

inequality both domestically and internationally, restrict advertising of "unhealthy" products, limit the items offered in vending machines, stop the construction of new hospitals (which, he says, are "incompatible with the new view of health"), introduce national health insurance, decentralize populations (that is, disperse them from cities), dismantle large corporations, reclaim the mass media for the public from their corporate owners, and have the government subsidize organic agriculture, solar energy, and the practice of holistic medicine.

His treatment of self-organizing systems is particularly eccentric, since he describes many examples of such systems (evolution, ecology) and fully understands their open-ended nature but explicitly rules them out in the economic sphere. There, he argues, the whole cannot be allowed to be the sum of its parts because its "parts" are merely private interests; because there are externalities; because of the enormous power of giant corporations, monopolies, and advertising; and because certain ends that such a system might produce (such as corporations) are inherently evil. Government counteraction of the spontaneous ordering of the economy is, then, needed. Thus the few hints scattered through this book that would attract advocates of individual freedom are embedded in whole gobs of statism, authoritarianism, and force that would not just drive them up the wall but flatten them against the ceiling.

A sampling of Capra's own words may best capture the flavor of this literary effort. He confidently asserts that, "twentieth-century physics has shown us very forcefully that there is no absolute truth in science." Of modern medicine, he announces that "just [why infant mortality has declined in developed countries] is still poorly understood, but it has become apparent that medical care has

played almost no role in its decline." Capra comments on big business that "the numerous horror stories of corporate behavior in the Third World which have emerged in recent years show convincingly that respect for people, for nature, and for life are not part of the corporate mentality." And agribusiness

"ruins the soil on which our very existence depends, perpetuates social injustice and world hunger, and seriously threatens global ecological imbalance." Had enough from Capra? I have.

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Fleet-footed Adventures

Fletch; Confess, Fletch; Flynn; Fletch's Fortune; Fletch and the Widow Bradley; The Buck Passes Flynn

BY GREGORY MCDONALD

New York: Avon Books. 1974. 253 pp. \$2.25 paper.
 New York: Avon Books. 1976. 172 pp. \$2.25 paper.
 New York: Avon Books. 1977. 278 pp. \$2.25 paper.
 New York: Avon Books. 1978. 252 pp. \$2.25 paper.
 New York: Warner Books. 1981. 285 pp. \$2.95 paper.
 New York: Ballantine Books. 1981. 216 pp. \$2.25 paper.

REVIEWED BY EDWARD REGIS, JR.

"What's your name?"

"Fletch."

"What's your full name?"

"Fletcher."

"What's your first name?"

"Irwin."

"What?"

"Irwin. Irwin Fletcher. People call me Fletch."

"Irwin Fletcher, I have a proposition to make to you. I will give you a thousand dollars for just listening to it. If you decide to reject the proposition, you take the thousand dollars, go away, and never tell anyone we talked. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough. For a thousand bucks I can listen. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to murder

me." . . .

Fletch said, "Sure."

This is the new antiauthoritarian hero-detective? Yes.

Author Gregory McDonald is a newsman turned mystery writer who has produced two colossally successful series: the Fletch and Flynn mysteries. His first two books, *Fletch* and *Confess, Fletch*, each won the prestigious Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allen Poe Award; indeed, he is the first author ever to have won the award twice consecutively. The Fletch series, the better of the two, contains some of the cleverest, most imaginative,

and original plotting and some of the wittiest dialogue to be found in the detective novel. Not only that, Fletch, and to a lesser extent Flynn, are practicing antiauthoritarians: Fletch is an artful tax-dodger with an innate and sustained contempt bordering on hatred for agents of the government.

"C.I.A., Mister Fletcher."

"Um. Would you mind spelling that?"

The Fletch novels are unique in many ways. The hero is not in fact a detective but a newspaper reporter. The novels typically begin in astonishing, unbelievable circumstances: the hero agreeing to murder his client; the hero getting fired from his job for reporting a recent quote from a man two years dead; and so on. Most of the action in these books takes place without the support of conventional narrative: dialogue replaces description as the medium of plot. *Fletch* is almost all dialogue. The result is a fleet-footed adventure in which exposition, characterization, problem, and resolution all emerge from the interplay of conversation among its actors.

