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Captain Bennett's Folly
By Berry Fleming
136 pp. Permanent Press.

Seven decades ago, Berry Fleming became a first lieutenant in the U.S. Coast Artillery. When the World War ended, he finished his studies at Harvard in 1922, took up his pen and began the first of his two dozen books. Still living in Augusta, Georgia where he was born 90 years ago, Mr. Fleming has spent a lifetime languishing as one of America's least known superb fiction writers.

Appreciation delayed should no longer be appreciation denied.

In the 1970s, twenty publishers rejected *Captain Bennett's Folly* before it became one of *Two Tales for Autumn* published in 1979 by Cotton Lane Press.

Set at the intersection of the timeless and our times, Mr. Fleming's zesty comic novel opens with a phone call. Private Schurz, a friend of Capt. Nolan Bennett, calls from the Florida Keys with disturbing news for the ailing octogenerian's Georgia family. The captain has been having eerie dream visions lately. Bennett's heirs, covetous realtors about to run out of land, fear the uncle they have avoided seeing for 15 years may die before bequeathing them his tract of over 2000 Georgia acres. Once underwater and dubbed Bennett's Folly, the property is now dammed up and rich with profitable promise. They send great-nephew Walker Williams, the narrator, to the Keys to stop the captain's land, and his \$30,000 Lifetime Exemption, from slipping away to the young widow now keeping house for him.

Captain Bennett, though, has little interest in pecuniary matters. Having moved to the Keys years earlier to shed the stress from his life, the former history professor has been working on a mathematical system "for measuring the relationship between reason and unreason" which he calls Incalculus because it is "a study of the utterly incalculable." He was trying to translate dreams and their causes into actual films, projecting the unconscious onto a screen and "breaking through the awkwardness barrier into inner space" when his dream visions began: a series of interviews with a God-like Mr. C. Disheartened by mankind's violence, shallowness and greed, Mr. C contemplates destroying his Experiment as he had in Noah's generation: "My worry is, do I salvage what I can . . . or do I just smash the whole thing and start over again farther out in the Galaxy? Or in another galaxy, why not? I've got the space."

Bennett is absorbed by his probing moral discussions with Mr. C and Mr. C's eternal enemy, The Big Talker. Bennett's family, however, has no interest in his metaphysics, only in his land. Even before his consultations with Mr. C they had thought him a bit balmy for having business ethics, "hung up on the mildewed notion promises are meant to be kept . . . not understanding you don't 'keep' promises, you promise again, pay off one promise with a new one, refund it like a municipal bond." Precisely the kind of greedy sycophants Mr. C seems no longer willing to tolerate, they decide their only hope for obtaining Bennett's Folly lies in flying down with the family psychologist whose testimony may enable them to put the old man away.

Mr. Fleming's satire walks the slippery tightrope between humor and bite with Swiftian surefootedness. Reminiscent of Peter DeVries in its blend of energetically youthful voice and wit ("Schurz manufactured enough surprise at the sight of me to have covered a resurrection"), Mr. Fleming's prose is cogent and pensive. He gracefully probes ideas derived from the Buddha, Blake and Camus while sketching this avaricious clan, guilty of every vice but dullness, with enough benevolence to earn them our indulgence if not our sympathy. Their scheme to snatch the captain's land retains its comic suspense right to the end.

The plot's mystery lies in whether they will succeed. The bigger mystery, however, lies in how so entertaining a writer as Berry Fleming could have been publishing since 1927 without yet finding the widely appreciative audience he deserves.