stories drawn from Jenkins’s knowledge and research in a wide variety of fields—others, well, even Fleming had his clunkers.

As I was only provided 13 of the 16 published novels for review, *The Watering Place of Good Peace* (1960), Jenkins second novel, is not included in this overview of Jenkins first decade as a popular novelist. For ordering information about the IUniverse reprints, go to:

www.iuniverse.com/Bookstore/

or

en.wordpress.com/tag/iuniverse-publishing

A Twist of Sand (1959)

"Geoffrey Jenkins has the supreme gift of originality. *A Twist of Sand* is a literate, imaginative first novel in the tradition of high and original adventure." –Ian Fleming (note 1)

Jenkins’s debut adventure, which sold over 3 million copies worldwide, introduced Commander Geoffrey Peace. It certainly had all the elements for a character-driven action film, and one was indeed tried out in 1968 starring Richard “Bulldog Drummond” Johnson and Honor “Pussy Galore” Blackman. Then and now, the effort isn’t highly regarded. Perhaps casting was part of the problem. As I turned the pages of the original novel, I saw different faces in my mind like Humphrey Bogart and either Ingrid Bergman or Lauren Bacall in the roles of Peace and the doomed scientist, Dr. Anne Nielsen. Peter Lorre would have been perfectly cast as the would-be entrepreneur Stein who is willing to blackmail, kidnap, and murder in his quest to lay his hands on rare beetles in seemingly inaccessible mountains on the deadly “skeleton coast” of South Africa.

Sure, I’m a decade off making these choices, but I think of a Bogart-style actor as the literary Peace in *Twist* as Geoffrey Peace in 1959 was a dark, haunted sea captain. Peace had an almost mystical connection with the sea, especially the south Atlantic where he had an intimate familial, personal, and economic inter-dependency with that “Skeleton Coast.” In the first of four parts to the story, told from the Commander’s first person point of view, Peace demonstrates his mastery of the waters rimming South Africa and the ways of the rough-hewn men who sail it. He’s clearly a man with a past as he’s living under an assumed name which is the means the oily Stein can use to manipulate Peace to take him on a voyage to discover the insects the German is certain will make him rich. In part two, we learn what this past was. In World War II, Commander Peace, an experienced and skilled submarine skipper, was tapped to lead a secret mission to hunt and destroy an atomic-powered U-boat, a mission Peace accomplishes when he finds the boat in a hidden atoll on the Skeleton Coast. But he is only able to find it due to maps given him by Simon Peace, his grandfather, who not only knows the area well but wills a piece of it to Geoffrey. Peace is forbidden to reveal the purpose of his hunt, even from his own crew including his second-in-command, the ever loyal John Garland. As a result,

the Admiralty, unaware of the mission and Peace's special knowledge of the region, court-martials Peace and cashier him out of the British Navy when he returns to port.

So, in part three, Peace, Garland, and the rest of his private crew are unwilling accomplices for Stein as they first sail to the inhospitable bay where Stein forces Peace to lead him inland to the ultimate conflict where Peace must defeat both Stein and his bodyguard, a maimed survivor of the destroyed U-boat. Then, Peace must survive nature itself—lions, jackals, sand and storms—while coming to a new awareness of himself due to the probing insights of Ann, the insect expert who finds metaphors and meanings in both the beauty and savagery in the African mountains.

What Jenkins offers is, first, a fast-paced adventure yarn that builds in different times and settings, described with the authority of a man richly aware of detail and an artist's eye. In *Twist*, Peace is a forceful figure under the sea for his government, at sail on his own boat, and on land removed from his natural environment. Throughout the book, Peace is a character we see unveiled as a deeper figure than what he might seem—a wronged man, a man able to tear an opponent's shoulder loose while breaking into sweats under duress—and ultimately, as Anne teaches him, a hard-shelled beetle who has lost his wings. It's their dialogue (rarely a Jenkins strong suit) that elevates the story from a, say, H. Rider Haggard story of fantastic, exotic explorations into a quest the lead actor didn't even know he was on.

Still, the one drawback to the story is the unrealized quasi-romance between Peace and Anne that logically could not be consummated under the circumstances. Instead, Peace has a symbolic baptism, of sorts, when he carries her corpse across a desert to a shipwrecked frigate trapped in the sands. But by that point, it made sense for Peace to be forced to be stripped of everything he knew and cared for to stage his renewal. Yes, it would take a Bogie/ Bacall team to breathe life into these characters onscreen. But we don't really need them—the page is more than enough to flesh out a story worthy of new appreciation.

A Grue of Ice (1962)
(Published in the U.S. as *The Disappearing Island*)

"All the sustained excitement of a thriller in the boundless wastes of the Antarctic!"
Illustrated London News

"Vivid and exciting".
Punch

When Geoffrey Jenkins third novel appeared in 1962, his friend Ian Fleming reviewed the book for *The Sunday Times* just as he had for *A Twist of Sand*. As Jeremy Duns noted, Fleming compared Jenkins "favorably to John Buchan, Hammond Innes and Geoffrey Household" saying Jenkins was "in the ranks of the great adventure writers." (note 2) This time around, Fleming was half correct.

