

Chickadees Teach Lessons Seagulls Never Learned

Truly, the hard and mighty are set down; the soft and weak set on high.

—Lao Tzu, 5th Century B.C.

It is story telling time once again in the land of theology and religion.

—Harvey Cox

You don't have to be a college professor to pick up echoes of Jonathan Livingston Seagull in this beautiful little book.

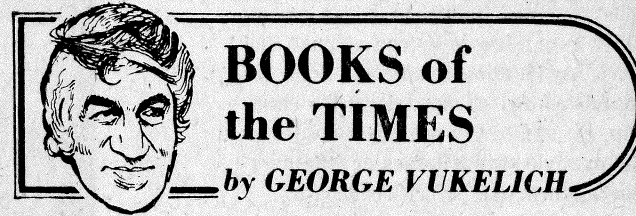
The author, who is a professor (of Mythology and the History of Religions) at Beloit College is quick to agree.

"It is probably inevitable at this point in time," Conrad Hyers says, **"that a fable about birds, albeit, miniscule birds, should immediately suggest itself as 'alas, another bird book' and run the risk of over-association with J. L. Seagull and the flock of comic satires of dubious profundity that attempted to ride tailwind on his jet stream."**

The Chickadees, Hyers insists, is much more than just a challenge to the Jonathan cult and certainly more than the gross parodies which it precipitated.

The Chickadees is after much larger "game" and deals with a much wider variety of contemporary issues: ecology, technological expansionism, the ideology of progress, utopianism, the work ethic, Indian mysticism and the drug culture — to name a few.

The Chickadees begins simply enough:



THE CHICKADEES

A Contemporary Fable, by Conrad Hyers, Illustrations by Ed Piechocki, The Westminster Press.

"As far as anyone could remember — which was about seven generations — they had always lived there, between the mountains and the sea. And as far as anyone could remember within that small forever, no one had ever crossed the mountains or visited the sea. There was, after all, no compelling reason for doing so . . ."

And so the Chickadees stayed in their little valley, flying. Swooping. Not with the great arching swoops of the Eagle or the Hawk but with little, skipping swoops, bouncing from tree to tree like winged balls of feathers.

"The Chickadee," Conrad Hyers writes, "is a stunt pilot of sorts, with only one stunt."

Then one day, a giant Condor flies over their valley and the world changes for all the Young Chickadees, who witness his awesome flying prowess.

"It is our lowly fate," they lament, "to have been reared in the miniscule nests of a paltry little band of Chickadees who know nothing beyond pine branches and insects and sunflower seeds!"

The more they contemplate the majestic flight of the Condor, the more tedious their valley becomes to them. And the more determined they are to ascend the mountain steeps and search for the Golden Valley beyond.

Pursuing their quest, the Young Chickadees encounter the Mountain Chickadee (remember Chang in Jonathan?) who tells them they can never get to the other side of the mountain, no matter how high they fly.

"Is there no more sky," they ask, **"at the top of the mountain?"**

"There is no end to the sky," the old Chickadee says, **"but however far you go, you will always be Here. There is no other place but Here."**

Before the young ones leave him the Mountain Chickadee reads them a passage from his treasured scroll:

Everywhere the Sage is at home and at ease

Though he travels Nowhere

Because he is always There from the Beginning.

He does not fly high, nor fast, nor far;

Yet from his quiet perch

He sees from Horizon to Horizon.

For him the Quest is the Detour
A circuitous Dreaming
His Freedom is within.

All his desires are satisfied,
Because inwardly he is a creature
of No-seeking and No-striving.

Looking into himself he sees Nothing.
And that Nothing mysteriously
Includes Everything.

With the delicacy of a flowing butterfly net, Conrad Hyers' book has caught the subtle nuances of Taoism, Zen — and yes, Christianity. And he hasn't torn up the transparent wings in the process. They flutter and still fly.

His previous publications have all been "rather scholarly," including the books Holy Laughter and Zen and the Comic Spirit.

"In The Chickadees," he says, "I have actually taken most of the basic themes of my academic writings and recast them in the symbolic form of a popular fable. In doing so, I have, perhaps, risked professional suicide. And yet it would seem that even scholars in comparative mythology ought to be able to write their own myths and dream their own dreams."

I don't know how Beloit College comes up with them. You'd think they'd be content with Chad Walsh and Bink Noll. Maybe they're out recruiting.