

The Geoffrey Jenkins Files, Part 3: The Final Four

by Wesley Britton

Books reviewed in this file: *In Harm's Way* (1986); *Hold Down a Shadow* (1989); *A Hive of Dead Men* (1991); *A Daystar of Fear* (1993)

The Jenkins Formula

As I've read but 13 of the 16 published novels of Geoffrey Jenkins, there may be exceptions to the following conclusions. If so, I will revise any points in a future update to these articles.

First, for the first twenty years or so of his career, the Geoffrey Jenkins formula has obvious consistencies. Many of these were typical conventions of adventure writers of the period such as Duncan Kyle, Desmond Bagley, and Gavin Lyall. For example, in terms of characters, most Jenkins novels feature a male protagonist who often speaks in the first person. In the main, these protagonists are interchangeable, especially all the sea captains (some with World War II experience) who share the same resourcefulness, skill sets, and self-assurance about their abilities to the point of being headstrong to the extreme. These would include Geoffrey Peace (*Twist of Sand*, *Hunter Killer*), Bruce Weatherby (*A Gru of Ice*), Ian Fairlie (*Scend of the Sea*), John Shotton (*South Trap*), and Peter Rainer (*A Ravel of Waters*). The most noticeable difference between the skippers and other such characters are professional titles: John Tregard represents a consortium in *River of Diamonds*, Kepler West is a scientist in *In Harm's Way*, John Keeler was an insurance investigator in *The Unripe Gold*, and Hallem Cane was a British engineer in *Fireprint*. In the words of Jeremy Duns, their "Backgrounds were often tangentially linked to Britain and superficially Bond-like (Royal Marines, etc), but there's very little of the high life, fancy suits or cars or cigarettes that you see in Fleming." (note 1)

One reason these men are so similar is that few reveal anything about themselves beyond their professions. To make another comparison with Ian Fleming, the creator of 007 gave us many glimpses into his character's motivations, upbringing, likes, dislikes, tastes, desires and fears. Most Geoffrey Jenkins leads have a strong resume and quickly become men of action with little reflection, soul searching, or thoughts beyond what steps need to be taken to push a ship through a gale, what maneuvers will outfox a pursuer, what actions will lead to survival when nature itself seems against them. There are exceptions to this rule, of course. In *Twist of Sand*, we learn much about Geoffrey Peace. In other cases, family histories come into play as with Shelbourne in *River of Diamonds* (although he is not the book's hero) and Ian Fairlie whose biography is interconnected with historical events. It's Jenkins final book, *A Daystar of Fear*, where we really experience a multi-generational series of events going back to World War I in which we get detailed autobiographies of a full cast of characters.

The protagonists in Jenkins stories are rarely good detectives or secret agents. Of course, with exceptions like professional John Keeler and amateur Sholto Banks (*Hold Down a Shadow*), few are trained investigators—these men are not James Bond clones. Rather, they are experienced hands in one field or another thrown into circumstances far removed from their normal spheres of operation. As a result, they will follow the clues, sometimes suspect who the villain might be, but rarely do they solve a mystery by putting the pieces together. Instead, like the reader, they follow the trail until the final twists come into focus. As such, they are often as much observer as participant in the plots they are involved in. Equally significant, from *A Twist of Sand* onward, the "man v. nature" situations were as important as any duels between good guys and bad, and the

hero's survival abilities and endurance were as important as their skills in more hospitable environments.

Such men are not married and, if they had any romantic past, they don't share it. Rather, usually within the first three chapters, they meet an intelligent, capable woman and a romance—of sorts—blooms. These women—Anne Nielson, Helen Upton, Linn Prestrud, Kay Fenton, Rill Crous, Maris Swart—are as interchangeable as their men. “Love at first sight” defines most of these dalliances if love be the word. What communication between the couples we hear is all about the dangers the pair are tossed into and the fears for each others safety. Not until Jenkins' final three novels do we hear conversations between lovers about their pasts, interests, desires or fears. And, very unlike Fleming, we never witness any consummation in bed. Presumably, the promises made during the books are kept after the reader has closed the cover.