Ice begins with Captain Bruce Weatherby, another hardened seadog with World War II experience, out on a sail to investigate the path of plankton between Africa and South America. In short order, a storm hits, a handy whale-spotting helicopter pops by, and female pilot Helen Upton whisks Weatherby and his Tristan Island companion to a factory ship where her father was looking for Weatherby. There, Sir Frederick Upton claimed he needs Weatherby's oceanic knowledge to help him find the breeding grounds for the blue whale, hopefully in a zone free of international treaties banning the hunting of whales.

Of course, Upton has, uh, other fish to fry beyond blue whales and his real quest has something to do with a mysterious Thompson's Island, a place only four people have ever seen—Weatherby being one of them during his WW II mission to sink a German ship. (As it happens, that ship's radio operator is now in Upton's service.) But what is of special meaning for finding the island worthy of outrunning a Norwegian government warship tracking Upton? The story gets muddy as the apparently fearless Helen, who carries around a bullet in her hip everyone knows about except her father, becomes traumatized by having to land on ice. She then, with little warning, flies off and alerts the Norwegians to her father's whereabouts. A few pages later, she's back on ship and apparently no harm done—after her father shoots down a seaplane closing in on him. Why does Upton suddenly drop all civility and threaten Weatherby with death to obtain a very rare map—and why would Weatherby be carrying the one and only copy of that map with him on his original mission to hunt plankton thousands of miles from this legendary island?

After the wobbly first half, *Ice* becomes what Fleming claimed it was—a first-class adventure. In the words of Jeremy Duns, "Jenkins' novels often feature tough men scrabbling for a prize across harsh terrain - in Africa, the ocean or, very effectively in *A Grue of Ice*, Antarctica." This happens when the story focuses on the insane Upton, his trigger-happy assistant, the radio operator, Helen, and Weatherby and his friend forced to travel around the South Atlantic seeking Thompson's Island—and the fateful mineral it contains. The final chapters are as exciting as any thriller's grand finale—but no spoilers here. *Ice* might not be among Jenkins's very best, but well worth enjoying on your next vacation—assuming you're not at sea.

The River of Diamonds (1964)

"A top-class adventure story about the efforts of a diamond-hunting expedition to find a fabulous hoard on the sea-bed of South -West Africa' (Namibia)."

The Observer

In its opening chapters, "Thriller" isn't the most precise term to define *River Of Diamonds*. After all, the first 70 pages or so are set in a courtroom where no crime is on trial, but rather the fate of a deep-sea diamond mining license. One contender is a lone prospector named Shelbourne who claims the rights due to a questionable document signed by his former partner 30 years previously—a partner who disappeared mysteriously. The other contender is John Tregard, a man who represents a large consortium with the means and resources to launch a full-blown operation which is what the South African authorities are hoping for. Tregard wins the day, and the rest of the book chronicles the increasingly dangerous test of wills between the resentful Shelbourne and a mystified Tregard who discovers diamonds aren't the only treasures in this slow-burning mystery.

As Geoffrey Jenkins observed in his “Author’s Note,” *River* was like *A Twist of Sand* in that some of the scientific background was based on historical events. Both books were set on the same “Skeleton Coast” and old Nazi U-boat sailors are part of the mix. However, *Twist* and *River* are very different books, the latter revolving around the plot far more than any central character. Tregard isn’t the one with the haunted past, but rather a bit of an adventurer encountering colorful opponents and compatriots with a wide spectrum of motives and desires. When he’s interacting with such types, *River* can be engaging—and when the answers come into focus in the final chapters, *River of Diamonds* does become a full-blown thriller with surprises and unique twists. It’s not a book assembling clichés and predictable sub-plots.

The *River of Diamonds* was made into a film in 1990, reportedly after decades of attempts to bring it to the large screen.

Hunter Killer (1966)

“. . . a thriller to grip your attention, full of unpredictable twists and turns and packed with action. . . . Since the author is the accomplished Geoffrey Jenkins, all you have to do is perch uncomfortably on the edge of your chair, prepare to bite your nails, and enjoy every minute of it.”

The Manchester Evening News

In between *A Twist of Sand* and its sequel, *Hunter Killer*, Jenkins had published three novels. But when *Hunter Killer* appeared in 1966, Geoffrey Jenkins seemed to have morphed into a completely different author and Geoffrey Peace had become a completely different character. At the end of *Twist*, Peace was still a private ship owner whose official name was still in “the bad books.” But the opening paragraphs of *Hunter Killer* are startling as Peace has apparently been so rehabilitated that a bogus funeral has been arranged for him at sea with a flotilla of American and British warships on hand as honor guard, not to mention worldwide TV coverage of this tragedy. What happened in the intervening years to elevate a once disreputable submariner to this level of appreciation?

