

The Geoffrey Jenkins Files, Part 2: The Second Era

by Wesley Britton

Books reviewed in this file: *The Scend of the Sea* (1971); *South Trap* (1979); *A Ravel of Waters* (1981); *The Unripe Gold* (1983); *Fireprint* (1984)

“try reading Jenkins’ novels, especially *Scend of the Sea* and *A Cleft of Stars*. Jenkins’ novels have a very evocative feel for South Africa, and he is an adventure novelist in the purest sense - which Fleming wasn’t. Jenkins’ novels are perpetually fresh. He lacks some of Fleming’s complexities and literary touches, and does tend towards ‘thick-ear’ dialogue, but I think he would have made an interesting Bond novelist.”

--Nick Kincaid (note 1)

After the publication of *Hunter Killer* in 1966, five years would go by before another Jenkins book would appear. Why? In an article published in *The Star* (25 May 1971), Jenkins claimed one reason was that he needed to get Ian Fleming out of his system:

"I took time off to re-find myself. ... I was suffering under what I call the Fleming Syndrome. Ian was a great friend of mine and gave me plenty of encouragement when *Twist* was launched. I used to look him up whenever I was in London. So I suppose it was natural my writing should drift towards the Bond style and my plots should begin to take on that form. That and an eye on the film rights. I couldn't shake it off even though I began to loathe the film industry. So I dropped everything and set about reassessing myself." (see note 1)

But Jenkins was clearly not letting any grass grow under his feet. One reason for his disillusionment with the film industry was that, in 1966, he was working with producer Charles H. Schneer for Columbia Pictures on a contracted screenplay called *The Fifth Paw of the Lion*, a film that was never produced. According to literary agent Ron Payne, a second screenplay was also commissioned that didn’t go anywhere as sea adventures are costly to produce and rarely sure-fire hits. In addition, the Jenkins archives have files with references to several unpublished novels that might have been written during this period: *A Kiss of Thorns*, which his publisher rejected, *Disquietly to His Grave*, *A Gate of Blood*, and *A Knot of Fire*. (note 2)

Then, during the 1970s, Jenkins published six books, two of them non-fiction. In 1971, the same year as *Scend of the Sea* was published, Jenkins also released a revision of his non-fiction work, *A Century of History: The Story of Potchefstroom*, which he had first published in 1938 when he was only seventeen. His second non-fiction work, co-written with his wife Eve Palmer, was *The Companion Guide to South Africa* (1978).

Of the four Jenkins novels published during the 1970s, two were not made available for review here: *A Cleft of Stars* (1973) and *A Bridge of Magpies* (1974). Readers curious about these titles can find synopses at the Geoffrey Jenkins website. So this file includes two books from the ‘70s and the first three that appeared in the following decade.

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The Scend of the Sea (1971)

(Published in the U.S. as *The Hollow Sea*)

"Geoffrey Jenkins can write with a rare compelling fervour."

Times Literary Supplement (note 3)

Published five years after *Hunter Killer*, Jenkins next story was somewhat of a return to his more realistic style with circumstances very loosely based on real events. It is the only one of his books included in the survey, "Africa, Crime and Mystery Writing" in which the reviewer noted: "Many South African crime authors have achieved an international readership. Geoffrey Jenkins is a productive adventure writer whose early *Scend of the Sea* . . . is a pure mystery." (note 4) Emlyn Brown claimed the novel inspired his "lifelong search for the legendary lost British steamship SS Waratah off the Transkei Wild Coast." (Brown later became co-creator of the official Geoffrey Jenkins website.)

Scend is another example of how well Jenkins could craft memorable introductions by getting a hefty chunk of exposition recounted without long narratives. *River of Diamonds* used a courtroom to put all the major players and their backgrounds on center stage; *Scend* begins with principal character Ian Fairlie setting up the mystery, not to mention considerable scientific details about his experimental weather ship, the Walvis Bay, by sharing all this to a woman standing in his cabin Fairlie doesn't know but to whom he is immediately drawn. Fairlie is descendent of a grandfather who, with all the other passengers and crew, disappeared when the ship, the Waratah, sank without a trace in 1909. In 1967, Fairlie's father was the pilot of the Gemsbok, a Viscount airliner of South African Airways which disappeared in exactly the same place. Now, come hell and very rough high water indeed, Fairlie is determined to solve the mystery, no matter the costs.

Scend is essentially another man v. nature battle with a splash of romance. For example, Jenkins continually foreshadows the troubles to come by repeatedly inserting Fairlie's comments on how what his quest would mean to a woman "whose name I didn't even know yet." Then again, character names or the characters themselves aren't really the point. Neither is the plot. For the most part, the episodes are a series of set pieces where the ocean bashes and crashes Fairlie's ships, planes, and those trapped inside—resulting in the death of Fairlie's brother.