The villains, too, are shaped in the same mold. In the view of Duns, they are something of a cross between “Fleming Bond and film Bond.” Their accents and heritages might be different, but most have old grudges driving them into one breed of madness or another. Some are ex-Nazis--Stein in *Twist*, Frederick Upton in *River of Diamonds*, Rolf Wegger in *South Trap*—others have more Cold war agendas as with Anton Grohman in *Ravel of Waters*. There's nothing subtle about any of them—the baddie is obvious when they step onto the page. They are crude, ruthless, mono-minded, sneering, leering, and asexual. Such men are not masterminds capable of creating new threats to humankind—instead they are greedy criminals or terrorists who know where the treasure (or bodies) are buried, know who has the McGuffin that will give them riches or power, or are simply crazed with a lust for revenge. Again, there are exceptions as with the elaborate schemes of *The Unripe Gold*, *In Harm's Way*, or the merging of two criminal enterprises in *Hold Down a Shadow*.

All this being said, it's clear character development was rarely the point. While the characters might have been thinly drawn, the stages on which they operated were as richly sketched as any novelist has ever offered. The Jenkins formula thrived on fast-paced plots, detailed and usually realistic descriptions of scientific technology and vivid settings, especially in the grand finales usually in some remote location in the South Atlantic. In particular, the closing scenes of *A Gru of Ice* and *A Ravel of Waters* are memorable as they merge the natural beauty and dangers of desolate places with man's attempts to use these islands or icebergs for covert purposes. But even before these cinematic set-pieces, Jenkins was a master of description, whether of the cabins and corridors of ships or the sometimes savage beauty of deserts and coastal regions.

One aspect of the Jenkins formula that was like that of Ian Fleming was his use of research to provide verisimilitude, plausibility, believability to his stories. Certainly, his knowledge of the ways of the sea are on frequent display which often included drawing from historical events to give his tales their launching points. Such research often provided depth to the circumstances including motivations for the baddies as well as often exotic explorations of sunken ships, underwater resources, and imagined or real treasures long abandoned in time. Beyond these marine adventures, Jenkins showed considerable command of geology, mineralogy, engineering, and even fighting styles to take the reader into the realms he's creating. Jeremy Duns puts it this way: “. . . where Jenkins does dwell is on technological details, nautical expertise, landscape, odd customs and traditions and local cultures - all these are handled with a similar verve to Fleming, and on some subjects he is more convincing. He was also very interested in gemstones, which form the plot of many of the books, and treasure - several of the latter books read very much like mid-period Bond films.” Occasionally, as with *Hunter Killer*, Jenkins floundered, and these stories were not up to par because the details were not there.

Some stylistic characteristics of the Jenkins canon are better than others. For example, the frequent foreshadowings of future events in “Had I only known” phrases seem contrived and unneeded. “Jenkins' flaws, “Duns adds, “were repetitive plots - a few too many in Africa, a few too many with convoluted family secrets.” On the other hand, as the years progressed, Jenkins clearly improved his style. In the better books of the middle 1980s and after, Jenkins had become an extremely economical writer able to keep a driving pace and get in his descriptive observations in very short order. As noted in several reviews in these articles, Jenkins was an outstanding shaper of introductions, getting his main players into action within very few pages. This is the other side of the lack of depth in his leads—what mattered was giving them their bona fides quickly and then letting them demonstrate their abilities of steering ships, investigating murders or smuggling, or falling into a mystery.

However, as Jenkins' final batch of novels began, the formula was changing. For example, the villain in 1984's *Fireprint* shared none of the characteristics described above beyond the requisite brutality. Vladimir Yasakov is a calculating KGB agent who's both effective in the field and able to conjure up a plot with world-wide consequences for the glory of the U.S.S.R., not personal gain. Over 40 pages of the first chapters of *Hold Down a Shadow* (1989) is dialogue between four criminals trying to determine their next big strike. But this gang, as described below, can't compete with the original and quirky feminists striking a blow against male domination in *A Hive of Dead Men*. And then there was *A Daystar of Fear*, in which old tropes return while character development finally takes center stage.

In short, the final four novels of Geoffrey Jenkins demonstrate a creative mind is not limited to even his own conventions. Ian Fleming found *A Twist of Sand* a book full of originality—much more was to come.

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In Harm's Way (1986)

"Mr. Jenkins does this sort of thing better almost than anybody else...In the realm of the British adventure story—a great tradition—Mr. Jenkins keeps the flag flying splendidly".
Church Times (note 2)

LETTING THE READER KNOW THIS STORY WILL DRIVE AT A VERY FAST CLIP INDEED, *IN HARM'S WAY* BEGINS:

“The racing car jerked convulsively, leapt, arced into the air like the spine of a prisoner interrogated by electric torture. Fenders, bonnet and boot lids separated themselves from the vehicle's central structure and resorted to a clumsy parody of flight. Wheels, body, engine, skidded off the stack of nuclear waste drums stacked at the rear of the special multi-wheeled low-level transporter. Their rounded surface served as a kind of launching-ramp. At the speed at

which the car had hit the transporter's rear, they acted as a catapult to project it upwards, so that it missed the cab altogether and went high. It carried with it a tail of dust, like a drunken comet.”

