

Book review

Jonathan Gosling and Peter Villiers, *Fictional Leaders: Heroes, Villains and Absent Friends* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK 2012) 280 pp.

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I chose this book for review for the simple reason that I enjoy reading fiction, as it seems do most contributors to this absorbing collection of essays. Edited by Jonathan Gosling, Professor of Leadership Studies at the University of Exeter, and writer and consultant Peter Villiers, *Fictional Leaders* adopts an intriguing, and unusual, approach to leadership. From ancient and modern texts, this book demonstrates how literature offers insights into contemporary issues regarding leadership. In their introduction, Gosling and Villiers argue that management theory often obscures leadership experiences by focusing on positive aspects of leading. The stated aim of this book, by contrast, is to address difficult-to-explore aspects of leadership such as 'loneliness, frustration and disappointment' (p. 1). The intent is not to provide an overarching leadership theory, but rather to highlight 'conceptual observation and theoretical problems' (p. 1) by focusing on particular experiences.

So which fictional characters emerge as worthy leadership material? Well, there are some classical examples as in Burkard Siever's fascinating examination of the mono-maniac leadership of Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Then there are less well-known entries, such as the Japanese author Haraki Murakami's novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*. Here Chris Land, Martyna Śliwa and Sverre Spoelstra examine Murakami's surreal account of how a mystical sheep enters the body of a man, referred to as 'Boss', transforming him into a powerful leader. But is the Boss really that powerful, or is his leadership success a result of his followers' desire to see him as great? A similar theme is explored by Peter Pelzer and Peter Case through a discussion of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. They begin with an account of a senior executive in a German bank who voiced despair at his inability to effect organizational change. This man's exclamation of powerlessness is contrasted with his apparent powerful position. Pelzer and Case ask whether this man's realization of his incapacity to effect change is an example of how leadership sovereignty is an illusion (p. 153). In examining the illusory quality of leadership, they show how the CEO's position is a symbolic one that depends upon 'the delusional assumptions' of others (p. 164). It would appear that in fiction, as in real life, we expect too much from the man at the top.

Perhaps the most debonair example of leadership in popular culture is Ian Fleming's James Bond. '007' represents a particular kind of masculinity whose love of fast cars, beautiful women and cocktails (shaken but not stirred) is deeply woven into the Western mystique about leaders. In 'The Silhouette of Leadership: James Bond and Miss Money Penny', Beverly Hawkins compares the relationship between Bond and

Money Penny with that of a longitudinal ethnographic study she conducted with a self-managed team of recruitment consultants. The organization, identified as 'Strongstaff', adopted the theme of 'James Bond and Miss Money Penny' for its annual sales day to encourage staff to think deeply about their aspirations. Hawkins contends that 'Bond's heroic style of action-focused leadership acts as a template for organizational heroics' (p. 125). While there are gestures toward collaborative work teams in many modern workplaces, for Hawkins, the heroic figure remains a dominant leadership model.

If literature is anything to go by, there's a lot of strange leadership behaviour going on. As Hugo Leticie and Jen-Luc Moriceau observe in their compelling account of a novella by Maurice Blanchot, 'leadership is quite mad' (p. 166). They assert that this is partly because we focus on superficial issues – such as accountability – without understanding the deeper implications of leadership vis-à-vis society as a whole. For example, what happens to leaders when the very structure of society collapses? This is the question that Jonathan Gosling considers in his exploration of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In fact, Gosling sees the current abuses of power as potentially indicative of the end of an era, whose seeds of destruction began with colonialism. In his discussion of Achebe's novel, we witness the devastation that colonialism inflicted on the communal lives of people in an African village. The destruction of communal bonds is illustrated by the character of Okonkwo, who was once considered to exhibit great leadership potential, but whose judgement becomes increasingly flawed as his violence towards others increases. Gosling links the violence in the novel to how some leaders in today's workplace enjoy bullying their employees. Further, he observes that domestic violence can be a negative side-effect of a leader's abuse of authority. Thus, we see how leadership is intrinsically connected to wider themes of social injustice.

If I had to sum up the book in one word, it would be 'character'. Indeed, what interests many contributors is how a person's character is formed, or deformed, by the practices of leadership. But leaders do not act alone; leaders are always aided and abetted by others. Thus, the importance of character is important, not just for the leader, but for each of us. Whether it is Socrates' *daimonion*, that inner voice that stops us from committing certain actions, the African notion of *chi*, or the Hindu concept of *Dharma*, many chapters consider the need for leaders to exhibit right conduct, and some of the dire consequences when they do not. By linking epic sagas to contemporary times, as Harsh Verma notes, we see how crucial it is for leaders to balance personal duty with public responsibility. Taking responsibility as a leader requires having the 'courage and determination to make a new future' (p. 201).