While *Scend* is one of the most frequently recommended titles in the Jenkins canon, it is neither a "pure mystery" nor inspirational. The novel's structure is mainly Fairlie pushing a ship through a storm, a digressive court of inquiry asking why he did it, and then Fairlie pushing another ship through another storm. After some of the memorable if fantastic climaxes of the novels of the 1960s, *Scend* is riddled with hints of coming attractions but the payoff just doesn't compare with other Jenkins finales.

Despite my misgivings, *Scend* is a book that has continued to enjoy a long shelf life. *Scend was first* republished by Harper Collins in 1980 before BBC Audiobooks America issued an unabridged audiobook in January 1993 as read by Patrick Malahide.

South Trap (1979)

(Published in paperback as *Southtrap*.)

"The terrors of the South Atlantic and a gun-happy villain.....a rattling good yarn".

The Daily Telegraph

South Trap opens with the narration of John Shotton who becomes captain of the *Quest*, a converted factory whaler, after its owner is pistol-whipped. At the last minute, Shotton has the responsibility for transporting some 30 tourists and scientists to the Prince Edward islands with something of a makeshift crew. Among them, Shotton has a new first officer named Rolf Wegger he knows little about and a partner he has just met, Linn Prestrud, the ship owner's daughter. In short order, Shotton finds himself in the center of a cast of characters with a variety of interests. These include thrill seekers wanting to sail around the South Atlantic and sub-Antarctic regions following the path of Admiral Sir James Clark Ross's 1840 voyage of exploration in HMS "Erebus." More serious passengers include geologists excited about touring the remote islands, weather experts eager to launch a new buoy and balloons, ornithologists eager to see birds of the Antarctic, not to mention a protector of the civil liberties of penguins.

But other passengers have personal desires linked to the more recent past which are slowly unveiled as John and Linn begin a romance in the days after her father's death. Then there's a murder on board ship, a mayday call from a distant windjammer, and then the *Quest* is hijacked during a festive dinner as the body count grows . . .

Despite some foreshadowing of troubles to come in comments regarding Mr. Wegger, *South Trap* is one of Jenkins most subtle works, with a slow, almost casual introduction to the *Quest* and its principals. It's drama without the melo, at least for the first half of the mystery. Then, many of Jenkins familiar tropes return—a crazed enemy willing to sacrifice everything in a hunt for gold and revenge, a heroine who's fate isn't known until the last sentence, and yet another flashback to the U-boats of World War II. In publicity for the book, it was noted:

"Geoffrey Jenkins has taken the liberty with the date when the Royal Navy visited Prince Edward Island during World War II. In fact, the cruiser HMS Neptune searched the remote islands of the Southern Ocean for secret U-boat bases in October 1940 and not a year later. Likewise he changed slightly the location of the German raiders secret rendezvous area in the southern Indian Ocean code-named Sibirien." (see note 3)

As usual, such historical references are essentially launching points for the story and only provide a bit of backdrop that establishes the villain's motives and the "Macguffan" the baddies seek. In short, the Jenkins formula is on display in one of his lengthiest books, so the surprises are few for those who've experienced his earlier novels. But this time around, the formula is enriched with new circumstances, new technology, and a stronger thread of mystery than some titles. It was a good book to end the 1970s with.

A Ravel of Waters (1981)

"Geoffrey Jenkins has the touch that creates villains and heroes-and even icy heroines-with a few vivid words."

Liverpool Post

"A style which combines the best of Nevil Shute and Ian Fleming."

Books and Bookman

Geoffrey Jenkins started the 1980s by doing things a bit differently. *Ravel*, for example, opened not with the usual first person introduction by the principal character, but rather with two transcripts of documents signaling something Top Secret was involved in this yarn. After this cinematic teaser, yachtsman Peter Rainer takes over the tale at the moment his experimental ship, the “Albatross” arrives in Capetown after a record-setting sail from South America. Without a moment to rest, he’s quickly recruited to captain another, larger sailing ship called the *Jetwind* which has an owner who’s invested \$20 million in its future. The *Jetwind* too has break-through technology including increased wind power which decreases its need for diesel fuel. But it’s holed up in Port Arthur in the Falkland Islands. Due to political tensions between Argentina and the British colonial government, *Jetwind*’s maiden voyage has been cut short which is upsetting any chance of attracting new investors. So Rainer is dispatched to the Falklands to get things going again—a setting not typical of previous Jenkins titles.

Then, we’re introduced to American journalist Paul Brocton and navigator John Tideman, who both turn out to be more than they seem. We meet Argentinean First Officer Anton Grohman who’s clearly the fly in the ointment. And there’s sail maker Kay Fenton who’s got more going on than becoming Rainer’s love interest. At first, the crew is involved in a daring escape, getting *Jetwind* out of Port Stanley under the nose of the Argentinean navy. Then Rainer learns both America and England are closely monitoring what *Jetwind* can do as there are major implications for submarine traffic around Cape Horn where the Soviet Union is vying for control of the waters. And then there’s the Top Secret secret in *Jetwind*’s sails . . . not to mention the Top Secret Soviet base dispersing a unique fuel for their subs from a fantastic base hidden by a massive iceberg.