The plots are complex: the stories as a rule contain several interrelated plotlines that move along interdependently (in contrast to Ed McBain's 87th Precinct stories, for example, which are usually unrelated to each other and unfold episodically). So while the primary action of *Fletch* concerns the hero and his victim-to-be, a parallel plot involves Fletch's investigation of a drug ring, and a subordinate storyline concerns the attempts of the hero's two ex-wives to sue him for nonpayment of alimony. Can Fletch murder his client, collecting payment for it while at the same time evading the tax on it, solve the drug-supply mystery, see that his ex-wives get what they deserve, and at the end come out innocent of all wrongdoing? Suffice it to say that the author brings off a near-impossible task, resolving all plotlines and achieving one of the most poetically satisfying final images one

could imagine. Indeed, *Fletch* is a virtuoso performance at every level.

In *Flynn*, McDonald's other hero, an inspector on the Boston police force (where, mysteriously, there is no such rank as inspector), is put in the unusual position of witnessing as it happens the very crime he will be called upon to solve. Whereas *Fletch* is a cocky, sarcastic young bachelor (a twice-divorced bachelor, to be sure), *Flynn* is a gentle, phlegmatic family man with a wife and five children.

Like *Fletch*, *Flynn* shows a delightful disdain for certain authorities. McDonald depicts FBI agents ("Fibbies") as dictatorial bastards who *Flynn*, while playing dumb ("One can't keep up with the criminal mind," said *Flynn*. 'Especially when it belongs to the FBI.'"), manages to outsmart, elude, and frustrate at every turn. And one will be entertained by his attitude toward too many laws ("You feds. A law for everything." ... "The hell with the law!... There's entirely too much of it!"), especially tax laws ("He always had a complete physical exam before doing anything about his income taxes").

Both protagonists meet in *Confess, Fletch* where *Fletch*, in Boston to do research for a biography of the Western artist Edgar Arthur Thorp, is accused of murdering a young lady whom he finds, naked and dead on the carpet, upon returning home from dinner. *Flynn*, of course, is the investigating officer. While trying to clear himself, *Fletch* works to retrieve a stolen painting for its rightful owner in Italy, who does not, however, know it is stolen; solves the disappearance of his girlfriend's father; and fights off the advances of that girlfriend's mother. The unraveling of all this sees *Fletch* assume several different identities, break into and enter a heavily burglar-alarmed house without being detected, and interview a lesbian couple, all the while staying one step

ahead of his enemies. Throughout it all, there are the usual antigovernment touches.

"Sorry if I appear to be ignoring you [says *Flynn*] but a City Councilwoman was murdered in her bath this morning and since it's a politically sensitive case, I've been assigned to it. I've never held with taking baths in the morning, but when you're in politics god knows how many baths a day you need."



GREGORY
MCDONALD

The most interesting, imaginative, and baffling of the *Flynn* novels is *The Buck Passes Flynn*. After an ordinary and humdrum opening ("From across the men's room *Flynn* aimed his gun at the President of the United States."), we get to the main problem. It seems that in the little town of Ada, Texas (pop. 1,856), residents one morning awake to find on their doorsteps, each of them, envelopes containing \$100,000 in cash. One hundred thousand dollars for each man, woman, and child in town. How could it happen? Who's dealing it, and why? *Flynn* is dispatched to the scene. (Why? No crime has been committed.) But all the residents have left, save two. Where have they gone, and why have the two remained?

People begin receiving the same amount of money elsewhere: East Frampton, Massachusetts, and then an entire Pentagon Intelligence section. The book traces out the effects of this largesse upon those who receive it and upon the nation's economy in the event this boon (disaster?) becomes more widespread. *Flynn*'s investigations take him to Las Vegas, to Hawaii, and to Smolensk, USSR, to meet with master counterfeiter Cecil Hill.

