

Fate is the Hunter

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Other key staff: Greg Kelly, editor & executive producer

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SUMMARY

You're cruising along in life. Then, out of the blue, you're blindsided by misfortune. Maybe you're Ron Rapp, landing your two-seater aircraft at an airport in California. Or maybe you're a student pilot doing the same thing on another day, at a landing strip in Florida. One moment, all is well. The next, a rogue plane comes out of nowhere and hits you, midair. Two mishaps. Two blameless pilots. Only one survives. How do we make sense of it? Is it luck? Fate? A divine plan? Ernest K. Gann posed the same vexing questions in his celebrated aviation memoir, *Fate is the Hunter*. Gann was an American airline pilot from 1938 to 1952, a dangerous era in flight. He loved flying. But many times, it nearly cost him his life. In his telling, only good fortune saved him. Drawing on his diaries and flight logs, Gann wrote a gripping account of his narrow escapes. But what makes his memoir endure is his meditation on the mysteries of luck. The documentary begins as a literary feature - an appreciation of author and text. It evolves into a provocative inquiry into the imponderables of life. Is there a guiding hand that shapes our lives? Or is the universe chaotic and random? Popular culture would have us believe that pilots are nearer to God. Gann sees nothing noble or redeeming in their death. First person stories of contemporary airplane accidents sharpen the discussion. Sandell connects the dots back to his own earthbound moment of truth.

Fate is the Hunter

ERNEST GANN (actor reading from *Fate is the Hunter*)

“At night there seems to be a muffling of all outward sounds by the darkness until the cockpit becomes a cozy place well suited to meditation. If the night is fair and strewn with stars, or phosphorescent with a moon, then pilots have been known to turn down every light in the cockpit and sit in absolute silence. Few pilots are immune to this nocturnal spell. I have been staring at the moon.”

CBC Presenter

Fate is the Hunter, a documentary about Ernest Gann’s celebrated memoir of his days and nights as a commercial pilot, a period from 1938 to the early 1950s. He flew passengers and mail. He flew war supplies to combat zones and wounded soldiers back home. When there were no maps or radio signals, he navigated by the stars. He loved flying, though many times, it nearly cost him his life. Ernest Gann wrote about it all ...in bestselling fiction and screenplays too. But it's his real life memoir that's inspired a devoted following. So, what accounts for the enduring appeal of *Fate is the Hunter*? Neil Sandell begins his story in his kitchen.

NEIL SANDELL: What do you think?

WIFE: It's a pile of little fish. They're interesting colours. There's a lot of pink in them. And they have bright little eyes that are staring at us right now.

NEIL: Yeah, these are called girelles.

(TO HIMSELF): Listen to me trying to sound like I actually know something about French fish.

NEIL: So, all of these are rock fish. And these have been what I've been looking for, for so long, in order to make bouillabaisse for the first time. You have that look of "don't screw up." *(laughter)*

NEIL

Oh, I screwed up. Gloriously. My bouillabaisse was a sad, grey mess. Not even the dogs would eat it.

That was nearly 10 years ago. We had just moved to France. And, I had this crazy notion I'd feel more at home if I learned how to make the local soup. It was a lighthearted day after a difficult year.

Living in France had been our dream for a long time. But saying goodbye to Canada was not so easy. Every big decision came at a cost - financial, but also an emotional cost. Like what to do with our stuff. There's only so much you can pack into a shipping container before it becomes too expensive. So, we stripped our belongings down to a bare minimum. And we gave away our books. Shelves and shelves of them. All but a few. Because there was one I wouldn't give up. And that was *Fate is the Hunter*.

And I've been pondering that choice ever since. The best I can figure out is... it's because it came to me at a particular time in my life. I was in my early 30s, sailing along, carefree. I had a new job. New love. I'd just met my future wife. And then, a trap door opened and I was tumbling into a dark unknown. Suddenly she was very, very sick, staring at a life threatening illness. And, I was afraid. Panicky. Blindsided by something out of the blue, like Ernest Gann in *Fate is the Hunter*. I wasn't falling from the sky. But it felt like it.

(MUSIC)

They say we look at a painting to see ourselves. But maybe that applies to books too. Maybe *Fate is the Hunter* is a mirror. At least for those of us who love it.

MUSIC RESOLVES.