A Ravel of Waters was a departure for Jenkins in a number of ways, the most important being the shift to looking to the future rather than the past. No ex-Nazis or Third Reich treasures. Instead, Jenkins’ research took him, and us, into new scientific developments more advanced than his previous uses of history, geology, and oceanography. The Cold War themes provide the situation with higher stakes than greedy terrorism or a simple revenge plot. *A Ravel of Waters*, in short, was one of Jenkins’ best.

(Ulverscroft publishing brought out a Large Print edition in June 1992.)

The Unripe Gold (1983)

"His storytelling has a drive that is compulsive".
Scotsman

In 2005, Jeremy Duns convincingly made the case that *Unripe Gold* was not a re-working of the missing *Per Fine Ounce* 007 manuscript. (note 5) For one matter, the clues we have regarding *PFO* don’t line up with anything in *Unripe Gold*. Duns wrote:

”Set in the diamond mining town of Oranjemund in south-west Africa, it features a crazed German scientist who has discovered a ton of the extremely rare metal, which he intends to use to tip the balance of the Cold War. As in *Thunderball*, a group of terrorists masquerade as prospectors. The town is protected by a Major Rive, the head of a security service employed by Consolidated Diamond Mines. As a terrorist approaches the town’s perimeter fence, the guard on duty mistakes him for Rive:

"What was bugging him tonight? Sneezer asked himself. Maybe one of his hunches - and no one could deny that on a famous occasion Major Rive's hunch had paid off when there had been a James Bond attempt to land a plane upcoast and fly out a parcel of stolen diamonds." (note 6)

It's possible Jenkins cannibalized some of the *Per Fine Ounce* outline for *Unripe Gold*, but little of the *Bond* story would likely have transferred into a tale with many references to later figures like U.S. presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Secretary of Defense Alexander Haig, not to mention Libyan dictator Col. Omar Gaddafi who has a cameo role in the proceedings. More importantly, *Gold* is an excellent novel on its own merits with no need of recycling old unused story ideas. It features several of Jenkins best realized characters such as insurance investigator John Keeler. He's introduced in the first paragraphs of the book thusly:

"The blackness. Hell, the blackness! It was as thick here inside the barge's hull as the fog outside on the river. It broke like invisible surf over the kneeling man. It washed across the Browning Kapitin automatic readied in one hand, and over the unlit flashlight in the other. It drove on against the long object in front of which he crouched. It could have been a coffin or a log. Only his torch would show. He seemed to hesitate to use it for fear of giving himself away. The blackness. The silence. The macro-value of sound at two a.m. He thought he could almost hear the rough breathing of the guard he had slugged on the deck above, though he had dragged him clear of the barge out of sight under one of the ore-lorries parked on the roadway to the jetty. The blackness. His pants and jerkin were black, to match the night. John Keeler swung his head to-and-fro like a radar scanner searching for some danger blip of sound in the silence. The motion was a practised one. It should have been. It had saved his life before tonight. So had the Hi-Power 9mm parabellum automatic with its special lightened trigger and combat-version safety catch. The gun was a man-stopper, a killer, poised now on a hair-trigger of tension as was the man himself."

Gun in hand, Keeler shortly meets a new partner, American agent Ross Gressitt who's worried about smuggling. Without his gun, Keeler meets Peter Herington, a gruff expert in kayaking who also joins the team looking into strange doings in the harbor. The fourth member of this circle is geologist Rill Crous who reveals the "unripe gold" Keeler and Gressitt have discovered is Iridium, a mineral of immense value. She's not so bad herself—and the geologist and the insurance man are soon inseparable as the group seeks to find out who's smuggling the Iridium, where it's coming from, and who's paying the tab for "Operation Rainbow." *The Unripe Gold*, however, is far more than a smuggling story as a very SPECTREesque organization is out for more than rare metals. The scope of their takeover of an entire town is both startling and vivid in its execution. But what if all this is but a red herring to . . .

Like the Timothy Dalton 007 films of the 1980s, the novel is not an exercise in over-the-top fantasy but rather is a plausible, grounded yarn that's still exciting decades after its original appearance.