Is the money counterfeit? Are the Russians spreading it around? I'll only report that Cecil Hill does say:

"All money is fake. An illusion."

"Excrement," *Flynn* said. "Garbage."

"No. Both excrement and garbage have some use. Money is totally fake. All money is fake."

While being led to the solution of the mystery, the reader learns a lot about money, inflation, and the human response to both.

Finally, *Fletch's Fortune*, and *Fletch and the Widow Bradley*. In the latter, *Fletch* suffers acute embarrassment and sincere incomprehension over having reported a recent quote from someone who's been dead two years. What happened? Can it be that the man is dead—and also quite alive? Now I'm not usually one to say, "Check your premises." Nevertheless!

My personal favorite of all these books is *Fletch's Fortune*. Catching up with *Fletch* after a lifetime of nonpayment of taxes ("I have a very slow accountant."), the CIA corners *Fletch* into spying for them. (What's the CIA got to do with taxes?) They want him to bug a newsmen's convention, and *Fletch*, seemingly intent on being cooperative, meets and exceeds their wildest expectations. As the action progresses, the reader is kept abreast of the convention program.

10:30 What Time Is It In Bangkok?

—an editor's view

11:00 GOD IS IN MY

TYPEWRITER, I KNOW IT.

—an address by
Wharton Kruse

There is, of course, a murder that *Fletch*, of course, solves. But *Fletch's* romantic exploits are a principal interest of the novel. He spends much time resisting the overtures of a fabulously beautiful woman (whom he ends up trying to seduce), while pursuing an overweight, unattractive woman who no longer believes in herself. And there is the especial delight of seeing *Fletch*, after all these years, being caught up with:

"I.R.S.," the man said.

Fletch slid the door open.

"How do you spell that?"

"Internal Revenue Service."

And at long last we learn why *Fletch* has never filed:

"Is there any political thinking behind your not paying taxes?"

"Oh no. My motives are purely esthetic, if you want to know the truth."

"Esthetic?"

"Yes. I've seen your tax forms. Visually, they're ugly. In fact very offensive. And their use of the English language is highly objectionable. Perverted."

"Our tax forms are perverted?"

"Ugly and perverted. Just seeing them makes my stomach turn."

As should by now be evident, these novels are a lot of fun to read. And the fun reflects the author's view of life and how to live it. McDonald's most engaging hero, *Fletch*, is an extreme anti-authoritarian. He breaks all rules and obeys nobody—not his editor, not his ex-wives' attorneys, not the courts, certainly not the agents of any government. But *Fletch* does live a highly purposeful, goal-directed life, making his own rules and then living by them, and he has enormous fun and reaps great rewards, financial and emotional, while doing so. Always, he respects other people's rights, and sometimes he goes out of his way to help certain individuals. And always, justice is done: the

bad are punished, the good win out.

The novels also reflect a certain view of evil. In much detective fiction, evil is a potent, often triumphant, force. It is tremendously powerful in Mickey Spillane, for example, ubiquitous in Maj Sjowall and Per Wahloo (the brilliant Martin Beck novels), and an overwhelming presence in Ross MacDonald. The latter provides a good contrast. Both Lew Archer (of Ross MacDonald's works) and Fletch are Californians, both single, both once-married. But Lew Archer sees mainly the seamy side of things: behind the clean white facade of every stucco house there lurks evil: "trouble," foreboding, menacing; in every family's past there is a history of jealousies, hatreds, bitternesses and betrayals. Very little is as it seems in the world Lew Archer inhabits, and there is very little good in it. The most Archer seems able to do is to prevent further evil.

In Fletch's world, by contrast, evil does not seem to be a *force* at all. Bad things do happen, but they are the discrete and self-contained results of individuals acting in certain ways; they do not form an overpowering metaphysical entity. Further, these evil acts can be resisted, and their effects rectified, by the acts of the hero. It is only a few people who are bad in Fletch's world, not the world itself. The world itself is a fun place, the people in it are in control of themselves and their circumstances, and these circumstances, even when they are bad to begin with, can be turned to advantage in the end.