COLLEEN MONDOR

I got this when I was in college. One of my professors mentioned Gann in class. So, I read it. I've read it many times. And it is Post-It noted all over the place. *(laughs)* **NEIL**

The journalist Colleen Mondor, author of the book, *The Map of My Dead Pilots*. It's about her experiences as a dispatcher for a small airline in Alaska. She started out studying aviation management in Florida.

COLLEEN MONDOR

You know, initially when I read it -- because it was beyond my understanding at the time. I was just barely learning to fly and just barely learning about aviation. Just taking classes in regs and navigation and only the earliest stuff. So initially, what I noted was the language. I really fell in love with the way Gann wrote. Period. Regardless of the topic, I just think he's a beautiful writer. So initially, some of the things that I was noting were passages -- just in his descriptions of the men that he worked with.

ERNEST GANN

"Hughen is a large and dignified man who speaks in short, quick word groups, as if all that he had to say was assembled, chained neatly together, and then released only when ready." [5:53]

COLLEEN MONDOR

As I got deeper into aviation, what I Post-It noted was things like the ice -- that whole section on encountering the ice -- particularly after I got to Alaska. And the thunderstorm and what it was like to be in a scary situation, and how he wrote about that.

ERNEST GANN

“A sudden, terrible shudder seizes the entire airplane. At once Hughen shoves the throttles wide open and the nose down. The shuddering ceases. Hughen wipes the sweat from his eyes.

‘She almost got away from me.’

We have merely nodded to fear. Now we must shake its filthy hand.

Both engines suddenly begin cutting out— first one and then the other. For one awful moment they both subside together. And there is a silence which is not really a silence but a chilling diminuendo of all sound.

This is the way you die. At 3 minutes past 2 in the morning.”

NEIL

Is it a touchstone for you?

COLLEEN MONDOR

Very much so. Especially again, after I got to Alaska. You know, I joke -- that I have a college degree in aviation management. So, I learned this is how aviation works. And these are the regulations and the classes on aviation law and governmental regulation of aviation. And that's how I thought it was.

And then I got to Alaska and I got the job at the company that I worked for, and it was how much can we fit on the airplane? And can we get them out of here? And how fast

can we get them out of here? And is a window open to get them through before the weather comes in again? And that's when you read Gann, like when he writes about encountering the ice, and just trying to keep the plane in the air. And there were situations with the guys I worked with where that happened more than once. So, you know there's all kinds of things like that that are in *Fate is the Hunter* that I know are exactly the way it is in certain parts of Alaska still today.

NEIL

When Colleen Mondor says “the ice” or “the thunderstorm”, that’s shorthand for one of the stories in the book. Each one a narrow escape from midair disaster. Each one leaving Ernest Gann perplexed. How am I not dead?

CHRISTIAAN VAN HEIJST

Yeah, yeah, that's basically the main question of *Fate is the Hunter*.

NEIL

Christiane Van Heijst, a Dutch pilot who flies a 747 cargo jet. He documents his life aloft in social media.

CHRISTIAAN VAN HEIJST

The first chapter opens already really strong, with an incident where he barely misses another airplane in the middle of the night in flight. They just change altitudes a minute before and thereby actually survive. Another case is where he was flying as a copilot and they were flying with the DC-2 in winter, and they were picking up a lot of ice.

So much ice that the airplane barely became flyable.

ERNEST GANN

“An uneven vibration seizes the entire ship. It passes beneath my feet from one side of the cockpit to the other, surging to a maximum, falling off, and then returning again. I do not like this vibration. There is something wicked about it.”

CHRISTIAAN VAN HEIJST

They had to descend because of the weight. And they almost stumbled into the mountains. And only later on they realize how extremely fortunate they were... that they must have, probably, descended into a valley. The windows were completely iced up so they didn't see anything.

COLLEEN MONDOR

I mean, you're through every blessed second of what they go through trying to keep that aircraft, in that case is a DC-2, in the air while it's picking up just ungodly amounts of ice.

