

Martin Gardner: A “Documentary”

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While sifting through my notes with the intention of writing a biographical sketch of Martin Gardner, I was struck by two things. First, it would be difficult to construct a short narrative without making many unsupported statements. Second, in the various interviews and articles about Gardner there were many interesting quotes. Hence, I thought the best thing to do at this time was assemble some of these quotes in the fashion of a documentary, i.e., without narrative but arranged to tell a story. Hopefully, soon a narrative biography will appear.

The first two times Gardner appeared in print were in 1930, while a sixteen year old student at Tulsa Central High. The first, quoted below, was a query to “The Oracle” in Gernsback’s magazine *Science and Invention*. The second was the a “New Color Divination” in the magic periodical *The Sphinx*, a month later. The early interest in science and magic and publishing were to stay with him.

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“I have recently read an article on handwriting and forgeries in which it is stated that ink eradicators do not remove ink, but merely bleach it, and that ink so bleached can be easily brought out by a process of ‘fuming’ known to all handwriting experts. Can you give me a description of this process, what chemicals are used, and how it is performed?” [1]

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An able cartoonist with an adept mind for science. [1932 yearbook caption]

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[In 1934.] “As a youngster of grade school age I used to collect everything from butterflies and house keys, to match boxes and postage stamps — but when I grew older ... I sold my collections and chucked the whole business, and began to look for something new to collect. Thus it was several years ago I decided to make a collection of mechanical puzzles. ...

“The first and only puzzle collector I ever met was a fictitious character. He was the chief detective in a series of short stories that ran many years ago in one of the popular mystery magazines. ... Personally I can’t say that I have reaped from my collection the professional benefit which this man did, but at any rate I have found the hobby equally as fascinating.”

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Gardner was intrigued by geometry in high school and wanted to go to Caltech to become a physicist. At that time, however, Caltech accepted undergraduates only after they had completed two years of college, so Gardner went to the University of Chicago for what he thought would be his first two years.

That institution in 1930s was under the influence of Robert Maynard Hutchins, who had decreed that everyone should have a broad liberal education with no specialization at first. Gardner, prevented from pursuing math and science, took courses in the philosophy of science and then in philosophy, which wound up displacing his interest in physics and Caltech. [3]

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“My mother was a devout, orthodox Methodist, but my father was more of a pantheist and skeptic. ... I was a Protestant fundamentalist when I was in high school. This is reflected in my only novel, *The Flight of Peter Fromm*. But I got over that when I went to the University of Chicago.” [4]

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Gardner returned to his home state after college to work as assistant oil editor for the *Tulsa Tribune*. “Real dull stuff,” Gardner said of his reporting stint. He tired of visiting oil companies every day, and took a job ... in Chicago. [5]

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He returned to the Windy City first as a case worker for the Chicago Relief Agency and later as a public-relations writer for the University of Chicago. [6]

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[In 1940.] A slim, middling man with a thin face saturnined by jutting, jetted eyebrows and spading chin, his simian stride and posture is contrasted by the gentility and fluent deftness of his hands. Those hands can at any time be his passport to fame and fortune, for competent magicians consider him one of the finest intimate illusionists in this country today. But to fame Gardner is indifferent as he is to fortune, and he has spent the last half-dozen years of his life eliminating both from his consideration.

In a civilization of property rights and personal belongings, Martin Gardner is a Robinson Crusoe by choice, divesting himself of all material things to which he might be forced to give some consideration. Son of a well-to-do Tulsa, Oklahoma family which is the essence of upper middle-class substantiality, Gardner has broken from established routine to launch himself upon his self-chosen method of traveling light through life.

Possessor a few years ago of a large diversified and somewhat rarefied library, Martin disposed of it all, after having first cut out from the important books the salient passages he felt worth saving or remembering. These clippings he mounted, together with the summarized total of his knowledge, upon a series of thousands of filing cards. Those cards, filling some twenty-five show boxes are now his most precious, and almost only possession. The entries run from prostitutes to Plautus — which is not too far — and from Plato to police museums.

Chicagoans who are not too stultified to have recently enjoyed a Christmas-time day on Marshall Field and Company’s toy floor may remember Gardner as the “Mysto-Magic” set demonstrator for the past two years. He is again doing his stint this season. The rest of the year finds him periodically down to his last five dollars, facing eviction from the Homestead Hotel, and triumphantly turning up, Desperate Desmond fashion, with fifty or a hundred dollars at the eleventh hour — the result of having sold an idea for a magic trick or a sales-promotion angle to any one of a half-dozen companies who look to him for specialties. During the past few months a determined outpouring of ideas for booklets on paper-cutting and other tricks, “pitchmen’s” novelties, straight magic and card tricks, and occasional dabbings in writings here and there have made him even more well-known as an “idea” man for small novelty houses and children’s book publishers. ...