But how do we effect positive change in leadership? One way is by learning from the past. In Plato's *Apology*, Nathan Hartner contends that, in the figure of Socrates, we have an exemplar of a man who refused to 'toe the party line'. Socrates's constant questioning of his own views, as well as everyone else's, stands in sharp contrast to today's work environment where, oftentimes, conformity is valued over dissent. Thus, as Harter argues, Socrates offers us an alternative model of leadership where doubt and questioning are seen as critical to our understanding of the human condition. Similarly, in Satish Kumar's study of Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengalese poet, playwright, painter, and Nobel prize winner, we see a twentieth-century example of a caring leader. Tagore believed that education was critical to the development of a person's imagination, and the formation of character. His friend, Mahatma Gandhi, referred to Tagore as the 'divine teacher' (p. 216). Central to Tagore's teaching was the notion that each person had to forge their own way, and be willing to 'walk alone' (p. 217). This character-building journey enables a person to connect in a deeper way with the world and, in doing so, discourages instrumental ways of being that places self above others. Yet the question

remains: do we want to alter our thinking about leadership? Or would we prefer to just go along with the Boss (after all, it makes life easier)?

In the final essay, Robert Adlam offers ten great works of literature that he regards as fruitful for further investigation. These texts range from Plato's *Republic* to Zamyatin's *We*. Another suggestion is Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*; Adlam argues that this novel is about the 'psychology of men' (p. 241). Possibly, but I think there's a whole lot more going on, which leads me to what I regard as a weakness of this collection. Apart from Emily Dickinson, one of three poets discussed by Barbara Mossberg, there are no women writers. Conversely, there are several chapters on military leaders. This dearth of female authors in favour of military narratives leads to an imbalance, which, in my opinion, mirrors that of contemporary leadership studies. Furthermore, I found that some of the shorter chapters did not provide sufficient depth to obtain the rounded knowledge of leadership that the editors claimed was the volume's purpose. Despite these caveats, this book offers fascinating insights into leadership through different cultural and historical lenses. Written in a clear and engaging way, this book will be of interest to scholars, activists and others interested in a deeper exploration of the study of leadership.

With Professor Jonathan Gosling and Dr Alexandra Stubbings. 11.30am Thursday 19th to 5pm Friday 20th September 2019, Hartwell House, Aylesbury, UK. His work is published in journals such as Leadership, Harvard Business Review, Organization, Studies in Higher Education and Social Epistemology. His most recent book is *Fictional Leaders: Heroes, Villains and Absent Friends* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), which also includes a chapter by Dr Jones. Professor Gosling, a graduate of the University of East Anglia, plays a significant role in the "greening" of management education worldwide and is co-founder of the "One Planet MBA" at Exeter. Gosling, J. and Villiers, P (eds) (2012) *Fictional Leaders: Heroes, Villains & Absent Friends* London: Palgrave. Gosling, J., Jones, S., Sutherland, I. and Dijkstra, J. (2012) *Key Concepts in Leadership* London: Sage. Bolden, R. Hawkins, B., Gosling, J. and Taylor, S. (2011) *Exploring Leadership: Individual, organizational and societal perspectives* Oxford: OUP. Dawson, L., Dunn, E., and Gosling, J (2004). *A Survey of Books and Courses for Church Leaders* in Nelson, J., *Church Leadership*, Gower. Gosling, J. (1996) *The Business of Community* in Kraemer, S. and Roberts, J. *The Politics of Attachment* London: Free Association Press. Gosling, J. (1996) *Plato on the Education of Managers* in French, R. and Grey, C., *Rethinking Management Education* London: Sage. Case Studies. Jonathan Gosling (Hardback, 2012) at the best online prices at eBay! Free delivery for many products! Jonathan Gosling is Professor of Leadership Studies at the University of Exeter, UK, and has published articles in Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review, Leadership, Management Learning and elsewhere. He advises companies, agencies and government departments across the world on their leadership-related issues. *Fictional Leaders. Heroes, Villains and Absent Friends*. Authors: Gosling, Jonathan, Villiers, Peter. Free Preview. Buy this book. eBook 71,68 £. Jonathan Gosling is Professor of Leadership Studies at the University of Exeter, UK, and has published articles in Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review, Leadership, Management Learning and elsewhere. He advises companies, agencies and government departments across the world on their leadership-related issues. He is Fellow of the Windsor Leadership Trust and the Leadership Foundation, a member of the Advisory Board of the Defence Academy, co-director of the European Leadership Centre and director of Coaching Ourselves Inc. Bibliographic Information. Book Title. *Fictional Leaders*. Book Subtitle.