Gann is obviously in the cockpit, and he puts you right in the middle of it. But what Gann also does, while telling you all the technical information in an incredibly readable manner. I mean, that's, that's one of his gifts as a writer, you know. It's clear cut and easy to understand. But what he also does in the book is, he says, okay, this is what we were dealing with. This is what was going on in the ground. And now his mind always moves outside of the cockpit as well. He's in the personalities of the of-- He's not only looking at the instrumentation in front of him. He's in the personality of himself, the people that he's flying with, the people who might be in the back. And then he also wants to understand how he got there. In this particular case, what transfixes him is that if they were flying the aircraft they were scheduled to fly -- a DC-3 -- they would not have been able to stay in the sky with the amount of ice that they picked up.

So, he then begins to wonder, you know, why was this plane scheduled? How did this happen? How, you know, how did we get in this situation with this weather... and follows it all the way back. And I think that's exceedingly helpful. He forces you to look beyond the obvious. That's part of why the book is endured.

DAVID FOXX

One of my favorite passages is where they've flown out of Belém over the jungle and one of the engines of their Lockheed has almost certainly been sabotaged. The oil cap blows off and the engine starts losing oil at a prodigious rate. And they turn back and just manage to survive.

NEIL

David Foxx in Adelaide, Australia. Flies small planes for a hobby. Bug smashers, he calls them. [11:41]

DAVID FOXX

It gets him thinking about his fate then because the chance of him noticing the...the oil – He was looking at the engine pretty much the moment that the oil cap came off. And it would have been a matter of 30 seconds that they wouldn't have survived. It would have crashed into the jungle if he hadn't been there looking at that time. The outcome would have been completely different. But the writing in that passage... because he goes back to the cabin, and he's admiring the charts of South America that he's been given to use...

ERNEST GANN

“Here, on the eastern route to Rio, the charts are not only gaily colored but meticulously detailed and surprisingly accurate. A swamp is a swamp and clearly designated with symbolic groups of reeds and mangrove quite as graphic as the illustrations in a children’s book. Whoever conceived these charts was more than a devoted cartographer and could not have been content with mere facts. Even the green selected to display the vast jungle surrounding Belém is the right green. Deep, voluptuous, and forbidding.

I resolve to steal as many as I can carry when this project is finished. And I shall keep them forever. As more than mementos. As stunning, exciting proof that a proper mixture of science and art is not only possible but a blessed union.”

DAVID FOXX

He makes a very powerful point there, I think, about the union of art and science, and how marvelous that is when it's done well. And I think that's probably really central to his belief system.

But the whole passage where he's describing these charts is long and slow and contemplative. And it's jarred right bang into this explosive action of the engine puking out oil, and him running back to the cockpit to feather the propeller, and turn the plane around, and started a descent on one engine back to Belém before he even has time to explain to the co-pilot what is happening. And it's just a masterful handling of the language and of the structure of that story.

COLLEEN MONDOR

He manages to make all of the men -- and of course they're all men because of the time period -- but he manages to make all these men singular and individual and interesting even when they only exist on the page for a paragraph or two. Even when

they're not a huge part of the story. When he intersects with them, he makes sure that you see them.

You have to remember too that when he was flying, the people that the average person was reading about back in this time period are like Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart, and these great big, huge names doing these huge things that just seem otherworldly. You know, nobody else is doing this. I can't imagine this. So, all of a sudden Gann pulls the curtain back and says, let me show you what this is really like. Let me talk to you about you know these individuals going from point A to point B with their flight bags and tired...

ERNEST GANN

“O’Connor moves into the light from the doorway, and he is at once the oldest professional in the world. His gray hair is matted with rain and his whole body sags with weariness. This is a man who has come a long way, not just on this night, but on so many years of nights when his way of life kept him aloft. He is a scarred warrior, accustomed to discomfort, danger, and travail. He is not to be defeated; for having so many times emerged victorious, no other outcome enters his thinking. His home is in his flight bag, his wardrobe a rumpled uniform, and his office in the sky. Now, coming to a miserable house which he has never seen, in a foreign land he has found but never observed in daylight, he is home from the office. He is, for this moment, the weather-worn symbol of us all.”

COLLEEN MONDOR

He's definitely letting you on the inside. And he does it in a way where you feel like you're inside. It's a club, and he's letting you see what it's like inside the club.

RON RAPP

It's a wonderful picture of sort of a classic time in the history of flying.

NEIL

Ron Rapp... flies a business jet for a living.