To Gardner’s family his way of life has at last become understandable; but it has taken

world chaos to make his father say that his oldest son is perhaps the sanest of his family. ...

His personal philosophy has been described as a loose Platonism. But he doesn't like being branded, and he thinks Plato, too, might object with sound reason. If he were to rest his thoughts upon on quotation it would be Lord Dunsany's: "Man is a small thing, and the night is large and full of wonder." [7]

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Martin Gardner '36 is a professional [sic] magician. He tours the world pulling rabbits out of hats. When Professor Jay Christ (Business Law) was exhibiting his series of puzzles at the Club late last Fall Gardner chanced to be in town and saw one of the exhibits. He called up Mr. Christ and asked if he might come out to Christ's home. He arrived with a large suitcase full of puzzles! Puzzles had been hobby with him but where to park them while he was peregrinating over the globe was a problem. Would Mr. Christ, who had the largest collection he had ever heard of, accept Mr. Gardner's four or five hundred? [8]

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He was appointed yeoman of the destroyer escort in the North Atlantic "when they found out I could type." "I amused myself on nightwatch by thinking up crazy plots," said the soft-spoken Gardner. Those mental plots evolved into imaginative short stories that he sold to *Esquire* magazine. Those sales marked a turning point in Gardner's career. [9]

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His career as a professional writer started in 1946 shortly after he returned from four years on a destroyer escort in World War II. Still flush with mustering-out pay, Gardner was hanging around his alma mater, the University of Chicago, writing and taking an occasional GI Bill philosophy course. His break came when he sold a humorous short story called "The Horse on the Escalator" to *Esquire* magazine, then based in Chicago. The editor invited the starving writer for lunch at a good restaurant.

"The only coat I had," Gardner recalls, "was an old Navy pea jacket that smelled of diesel oil. I remember the hatcheck girl looking askance when I handed her the filthy rag." [10]

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About 1947, he moved to New York where he soon became friends with such well known magical devotees as the late Bruce Elliot, Clayton Rawson, Paul Curry, Dai Vernon, Persi Diaconis, and Bill Simon. It was Simon who introduced Martin and Charlotte (Mrs. Gardner) and served as best man at their wedding. Judge George Starke, another magic friend, performed the ceremony. [11]

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"Every since I was a boy, I've been fascinated by crazy science and such things as perpetual motion machines and logical paradoxes. I've always enjoyed keeping up with those ideas. I suppose I really didn't get into seriously until I wrote my first book, *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. I was influenced by the Dianetics movement, now called Scientology, that was then promoted by John Campbell in *Astounding Science Fiction*. I was astonished at how rapidly the thing had become a cult. I had friends who were sitting in Wilhelm Reich's orgone energy accumulators. And the Immanuel Velikovsky business had just started, too. I wrote an article about those three things in an article for the *Antioch Re-*

view, then expanded that article into a book by adding chapters on dowsing, flying saucers, the hollow-earth theories, pyramidology, Atlantis, early ESP research, and so on. It took a long time for the book to start selling, but it really took off when they started attacking it on the *Long John Nebel Show*. ... For about a year, almost every night, the book would be mentioned on the show by some guest who was attacking it.” [4]

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Their first son was born 1955 and their second three years later. Gardner needed a regular income in those years and with his usual serendipity found a job that was just right for him: contributing editor for *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine*. He designed features and wrote stories for *Humpty*, *Children's Digest*, *Piggity's*, and *Polly Pigtales*. “Those were good years at *Humpty*.” [10]

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Although Gardner is a brand-new children's writer, he has a helpful background for the task. He says that he is a great admirer of the L. Frank Baum “Oz” books, having read all of them as a child, and regards Baum as “the greatest writer of children's fiction yet to be produced by America, and one of the greatest writers of children's fantasy in the history of world literature.” He adds, “I was brought up on John Martin's magazine, the influence of which can be seen in some of the activity pages which I am contributing to *Humpty Dumpty*.” [12]

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He got into mathematics by way of paper folding, which was a big part of the puzzle page at *Humpty*. A friend showed him a novel way to fold a strip of paper into a series of hexagons, which led to an article on combinatorial geometry in *Scientific American* in December 1956. James R. Newman's *The World of Mathematics* had just been published, demonstrating the appeal of math for the masses, and Gardner was asked to do a monthly column. “At the time, I didn't own a single math book,” he recalls. “But I knew of some famous math books, and I jumped at the chance.” His first columns were simple. Through the years they have grown far more sophisticated in logic, but the mathematics in them has never gone much beyond second-year college level, because that's all the mathematics Gardner knows. [13]