The world of these novels is one in which concrete evil actions can be and are countered by the ingenuity andadroitness of a talented adversary. It is easy to fall in love with such a world and hard for the reader to leave it.

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A Christian Defense of Capitalism

The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism

BY MICHAEL NOVAK

New York: Simon & Schuster. 1982. 433 pp. \$17.50.

REVIEWED BY K. E. GRUBBS, JR.

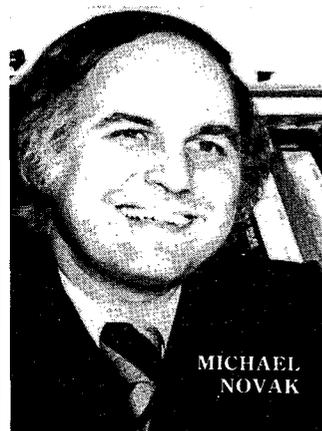
Few disciplines seem quite so incompatible, according to contemporary habits of mind, as economics and religion. So much so, in fact, that economics conjoined with religion has nearly replaced politics as the dinner table taboo; indeed, politics—partially informed politics, at that—has become nearly as *rigueur* as dinnertime conversation.

There are reasons aplenty for this uneasiness, but the fault lies in both camps, the pure economists and the ardent religionists. In America, the old share-the-wealth Social Gospelers have left their imprint on economic policies, however obscure this source to quasi-socialist policymakers. In Europe, too many theologians—Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish—have simply neglected to think through the necessary comparisons of economic systems, variously intoning antiquated "solutions" to the problem of poverty without bothering to check which system has historically lifted more of human kind out of poverty.

Then there are the libertarian individualists with their worldly philosophy. Many of libertarianism's leading intellectual lights verily pontificate (think for a moment on the source of *that* word) on what is truly acceptable for any right-thinking free-market individualist. They allow little room for religion, which they

pejoratively call mystical or irrational.

Much of this hostility to religion is the legacy of the late novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand, who wrote with great clarity and courage about which economic system actually relieves human suffering and which systems do not. Naturally, Rand found herself at odds with the Social Gospel's legatees; that division became enshrined by Rand's votaries, who persistently confused the irrational with the nonrational. The result is profoundly unlearned attempts to disprove the existence of God, a vast



potential outreach that has scarcely been tapped, and, worse, a source (some would say *the* source) of ecstasy, joy, and the meaning of life from which many libertarians have estranged themselves.

Exceptions to this untoward hostility intrude on the mind, of course. The Rev. Edmund

Opitz of the Foundation for Economic Education wrote a fine book a few years back entitled *Religion and Capitalism: Allies Not Enemies*. A fellowship of Christian libertarians (or libertarian Christians; I am not sure of their preference) circulates a newsletter to a scattered fellowship. The powerful but unpublished writings of Rodney Boyer one day will surface. And on the "theology" of self-esteem, one of television's most prominent evangelists, the Rev. Robert Schuller, preaches movingly, perhaps even more cogently than Nathaniel Branden (a one-time associate of Ayn Rand who places self-esteem at the center of his psychological writings and therapy).

All this to build up (I suppose necessarily in a magazine that rarely, if ever, reviews books on religion) to *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, a landmark book, a book neither free-market individualist nor complacent Christian socialist can ignore. Michael Novak, who is rapidly becoming one of the free society's most important spiritual and intellectual resources, wrote it. Fittingly enough for its thesis—that political and economic freedoms not only are united but grow out of the religious traditions of the West—this is a life-giving book. It gives new life to a perspective that few have cared to take seriously. And it argues its case so compellingly that antagonists henceforth may have to show cause why *they* should be taken seriously.

Novak, currently a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., is a lay Catholic theologian noted for his sociological studies of ethnicity in modern America. He has written movingly on the institution of marriage and lyrically of the joy of sports. For a too-short period in the late 1970s, Novak was an editorial page editor's dream, producing with a lovely economy of language a twice-weekly syndicated column that proved to be a topical-yet-timeless jour-