RON RAPP

Today we take flying for granted. It's like getting in a cab, you know, or driving in a car. It's not very glamorous, but back then it really was. And we've all seen the pictures of what it looked like back in the cabin with people being served... fillet mignon, and everyone dressed to the hilt, ... wearing suits and other oddities like people smoking in airplanes and whatnot. But it was a very different time up front as well. The aircraft that he flew, they had reciprocating piston engines. They didn't fly over the weather.

They flew through it. They didn't have the traffic detection equipment. They couldn't detect-- you know, they didn't have decent radar. They didn't have the weather data. They didn't have any of the stuff that we take for granted nowadays.

Yeah, there's a sense of adventure, a sort of Indiana Jones sense that's no longer there. We've lost the romance of flying for sure. That's part of why I pursue a lot of the flying that I do outside of work is because I don't want it to become a job. You know, for a lot of people, that's all it is. But I really love flying and I really would hate to lose that. The romance of flying is definitely gone. The wonder. The magic. The adventure.

NEIL

And the danger. Most of it. When Ernest Gann sits down to write his memoir, he gathers up his diaries, flight logs, and old photographs, and reconstructs his days as an airline pilot. Later he says, the experience is so vivid, it's as if his old comrades are in the room with him. And, he broods. He travels to Washington and combs through years of accident reports. And there, in his spiral bound notebook, he compiles a grim list. Lives cut short during his 14 years of flying. They number more than 400.

The historian and author, Bow Van Riper.

BOW VAN RIPER

I mean, it's brought home to the reader right at the beginning. You turn the cover page and you're confronted with this list. Two columns, four and a half pages of name after name after name. All the names of fellow pilots who died in crashes and accidents and whatnot. And for me that is Gann's great theme. That awareness that he went everywhere and did everything. And he lived and all these other men, who he freely admits were as good or better pilots than he in many cases, died along the way. As the title suggests, the book embodies Gann trying to come to grips with that fundamental fact and trying to come to grips with how it is that he's still walking around.

COLLEEN MONDOR

You know, to me, it's two different stories. One is a straight up portrait of a certain segment of American aviation. 1938 to 1952. But on another level, on a completely separate book, it is about the capricious nature of aviation to me. And this is still very true. I've had a lot of people that I've known that have been in accidents, some survivable, some not...that somebody else did the same thing, or something so similar to it days before or weeks before, and they did just fine. They, they didn't have any trouble at all.

And I think that was also part of what Gann was saying when he talks about fate is sometimes it just doesn't make any sense. It's a very unforgiving activity. It's a very unforgiving industry. You can't make any mistakes. Sometimes you can get away with a mistake. But sometimes you don't. And so you've really can't make any at all. Because today could be the day where you don't get away with it. And that, to me is the second significant story that he's telling.

NEIL

And that is the centre of gravity of the book. Is survival a matter of luck, or fate? And if you survive, then what?

RON RAPP

Accidents were very, very common in his day, and he avoided those by the skin of his teeth on many occasions. And so, if you are someone who flies, you're going to experience that from time to time. I mean, I was in a midair collision myself. [21:16]

NEIL

There is a puzzle at the heart of *Fate is the Hunter*. Ernest Gann wonders, how did I survive all those years when so many other pilots perished? Of course, flying was more dangerous back then. But even today, there are still deadly accidents, and still narrow escapes...

...like what happened to Ron Rapp. He flies a business jet for a living. For fun, he flies vintage aircraft ...which is what he was doing one bright, clear day near his home in southern California.

RON RAPP

So, everyone and their mother is out flying. And ironically, I'm flying something that Gann might have flown, which is a Boeing Stearman. It was a World War 2 training aircraft. It's an open cockpit biplane. Really nicely restored example. I had taken someone up for a ride earlier that day. You know? They had a great time, and we came down, and I just decided I wanted to go up again.

So, I'm flying in the traffic pattern, which is kind of a rectangular pattern that you fly if you're just practicing landings. And everything's great. And then when I get on final approach, I'm about maybe a couple 100 feet off the ground. I remember seeing the

sun glinting off of a hangar that was off to my left, and it didn't seem-- Something about it didn't seem right.

And eventually, I realize it's not a hangar that I'm seeing. It's another wing coming out from under my lower left wing. And the problem is I'm doing about 60 miles an hour. So, if I just haul back on the stick, that's going to cause the airplane to stall. You'll exceed what they call the critical angle of attack, and you'll stall the airplane at low altitude, and then you're dead. A total Ernie Gann moment, right? You're right there.