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“*The Annotated Alice*, of course, does tie in with math, because Lewis Carroll was, as you know, a professional mathematician. So it wasn't really too far afield from recreational math, because the two books are filled with all kinds of mathematical jokes. I was lucky there in that I really didn't have anything new to say in *The Annotated Alice* because I just looked over the literature and pulled together everything in the form of footnotes. But it was a lucky idea because that's been the best seller of all my books.” [14]

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At first, Gardner says, the column was read mostly by high school students (he could tell by the mail), but gradually, as he studied the enormous literature on recreational math and learned more about it, he watched his readers become more sophisticated. “This kind of just happened,” he explains with a shrug and a gesture toward the long rows of bookshelves, crammed with math journals in every language, that line one alcove in his study . “I'm

really a journalist.”

Gardner says he never does any original work, he simply popularizes the work of others. “I’ve never made a discovery myself, unless by accident. If you write glibly, you fool people. When I first met Asimov, I asked him if he was a professor at Boston University. He said no and look startled. He asked me where I got my Ph.D. I said I didn’t have one and he looked startled. ‘You mean you’re in the same racket I am,’ he said, ‘you just read books by the professors and rewrite them?’ That’s really what I do.” [15]

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“I can’t think of any definition of “mathematician” or “scientist” that would apply to me. I think of myself as only a journalist who knows just enough about mathematics to be able to take low-level math and make it clear and interesting to nonmathematicians. Let me say that I think not knowing too much about a subject is an asset for a journalist, not a liability. The great secret of my column is that I know so little about mathematics that I have to work hard to understand the subject myself. Maybe I can explain things more clearly than a professional mathematician can.” [4]

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His “Mathematical Games” column in *Scientific American* is one of the few bridges over C. P. Snow’s famous “gulf of mutual incomprehension” that lies between the technical and literary cultures. The late Jacob Bronowski was a devotee; Poet W. H. Auden constantly quoted from Gardner. In his novel *Ada*, Vladimir Nabokov pays a twinkling tribute by introducing one Martin Gardiner, whom he calls “an invented philosopher.”

Nevertheless, as the mathematician admits, “not all my readers are fans. I have also managed to provoke some outspoken enemies.” In the forefront are the credulous victims of Gardner’s recent hoaxes: an elaborate treatise that demonstrated the power of pyramid-shaped structures to preserve life and sharpen razor blades, and “proof” by a fictional Dr. Matrix that the millionth digit of π — if it were ever computed, would be the number 5. ... Professors at Stanford University have just programmed a computer to carry π to the millionth digit. To everyone’s surprise — especially the hoaxer’s — the number turned out to be 5. [16]

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“I particularly enjoy writing columns that overlap with philosophical issues. For example, I did a column a few years ago on a marvelous paradox called Newcomb’s paradox, in decision theory. It’s a very intriguing paradox and I’m not sure that it’s even resolved. And then every once in a while I get a sort of scoop. The last scoop that I got was when I heard about public-key cryptography system at MIT. I realized what a big breakthrough this was and based a column on it, and that was the first publication the general public had on it.” [14]

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“I’m very ill at ease in front of an audience”, Gardner said. He was asked how he knew he was ill at ease if he had never done it, and that stumped him for a moment. His wife interjected: “That fact is he doesn’t want to do it the same way he doesn’t want to shop for clothes. To my knowledge he’ll shop only for books.” [3]

* * *

“My earliest hobby was magic and I have retained an interest in it ever since. Although

I have written no general trade books on conjuring, I have written a number of small books that are sold only in magic shops, and I continue to contribute original tricks to magic periodicals. My second major hobby as a child was chess, but I stopped playing after my college days for the simple reason that had I not done so, I would have had little time for anything else. The sport I most enjoyed watching as a boy was baseball, and most enjoyed playing was tennis. A hobby I acquired late in life is playing the musical saw.” [17]

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Gardner takes refuge in magic, at which he probably is good enough to earn yet another living. Gardner peers at the world with such wide-eyed wonder as to instantly inspire trust in all who meet him. But when Gardner brings out his green baize gaming board, the wise visitor will keep his money in his pocket. [18]

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“There are, and always have been, destructive pseudo-scientific notions linked to race and religion; these are the most widespread and the most damaging. Hopefully, educated people can succeed in shedding light into these areas of prejudice and ignorance, for as Voltaire once said: ‘Men will commit atrocities as long as they believe absurdities.’ ” [19]

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“Martin never sold out,” Diaconis said. “He would never do anything that he wasn’t really interested in, and he starved. He was poor for a very long time until he fit into something. He knew what he wanted to do. He didn’t want to invent slogans for General Foods. It really is wonderful that he achieved what he achieved.” [3]

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