The narrator, Peace’s loyal shipmate John Garland, doesn’t tell us much about what happened in the years after the events of *A Twist of Sand*. Instead, the opening pages show us Garland mourning his friend, finding a mysterious CIA agent attempting to break into Peace’s steel coffin, and then learning Peace is going to be buried at sea by way of a depth charge flung from a battle cruiser. Odd, that. Odder still, Garland goes to visit his old boss, the apparent retired chief of Naval intelligence, to discover Geoffrey Peace is very much alive, his death a ruse to allow him to lead a secret mission. The mission: the secret launch of a secret missile called “Little Bear” that will carry a rather interesting astronaut—the Vice President of the U.S. Peace’s job—to captain the submarine that will send the Veep into orbit.

If all that sounds a bit Bondian, that’s likely because the fake death scene is very like the opening sequence in the film version of *You Only Live Twice* (1967). As *Hunter Killer*

appeared one year before that Sean Connery outing, stories circulate that the Jenkins book was a direct influence on the set-up for 007's Japanese adventure. Jenkins expert Jeremy Duns—who thinks highly of the novel—discounts such speculation, but believes this scene was a metaphor for Jenkins' grief over the death of his friend, Ian Fleming, and suggests Jenkins laced *Hunter Killer* with subtle tributes to *Goldfinger* and the Bond short story, "A Hildebrand Rarity." (note 3)

Does all this relegate *Hunter Killer* to a footnote in Bond history? Well, on its own, *Hunter Killer* does come off as a contrived, artificial plot. There's no life-and-death conflict involved, no threat to the stability of the world. Instead, the Yanks want to send up a trial run for a missile quietly with the help of the Brits, and to do this quietly the Vice President of the U.S. is on hand to pilot it. A few members of the government know it, but not the CIA nor the U.S. Navy. So Geoffrey Peace finds himself grabbing the VP off a U.S. submarine and trying to outrun a sub of a friendly power. With the VP on board, naturally no one is out to sink him. So—how does a Vice President disappear without anyone noticing for weeks on end? Are the public relations of a secret mission so valuable that the VP can avoid all his other Constitutional duties for several weeks? In order to maintain secrecy, is it necessary to subject the VP to possible death by ramming a sub through a coral ceiling, weather a storm with the help of a handy fisherman who happens to know the ship's translator, and permit the entire Seventh Fleet to engage in risky rescues and take on the expense of tracking the VP down for nine days? What if the President of the U.S. cancels the mission, tries to inform the Veep, falls ill, and our hero refuses to stop the mission? This Commander Peace, two-dimensional for two-thirds of the book, is now the villain. Or perhaps just nuts.

If all this sounds like an implausible thrill-ride without one foot grounded in reality, that's *Hunter Killer*. Gone are the rich descriptive passages drawn from Jenkins' knowledge and background to be substituted with obviously farcical contraptions like the "Little Bear" missile itself. Why does it have to be transported to a remote location where apparently all it takes to launch it is a two-day set-up with a handful of scientists and a few crates of equipment on a French freighter? If an astronaut is on board, how does this qualify as a missile in the first place? I kept looking for clues that all this was intended as tongue-in-cheek nonsense, and scenes like the "Devil Fish" nearly eating a sub signal Jenkins was simply trying to be outlandish. If you're into the Dirk Pitt books of Clive Cussler or the pot-boilers of Jack Higgins, this is that breed of book. In fact, the changing style of Jack Higgins sprang to my mind reading *Hunter Killer*. Like Jenkins who had given us books with literary aspirations (*A Twist of Sand*), Higgins had come to prominence with the excellent 1975 *The Eagle Has Landed*. But by the time Higgins began his Sean Dillon books, such depths were dumped overboard in favor of straight-forward hard-edged throwaways. Think of *Hunter Killer* as Sean Dillon underwater without his whiskey, memorable supporting characters, and all the bloodletting.

The good news—it would take five years, but Geoffrey Jenkins would return, and in far better form.

Notes

1. All the short blurbs from book reviews used here came from the official Geoffrey Jenkins website:

www.geoffrey-jenkins.co.za/

2. Duns, Jeremy. "Gold Dust." *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang Magazine*, Issue 2 (Winter 2005), pp. 39-47

3. Duns, Jeremy. "Rest In Peace." CommanderBond.net, March 15, 2006.
<http://commanderbond.net/3144/rest-in-peace.html>

To hear a Jan. 20, 2010 audio interview by Wes Britton with Ron Payne, literary agent for the Geoffrey Jenkins estate, check out the "Past Programs" archives for the KSAV.org radio program, "Dave White Presents," at:

www.audioentertainment.org/dwp