After this opener, we meet scientist Dr Kepler West who has discovered a way of making nuclear waste safe so it can be stored in a repository in South Africa. The problem is that there's seven billion dollars in contracting the privilege of harboring the waste, and the Red Chinese would prefer the funds go to them to create their own repository in the Gobi Desert. So they hire a team of French terrorists to sabotage West's demonstration of his technique. Very unlike previous Jenkins titles with the lead protagonist on stage from first to last page, around 2/3 of the book details this group's various improvised efforts to see to it that international authorities are killed in a nuclear incident that will discredit the South African project.

Once again, Jenkins clearly did his homework so every page of this effort is plausible, especially in the technical details. Typical of the Jenkins formula, *IN HARM'S WAY IS* a chess game with all the pieces described with tight economy, the characters revealed with actions and dialogue and a minimum of back-storytelling. Along the way, we get a very sexy female courier, a haunted graveyard, quick mentions of the Mossad and French intelligence, not to mention references to Carlos the Jackal—a bit of a ubiquitous figure in fiction of the era from Frederick Forsyth to Robert Ludlum. We also get a very Flemingesque torture scene and a good old-fashioned ingenious escape.

One key distinction between this novel and Jenkins' earlier books is the lack of any “man v. nature” themes. Instead, Jenkins sticks to man v. man duels in a plot as readable today as it was in the Regan/ Thatcher era. Not a bad book for a Jenkins beginner to check out—not one of his best, but a quick, diverting entertainment.

In Harm's Way was adapted into the 1989 film, *Dirty Games*, starring Jan-Michael Vincent.

Hold Down a Shadow (1989)

Also issued as a cassette audiobook read by Terry Wale.

"One of the best adventure stories for a long time".

Sunday Times

The opening pages of *Hold Down A Shadow* quickly demonstrate this was not a book typical of the Jenkins formula. First, we witness a terrorist attack by a man dubbed the “Maluti Rider” who comes from the “mountains of death” in the country of Lesotho, a small kingdom on the northern border of South Africa. He's out for revenge against those who murdered his family and is unhappy his former home is about to be lost to a massive dam project that will put thousands of acres of land under water.

Then we meet the four most wanted men in the world—the infamous Chunnel Gang. “Pestiaux, the short-fuse impetuous gunman; Hayward, volatile and unpredictably Irish, yet the superlative explosives artist; Kennet, as single-track as a runaway bulldozer; Bonnay, the intellect of the bunch, and not the less ruthless killer because of it.” In 1992, they'd tried to assassinate the French President and British Prime Minister to block the building of the Chunnel between England and France. Nearly caught in the act, they escaped to pull off a daring robbery in Marseilles. Now loaded with loot, they're hiding out in Lesotho worried their protection money will soon run out. They need a new job. This mysterious Rider character they see on the news strikes their fancy as his goals might intersect with theirs if they can find him and bring him on

board. Then, a flashback reveals much about the characters of barrister Sholto Banks who meets the brilliant, beautiful, and moody artist Grania Yeats who's been commissioned to create an artistic masterpiece to commemorate the Highland Project's grand opening. Seeking inspiration, Yeats convinces Banks to take her on a hiking trip into the mountains where they get a rare glimpse of the lammergeyer, a giant bird that is half eagle, half vulture. In these mountains, Yeats has her inspiration for the "Eagle of Time," an intricate chronometer with delicate moving parts and secret treasures that will be unveiled at the Project's gala ceremony. The sort of art object to catch the eye of the Chunnel Gang as it was the perfect cover for a timer for a strategically placed bomb . . . which is but one of their plots. They also want to raise a million dollars by kidnapping a very important VIP. In order to set their bomb, they also need to kidnap a certain artist to force her to turn her masterpiece into a killing machine . . .