So, my wheels actually bounce off the top of this guy's wing. And that sort of launched me into the air a little bit. And I look over my right shoulder, and I looked down and I see that that guy's landed. So, he's in one piece. And I'm just like, really freaked out because I don't know what damage I might have to the aircraft. You know, is the wing busted? Is something wrong with the tail? It's a fabric covered airplane. So, the skin of it's not metal. It's actually covered in the same fabric you'd wear in a shirt. If you step on that wing, you'll put your foot right through it.

So, I'm wondering, now what do I do? You know, you've got all this training and years of experience, but it doesn't really prepare you for that. No one ever said, hey, if you get into a midair collision, do these things.

So, I made a call that I was going around. And someone from the ground said, "hey, I think you just hit another airplane." And I said, "yeah, I'm, I'm aware of that."

RON RAPP (continued)

So, a friend of mine who was coming over from Catalina, which has the same airport frequency, heard what happened. And he actually offered to form up on my left wing and kind of look at the aircraft and see if it was damaged before I tried to land. So, he did that. He said "your plane looks completely fine. You know, I wouldn't even know that anything had happened."

So, I came back and I landed. And we looked the airplane over. And there was really nothing wrong with it. Which is amazing. I mean, how many people get into a midair? No one gets hurt. The plane is not even damaged. In fact, it flew again the same day. The other guy needed a new wing because he had some big dents in it from the wheels of my airplane. But, you know...

I didn't see the guy. And I've thought about it countless times over the years. And I've really just never... come to the conclusion about what I've could have done that would have been different to prevent it. That was a *Fate is the Hunter* moment. And there have been other midairs at that airport where people....haven't survived.

So, I think back every day on that, really. And I think every day after that is just kind of a gift that I've gotten from God because I should probably be dead. So, one of the things that I appreciate about Gann is he had the same philosophy about it that I do. He doesn't let the fact that those risks are out there stop him from living his life.

NEIL

Ron Rapp. In Ernest Gann's stories, life and death teeter on a knife's edge. In flying, there's so little margin for error. But in our own earthbound moments of truth, there can be just the same sense of urgency.

Gann tells the story of a flight over the Pacific when a vibration shudders up and down the body of the aircraft. Unsettling, unexplained. Enough to make him want to investigate. Like when you feel a twinge in your body, or a pain, or a lump. And you book an appointment with a doctor. And suddenly you, or somebody you love, is tumbling over the edge into a world of tests, and then treatments. And if you've been there, you know that time suddenly seems very short.

In *Fate is the Hunter*, Gann frames his stories in two ways. Usually, a crisis that strikes without warning. But sometimes... sometimes Gann is gripped with a sense of foreboding. Nothing the flight instruments will explain. But still, there's this ominous sense that something bad is about to happen.

CHRISTIAAN VAN HEIJST

I'm not really superstitious, or not superstitious at all. But I had this really bad feeling about the flight.

NEIL: Christiaan Van Heijst.

CHRISTIAAN VAN HEIJST

I was born and raised in a very pragmatic family and environment. And for a long time, I just had the purely materialistic world view that basically everything is down to mathematics, and predictable, according to the laws of nature. But I had a couple of moments where I started to... to wonder, to wonder what life is about.

NEIL

He's on a sightseeing flight to Denali Park in Alaska. On this occasion, he's a passenger on a light aircraft. He takes the seat beside the pilot, just in case.

CHRISTIAAN VAN HEIJST

The pilot touches down and I feel the landing gear is... is touching really gently on the snow. And I basically tell myself, Christiaan, your worries were absolutely unfounded. You see, nothing is going on, and the airplane lands safely.

And exactly at that moment, I feel that the airplane is tipping forward. I hear the engine surging. I see the propeller blades bending as they dig into the snow. It's making a horrible noise to hear the engine choking on the propeller. I see chunks of ice and

snow just flying all around and everything just becomes white outside of the windows. And all of a sudden, the airplane comes to a stop.