Fireprint (1984)

"An unusual and imaginative thriller by the author of *A Ravel of Waters*."
Times Literary Supplement

How does a writer toss in all the ingredients of a murder mystery in a few paragraphs? You need a dark and stormy night, a sexy woman, a body by the road for starters. Here's how Geoffrey Jenkins did it in *Fireprint*:

"The crude graffiti of spraypaint splotched her naked left breast from shoulder to nipple. It made a suggestive, erratic loop and continued down past her bare navel to the skirt she was busy slipping off. Another red daub branched across her cleavage towards her other breast, which was only partly clear of her blouse. Her face was a curious compound of guile, expectation and incredible beauty. Her long delicate hands seemed to freeze in their undressing of herself as the car's headlights pierced the fog and

revealed her. They also revealed a man lying senseless at her feet. His wrists and throat were slashed. Hallam Cane gave a startled oath. His woman companion, who was driving, stood on the brakes and stopped short of the rain-streaked prefab which was their destination. Cane jerked open his door 'Hold on!' exclaimed the driver. But Cane had already covered the ground to the prefab entrance and the two figures. They remained immobile, the woman in her seductive stance, the man still Cane saw, now that he was close, that it wasn't a live woman but a statue carved from wood. Even without the fog's theatrical effect, she was so lifelike as to appear human. The unconscious man was real enough. The blood on his wrists and throat was likewise real."

Hallam Cane is a British engineer who'd just arrived at Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of Africa, to take over a geological research team in their search for Geothermal energy. His driver and new secretary is curvy Maris Swart. Her family has lived on the Cape for generations and is full of the local lore, including sunken Russian ships, possible treasure in them, not to mention the disasters that have been plaguing the British drilling team. To the annoyance of the locals, the Russians have claimed oil rights offshore and also have a diving team working nearby, allegedly to salvage a ship lost in 1909. It's a team of three men and one lesbian named Anna Tarkhanova. But she's not the spy—that privilege goes to Vladimir Yasakov, the leader of the group who created this ruse in order to find out how certain radio frequencies are eluding monitoring by Russian subs. It seems to have something to do with an American observatory that houses a scientist named Brad Testerman. He's willing to spend \$2 million to shut the British efforts down, but his stated motives don't add up. Stir into the mix a surly batch of roughnecks working for Rainer who won't follow orders and go on strike, potentially ending the geothermal project with no need of the American offer.

Very different from most of the Jenkins canon, *Fireprint* keeps close to the coast with all the action on land. Told in the third person, we watch from outside the characters rather from the inside looking out which allows for descriptions and information no one character could know. This was especially noteworthy during a night duel between Rainer and Yasakov when the two stalk each other through the drilling equipment, each assuming completely different circumstances. Such misunderstandings are but part of the dilemmas Cane and Maris suffer as the Yanks presume the couple are up to one thing, the Russians another. After a mysterious explosion, the three groups become embroiled in a confrontation with one group fighting to keep secrets, another trying to pry them loose, and the engineer and his girlfriend trapped in the brutal middle. Were Jenkins a novelist with literary aspirations, one might wonder if the story was intended as a metaphor for the Cold War's influence on South Africa with two super-powers playing secret games at the expense of those who get in their way.

The first sentence of *Fireprint* announced—"This story is set a few years in the future." Stripping away the Russian v. U.S. trappings, the novel would work very well now by substituting terrorists for the Reds with a different agenda. Some aspects are a bit contrived—that figurehead seen in the first paragraphs returns throughout the plot in one role or another—and the conclusion has Cane performing duties he shouldn't be able to accomplish. Still, what begins as a seeming simple murder mystery grows and expands into a well-written bit of speculative fiction, a very fresh attempt by Jenkins. In the mid 1980s, he was at the top of his game.

Notes

1. Qtd. in "007: Literary Intrigues. Investigative Reports. Per Fine Ounce." 007Forever.com, 2000. <http://bit.ly/bWHBBJ>
2. Emails to author on March 4, 2010 from Ron Payne and Jeremy Duns.

3. As with Part One, the short blurbs from reviews were found at the official Geoffrey Jenkins website:
www.geoffrey-jenkins.co.za/

4. The article, “Africa, Crime and Mystery Writing In Kruger's Secret Service, Murder in the Game Reserve, The Mystery of the Missing Sandals” is available at:
www.jrank.org/literature/pages/6320/Africa-Crime-Mystery-Writing-In.html

5. In a March 13, 2010 e-mail to this author, Ron Payne says David Jenkins, son of the author, believes *Unripe Gold* and *A Cleft of Stars* might have included elements from the unused *Per Fine Ounce* Bondd book.

6. Duns, Jeremy. “Gold Dust.” *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang Magazine*, Issue 2 (Winter 2005), pp. 39-47. In a March 2010 e-mail to this author, Jeremy Duns observed this episode was discussed at length in Ian Fleming's 1957 non-fiction book, *The Diamond Smugglers*, and inspired the opening scene of Jon Cleary's unproduced screenplay based on that book. For more on this little known story, check out the March 5, 2010 article in *The Sunday Times*:
<http://bit.ly/aQVds8>

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 radio program, “Dave White Presents” at:

www.audioentertainment.org/dwp