Set in 1995—six years after the novel's publication--the lengthy discussions among the Chunnel Gang are a bit reminiscent of *In Harm's Way* as that book too took us inside the scheming of a gang of criminals. But *Shadow* is considerably more substantial with much more depth for all the main characters. Not since *A Twist of Sand* has Jenkins been so literary, taking the time to provide incidents and dialogue that don't drive the pace but instead tell us much about the players. In fact the dialogue, usually far from a Jenkins strong suit, is much more than mere exposition. Unlike any previous romantic relationship, there's considerable tension and probing between Banks and Yeats with something very personal indeed haunting the artist, a mystery of its own. True, some sections can drag as in the descriptions of the Chunnel Gang stealing a security van in order to capture the "Maluti Rider." At times, Jenkins overdoes the emotional turmoil within Yeats, repeating and beating the obvious to death. Still, Jenkins is inventive in a variety of scenes along with his trademark twists in the final acts. *Shadow* is not representative of the Jenkins formula but is instead a novel that rises above it.

A Hive of Dead Men (1991)

"A rich mixture of mystery and mayhem. Five star fiction."
Bolton Evening News

The most offbeat of all the Jenkins novels.

Back in 1984, fireprint opened with a wooden statue of a woman caught in the headlights of a car; hive opens with a live woman cutting off the head of the wax effigy of Admiral Nelson in Westminster Abbey. Then, also in London, we learn teams from the U.S., France, and England are competing for the treasures in the sunken Confederate raider, the Alabama off the coast of France. We learn the Brits secretly discovered one precious item, a silver Admiralty Oar with intricate engravings from the era of George III that had been used in courts in South Africa.

The woman who decapitated Lord Nelson is Zara Hennessy, an angry South African leader of the Cape Town feminist terrorist cell, Rote Zora. For personal reasons, Zara hates men due to a seduction which led to a botched abortion that left her a "sexual vegetable." For her, Lord Nelson is not only a figure of male domination, but the domination of Great Britain over South Africa. So, as a protest against the reinstatement of the Simonstown naval agreement between South Africa and the U.K., she steals Nelson's wax head in London while her four confederates hang a fake penis on the figurehead of Nelson's ship, "Medusa," docked in Capetown.

While Zara returns to Capetown basking in her victory, ex-SAS officer Rayner Watton brings the oar to his employer where expert Fenella Gault reveals the oar is the double of one used in Cape

Town's Admiralty Court. Realizing ownership of the oar would likely result in legal squabbles for years, Watton's firm decides they'd earn some good PR if they can arrange an exchange of the two oars between the heads of state for Britain and South Africa at the Simonstown ceremony as a symbol of friendship between the two countries.

The first issue for Watton and Gault to resolve is how to deal with the current owner of the South African oar, the descendent of the last magistrate to use it. He is Vivian Pittock-Williams, a local figure of no small ego. He'll agree to contribute the oar in exchange for a place on the dais with the world leaders as well as the opportunity to conduct a mock trial where he and the oar will be on as public a display as possible. No problem—until Zara Hennessy sees Watton, Gault, and Pittock-Williams on television. Pittock-Williams, turns out, was not only the man who seduced and abandoned her, the two are descendents of brothers. Hennessy first attempts to strike out at the planned celebrations by sending Watton the head of the wax Admiral Nelson packed with explosives, but he's smart enough to figure out the hatbox with a strange human head inside is a bomb. Next, she shoots Pittock-Williams at the mock-trial, but only succeeds in grazing his left shoulder. Undeterred, Hennessy convinces the rest of her gang to help her kidnap Gault to learn how they can rig the oar to explode at the exchange. The girls, at first reluctant, cheerfully decide to help their leader out as it would be more fun than playing with "seeds and plants."

From this point, the quirky plot develops with both Gault and then Watton becoming prisoners of the terrorists in an underground cell beneath a secluded church. Hennessy is inventive when she comes up with a daring scheme to load the unusual bomb under the noses of the vigilant security guards. Of course, it's really Jenkins with the inventive mind who, once again, takes us into the workings of a group of criminals with a unique approach. Once again, Jenkins develops a romance with a bit more depth than earlier novels, creating a relationship that is more than giving a hero a reason to fight. There are a few clichés along the way, as with a suspicious security chief who keeps obstructing Watton's investigations. And then there is at least one nod to Jenkins' predecessors. In one scene, a defector from the terrorists asks Watton if he knows where he is. After he confesses his ignorance, the lady says, "It's the end that matters, as the bishop said to the actress." Anyone who's ever read a Leslie Charteris Saint story will get a smile from that line.

Hive buzzes with a different sort of energy from every other book in the Jenkins canon—a story far from representative of the Jenkins formula. But it's hard to think of a thriller more entertaining, more off the beaten track in both setting and story.