To my own relief, which is really calm, almost unemotional, I feel that all my limbs are still attached. No broken bones for as far as I could tell. And I want to get out because I smell gasoline. So, I unbuckle myself, and I'm falling to the ceiling. And that's the moment I realize that we're actually upside down. And we get out. And I stand next to the airplane. And all around us there are mountain peaks like walls of a castle... just looming up high into the clouds. And I just hear the engine ticking as the engine is cooling down. And there's just complete and utter silence. We're the only ones up there.

Fortunately, no one is hurt. And immediately, I realize what kind of predicament we are because nobody knows where we are exactly. We're halfway up the slopes of a huge mountain. So, it's going to be freezing cold in a couple of hours' time. And nobody's going to find us here. And still, I have this strong sense of serenity.

And by pure coincidence, or Gann would call it maybe fate, about two hours later, the sky just turned blue. The clouds just moved away. And we heard an engine from another airplane. And this happened to be the only other airplane that day that made a sightseeing flight in Denali Park. And the pilot was really skimming the clouds and the valleys. And by pure coincidence, our little valley where we were was opening up. And the pilot just flew into the valley. And we were found.

It's not so much about surviving an airplane crash. It's about why do things happen in life as they happen? Why are some people not lucky? Why are some people dying with a small accident just falling from the staircase. And why did I survive this, and also felt it even coming beforehand. And those questions are not easy to answer. But I think this is one of the reasons why I'm so touched and mesmerized by Ernest Gann because he's

dealing with exactly those same questions. And he was looking for answers his entire life as well.

POLLY GANN WRENCH

He wasn't into formal religion, but he had a philosophy that somehow...

He said, "you can't fly like I flew on nights, you know, when the moon is up when the stars are out, and not have a feeling that there's not something stronger out there."

And he used to talk about that.

NEIL

Polly Gann Wrench, Ernest Gann's daughter.

POLLY GANN WRENCH

...And we would go walking at night and look up at the stars. And he knew all the galaxies and the constellations, and everything. And he would talk about that. And then he said, when you're flying, you just cannot think that there isn't something stronger out there that maybe we don't know about, or we can't recognize. But it's there.

COLLEEN MONDOR

What Gann writes about over and over again, I think, is... you're right on the edge. In any instant, you can be right on the edge. And I think he's kind of mystified a few times by how he didn't tumble over the other side, how he managed to hold it together. And he kind of thinks, sometimes I think, that it's luck. I choose to believe that it's being able to stay calm under pressure, because I don't want to believe that it's luck. I really don't. I don't want to believe that some of my friends were just unlucky. I want to believe there was something more to it than that.

NEIL

Hmn. In your book, you write that there are two ways to tell a flying story -- the truth, and what everyone wants to hear. What do you mean?

COLLEEN MONDOR

You know, we used to laugh in college. The guys would say, there I was, you know, at 1000 feet with the enemy on my tail. You know, it's a joke, right? *(laughs)*

People, they want it to be exciting. They want you to be saving a life. They want you to be heroic. They want it to be safe, still. So, just enough danger to make it sound more heroic. But what they don't want to hear is, is how you're just... going from point A to point B. And it's one problem piled on top of another problem piled on top of another problem. At least the experience that I had with flying -- the stories that I knew in Alaska.

COLLEEN MONDOR (continued)

So, they want to hear that...that you were doing something noble, and you were doing something great. And that aviation is critical because it facilitates transportation in this romantic and impressive and noble way. And they don't want to hear that the plane is kind of a piece of crap and not being maintained as it should. And they don't want to hear that the owner is cheap. And they don't want to hear that the chief pilot is angry. And they don't want to hear that the director of operations is worried about the money. And they don't want to hear that you had a fight with your spouse last night. And they certainly don't want to hear that the accident didn't have to happen. So, you tell them the story they want to hear. And part of what I wrote about was, well, this is how the stories really were.

NEIL

In writing about flying in Alaska, Colleen Mondor shatters the romantic narrative that runs through aviation in popular culture. It's also something that Bow Van Riper explores in his book, *Imagining Flight*.

BOW VAN RIPER

"I've swept the surly bonds of earth and touched the face of God," McGee wrote.¹ And... McGee of course, was famously killed in action during World War 2. And, there's a long standing trope of the dead pilot who, especially if they die in circumstances where the wreckage of their plane and their body is never found, are imagined to have merely ascended into heaven directly from their cockpit.

In the 1943 film *A Guy Named Joe* the character played by Spencer Tracy dies on a combat mission and his plane literally lands on a runway surrounded by clouds and finds himself in the afterlife.

