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***Jonathan Livingston Seagull***, written by [Richard Bach](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Bach) and illustrated by Russell Munson, is a [fable](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fable) in [novella](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novella) form about a [seagull](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gull) who is trying to learn about life and flight, and a [homily](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homily) about self-perfection. Bach wrote it as a series of short stories that were published in [*Flying*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_%28magazine%29) magazine in the late 1960s. It was first published in book form in 1970, and by the end of 1972 over a million copies were in print. [*Reader's Digest*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reader%27s_Digest) published a condensed version, and the book reached the top of the [*New York Times* Best Seller list](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_Times_Best_Seller_list), where it remained for 37 weeks. In 1972 and 1973, the book topped the [*Publishers Weekly* list of bestselling novels in the United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Publishers_Weekly_list_of_bestselling_novels_in_the_United_States_in_the_1970s).

**Plot**

The book tells the story of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, a seagull who is bored with daily squabbles over food. Seized by a passion for flight, he pushes himself and learns everything he can about flying. His increasing unwillingness to conform finally results in his expulsion from the flock. Now an outcast, he continues to learn, becoming increasingly pleased with his abilities while leading a peaceful and happy life.

One day Jonathan meets two gulls who take him to a "higher plane of existence" in which there is no heaven, but a better world found through perfection of knowledge. There he meets another seagull who loves to fly. He discovers that his sheer tenacity and desire to learn make him "pretty well a one-in-a-million bird." In this new place, Jonathan befriends the wisest gull, Chiang, who takes him beyond his previous self-education, and teaches him how to move instantaneously to anywhere else in the [Universe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universe). The secret, Chiang says, is to "begin by knowing that you have already arrived."

But, unsatisfied with his new life, Jonathan returns to Earth to find others like himself to tell them what he'd learned and to spread his love for flight. His mission is successful, and Jonathan gathers around himself a flock of other gulls who have been outlawed for not conforming. The first of his students, Fletcher Lynd Seagull, ultimately becomes a teacher in his own right, and Jonathan leaves to teach other flocks.

**Part one**

Part one of the book finds young Jonathan Livingston frustrated with the meaningless [materialism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Materialism), conformity, and limitation of the seagull life. He is seized with a passion for flight of all kinds, and his soul soars as he experiments with exhilarating challenges of daring aerial feats. Eventually, his lack of conformity to the limited seagull life leads him into conflict with his flock, and they turn their backs on him, casting him out of their society and exiling him. Not deterred by this, Jonathan continues his efforts to reach higher and higher flight goals, finding he is often successful but eventually he can fly no higher. He is then met by two radiant, loving seagulls who explain to him that he has learned much, and that they are there now to teach him more.

**Part two**

Jonathan transcends into a society where all the gulls enjoy flying. He is only capable of this after practicing hard alone for a long time and the first learning process of linking the highly experienced teacher and the diligent student is raised to almost sacred levels. They, regardless of the all immense difference, are sharing something of great importance that can bind them together: "You've got to understand that a seagull is an unlimited idea of freedom, an image of the Great Gull." He realizes that you have to be true to yourself: "You have the freedom to be yourself, your true self, here and now, and nothing can stand in your way."

**Part three**

These are the last words of Jonathan's teacher: "Keep working on love." Through his teachings, Jonathan understands that the spirit cannot be really free without the ability to forgive, and that the way to progress leads—for him, at least—through becoming a teacher, not just through working hard as a student. Jonathan returns to the Breakfast Flock to share his newly discovered ideals and the recent tremendous experience, ready for the difficult fight against the current rules of that society. The ability to forgive seems to be a mandatory "passing condition."

**Part four**

In 2013 Richard Bach took up a non-published fourth part of the book which he had written contemporaneously with the original. He edited and polished it, and then sent the result to a publisher. Bach reported that he was inspired to finish the fourth part of the novella by a near-death experience which had occurred in relation to a nearly fatal plane crash in August 2012.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Livingston_Seagull#cite_note-1) In February 2014, the 138-page Bach work [*Illusions II: The Adventures of a Reluctant Student*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusions_II%3A_The_Adventures_of_a_Reluctant_Student), published as a booklet by [Kindle Direct Publishing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kindle_Direct_Publishing) in February 2014, also contains allusions to and insights regarding the same near-death experience. In October 2014, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull: The Complete Edition,* was published, and includes part four of the story.

Part four focuses on the period several hundred years after Jonathan and his students have left the Flock and their teachings become venerated rather than practiced. The birds spend all their time extolling the virtues of Jonathan and his students and spend no time flying for flying's sake. The seagulls practice strange rituals and use demonstrations of their respect for Jonathan and his students as status symbols. Eventually some birds reject the ceremony and rituals and just start flying. Eventually one bird named Anthony Gull questions the value of living since "...life is pointless and since pointless is by definition meaningless then the only proper act is to dive into the ocean and drown. Better not to exist at all than to exist like seaweed, without meaning or joy [...] He had to die sooner or later anyway, and he saw no reason to prolong the painful boredom of living." As Anthony makes a dive-bomb to the sea (at a speed and from an altitude which would kill him) a white blur flashed alongside him. Anthony catches up to the blur which turns out to be a seagull and asks what the bird was doing:

"I'm sorry if I startled you," the stranger said in a voice as clear and friendly as the wind. "I had you in sight all the time. Just playing...I wouldn't have hit you."

"No! No, that's not it." Anthony was awake and alive for the first time in his life, inspired. "What was that?"

"Oh, some fun-flying, I guess. A dive and pull up to a slow roll with a rolling loop off the top. Just messing around. If you really want to do it well it takes a bit of practice, but it's a nice-looking thing, don't you think?"

"It's, it's...beautiful, is what it is! But you haven't been around the Flock at all. Who are you, anyway?"

"You can call me Jon."

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