A Daystar of Fear (1993)

On one level, Geoffrey Jenkins' final novel brought the author full circle. Once again, we have World War II U-boats and a sunken ship in the mix. But *Daystar of Fear* is far from a re-tread of old storylines and settings.

After a teaser alerting readers that a gem necklace had been cursed by its makers when a Prussian ruthlessly killed one and blinded the other, we enter a helicopter in flight bearing mining engineer Gareth Ridpath on route to Lake Bangazi near the coast of Maputaland. He's planning to meet a contact at the exclusive Bangazi Lodge. Formerly a missile testing centre, it's now a recreational centre for executives run by a man called Ken Ziegler, although we quickly learn that's not his real name. On the flight, we also meet Pernelle Clymer, a marine archaeologist Ziegler wants to help him find the sunken liner, Nova Scotia, which had been torpedoed during WWII with the loss of seven hundred and fifty men, women and children.

But even before the helicopter lands, Ridpath spots a body floating in the water. When it is recovered, Ridpath pointedly does not reveal the corpse belonged to his contact.

Soon, Clymer is diving and suspicious of Ziegler as his impatient obsession with the Nova Scotia doesn't match what he says about it, that it would be an interesting location for scuba-diving guests of his lodge to explore. What she doesn't know is Ziegler isn't looking for anything in the wreck but rather waiting for the opportunity to salt the wreck with a necklace called Stones of the daystar. As it technically belongs to the German government, Ziegler can't reveal its existence, but if found on the ocean floor, he can earn a \$15 million bounty. That is, if Clymer will see sense and support his request to conduct a legal salvage operation.

Meanwhile, Ridpath spots diamonds cleverly hidden in abalone shells and knows he stumbled onto the smuggling route that cost his contact his life. At the same time, Ridpath and Clymer share their pasts to each other as their relationship deepens—and their autobiographies, as was the case in *Hold Down a Shadow* and *A Hive of Dead men*, are told with much more detail and mutual interest of the characters than in most other Jenkins yarns.

In fact, *Daystar* has more detailed back-stories for its characters than any other book in the canon. This is necessary because this multi-generational saga involves two sets of supporting characters—the family of the Prussian officer who stole the necklace over half a century earlier and the descendants of the jewelers from whom the necklace was taken. In the latter line, Louis Arnold was also a survivor of the U-boat attack with vengeance on his mind and a drive to make the site of the sinking a memorial and not a place for wealthy vacationers to play. His son, Rick, is a victim of the smuggling ring Ridpath is investigating. Clearly, an accounting is in the offing.

It's more than appropriate that, in his final book, Jenkins presents stories from three generations as his own writing career, beginning in 1959, had now just gone over 30 years. Some passages point to what he had learned along the way. In particular, during one lover's conversation, Clymer tells Ridpath:

“You see, I had gone looking for treasure with my father and Gil and, by all that's holy, we found it! But there was treasure in their hearts and minds too, and I need to deep-dive emotionally to find it once more. I need the gold of the heart, not a cargo of worthless scrap-iron . . . i can say this to you, and probably to nobody else. Perhaps the sea with its mystique has made me a dreamer; you know my background. I'm always reaching out for something beyond the horizon, perhaps for something that isn't there. Maybe the treasure's lying at my feet and I'll wake up only on the day I stumble over it —“

Perhaps this quote stated the most significant change in the Jenkins' formula in the last projects when the characters became more than players in stories looking for treasures under the sea or in desert caverns. “Gold of the heart” became the greatest McGuffan of them all, as even the earlier, less developed heroes knew when they risked everything to rescue their particular damsel in distress.

Still, *Daystar* contains one of the most Bondian final acts in the Jenkins catalogue when Ridpath and Rick Arnold have to infiltrate the lodge, which is as well protected a citadel as any lair of Blofeld. For Arnold, it's revenge he's after; for Ridpath, it's rescuing a lover locked in a hidden chamber accessible only by a private elevator. In the end, a necklace is thrown away as only gold of the heart matters. And that's a perfect way to close the book on the grand finale of one of the best of the best by Geoffrey Jenkins. A reader's only regret will be the knowledge that this is it. Unlike James Bond, Geoffrey Jenkins will not return.

Notes

1. Quotes from Jeremy Duns came from an e-mail to the author, March 15, 2010. I must thank Jeremy for reading these articles, critiquing them, improving them—even when he completely disagreed with some of my contexts, approaches, and conclusions.

2. As with Parts 1 and 2 of these articles, the short blurbs from reviews were found at the official Geoffrey Jenkins website:
www.geoffrey-jenkins.co.za/

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