DIALOGUE FROM: A GUY NAMED JOE

- Say, there's something cockeyed here.
- What?
- You don't belong here.
- Well, I certainly don't belong anywhere else.
- You're Dick Rumney, aren't you?
- Yes.

¹ "High Flight" by John Gillespie Magee, Jr. 1941.

- I saw you shot down over Brest. Your plane was on fire. Nobody could've got out of it.
- That's right.
- But you got out of it.
- No. I rode her down, Pete.
- Now wait a minute, wait a minute. Take it easy, take it easy. Either I'm dead or I'm crazy
- *(laughs)* Well, you're not crazy, Pete.
- You mean I'm dead?
- Yeah.

BOW VAN RIPER

That idea that the dead pilot somehow managed to go from sky to heaven and never touch the ground is extraordinarily powerful. And it goes to that idea that pilots are different from the rest of us. That they are, if not demi-gods at least tinged with godhood in some way, and that when their time comes to die, the gods gather them in directly, rather than allowing them to return to the earth and be sullied by the touch of it.

One of Gann's contributions to aviation literature is to provide a counterweight to our tendency not only to romanticize pilots as a class of people, but to romanticize pilots' deaths. Gann is not in the slightest romantic about it. To him there's no godlike quality. There's no cloud covered field on the other side of the barrier. There's no none of that. It's just: things go wrong. And if you can't find a way out, then, it's your name added to the list.

NEIL

It strikes me that's a humble stance.

BOW VAN RIPER

It's an extraordinarily humble stance. Americans are so conditioned to see pilots as these swaggering larger than life figures and Gann cuts entirely against that type. He has that level of humility and is absolutely upfront with the reader about it. I'm here not because I'm great, but because I'm lucky. They're gone, not because they were less than I was, but because they were less lucky.

NEIL

Did he think that he was a lucky man?

POLLY GANN WRENCH

Yes, yes. Yes, I do think-- He thought he was a very lucky man in many ways. Uh huh. The only thing that brought my father, as I recall, really, up short, was the death of my brother at sea. That really hit him hard. And it was a great loss because they were great friends. And of course, sailing. There was a passion between the two of them for that.

And so that was the first time that he was really brought up short. And it affected him deeply. Yeah. Because he used to say it was not right. It's out of line. You know, the feeling that I should go before he goes.

NEIL

In December 1973 Gann's oldest son George is swept overboard in a storm. He was chief mate on an oil tanker. 38 years old. Ernest Gann comes to think of his son's death as the universe evening the score for his own lifelong good fortune. He calls George's death, the Terrible Balancing,

And that gets it the riddle at the heart of *Fate is the Hunter*. Is the universe random and chaotic? Or is there a guiding hand that rules our fate? And if you believe in that guiding hand, if you believe that what happens in life is God's plan, how do you keep your faith in the face of suffering and death?

BOW VAN RIPER

One of the extraordinary things about Gann is that he doesn't take refuge in the easy places. He doesn't put it down to a divinity that shapes his career, that somehow preserves him because he has some higher purpose in the universe.

He encloses that list of names with a simple statement: "Their luck was not as great as mine." And between that and the title, it underscores his belief in, if not a randomness, at least an element of the universe - especially the flying universe - that is utterly beyond human control.

(sfx: typing)

ERNEST GANN

"An airplane crashes. There is a most thorough investigation. Experts analyze every particle, every torn remnant of the machine and what is left of those within it. Every pertinent device of science is employed in reconstructing the incident and searching for the cause. And sometimes, they discover a truth which they can explain in the hard, clear terms of mechanical science. They must never, regardless of their discoveries, write off a crash as simply a case of bad luck. They must never, for fear of official ridicule, admit other than to themselves, which they all do, that some totally unrecognizable genie has once again unbuttoned his pants and urinated on the pillar of science."

NEIL

Accident reports, in the words of Ernest Gann.

In her career as a journalist, Colleen Mondor reckons she's read about 5000 of them. There's this thing you hear people say sometimes. You hear it at funerals – that things happen for a reason.

(NEIL to MONDOR)

What do you think about when somebody says, with regards to accidents, bad things happening, or even good things happening: everything happens for a reason. What do you make of that point of view?

COLLEEN MONDOR

That is not my point of view. *(laughs)*. I'm – um - because too many things happen to really good - too many unfair things happen.

One of my classmates in school... he was 21 years old. He was a private pilot. And he was coming back, flying up the Florida coast and doing touch-and-goes. So, not coming to a full stop at the airport. And he lined up to do a touch-and-go at an airport in a place called Sebastian Inlet. No tower.

So, because he's a young pilot, he's setting it up. You know, the perfect rectangle for all of the legs of the entry and making all his calls over the radio, and doing everything the way you learn when you're young and new. And there was a pilot coming in behind him. And, I guess he thought that this kid's final approach was too far back. And I guess he thought he could beat him. He could drop down in front of him. And there was a midair collision. And both planes went down. The second plane, that pilot survived. This kid, this boy did not. He went into an unrecoverable spin.

And so, my stepfather was the dean of the School of Aeronautics where I went to school. And he was a longtime Air Force pilot, and then went into civilian flight. So, he was called to go down there. And he was down there all day. And we had a big talk about this. We talked about this many times in the years after the accident. And he stayed with him. It took them a long time to get the boy out of the wreckage, to recover his remains. And my stepdad stayed with him because he didn't want him to be alone.

And I was so angry, I wrote-- That was actually the first accident that I wrote about. And we had a huge memorial service at the school and his parents came to the service and they wanted to talk to me because they wanted someone to explain to them how this could happen. And I couldn't explain it to them. There was no explaining to them.

I can explain the mechanics of how any accident happens. I can explain to you what the report says. I can explain to you that the mistakes that any given pilot made, or the company personnel made, or what the total mechanical failure is ... that might have brought down an aircraft. But I can't explain to you why this boy was at that place at that moment, at [the] exact moment in time that somebody else came up behind him and wanted to be in the same place, at the same time. I can't make any sense of that.

And the only person I think who can understand that, or the only person I've been able to read who understands that, is Ernest Gann. He would say that that was fate. That it just got him and grabbed him and stole him away.

I... I still... I mean, this accident happened when I was 22 years old, and I still think about that boy. And I'm... I know his name. I'm not saying his name because I would hate for his family to suddenly hear it. But I know his name. I know all of their names. And I sit there, and I look at my flying list, which is not nearly as long as Ernest Gann's was, but all the lists of all of them. And I think, okay, this one could have done that.

And maybe that would have made a difference. And this one could have done that.

And in this particular case, this boy could have been there five minutes earlier, or five minutes later, and he would not be a dead 21 year old. He would be grey. And he would have children. And he would have grandchildren. And he would have had this great flying career.

I don't think that things just sometimes happen. I think that bad things happen, and tragic things happen. And it makes me mad. So that's why I spend most of my time trying to understand why they happen and prevent them from happening.

Which is a lot.

NEIL: You still struggle with it.

COLLEEN MONDOR

I do. I do. Because it was, uh-- I can still see his parents standing there asking me why. And I couldn't explain it.

And I think that's a weight that Gann laboured under, you know. He had all these names. He wrote this book so that they would be remembered. But when you see him, when you read him writing in here. You know, there was this accident and that accident. He came to terms with it by saying that we're literally being hunted.

And I, I know that maybe in this particular case, the boy's, his pattern, his traffic pattern was maybe too long. But that's not why you should get into a midair collision. It shouldn't happen that way. But it did. And all I can do is read the report, and write it up and say, okay, let's, let's not have that one happen again.

And tell the story. Sometimes all you can do is tell the story.

NEIL

As Ernest Gann did. As we all do when we tell our stories of sailing along in life, of getting blindsided. Our stories of sudden loss and narrow escape. And we struggle to make sense of them.

My wife? She beat the odds. She survived her medical crisis. But those long months of uncertainty, of fearing the worst...well, that can change you. It changed us. You realize you don't want to leave things too late. And that's how, one day you find yourself packing what you can into a shipping container. You can't take everything. You can't take most things. But you make room for a few choice books.

NEIL: It looks a little grey to me.

WIFE: Sea can be grey, too...*(laughter)* ...on a bad day.

NEIL:

Did he have a philosophy of how you should live your life?

POLLY GANN WRENCH

(laughs) That's a good one. Um... Ah, well, yes. He said, "go for it".