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A GARDNERIAN CENTENNIAL

BY MAX MAVEN

In a 1976 interview, Martin Gardner observed: "Biographical history, as taught in our public schools, is still largely a history of boneheads: ridiculous kings and queens, paranoid political leaders, compulsive voyagers, ignorant generals—the flotsam and jetsam of historical currents. The men who radically altered history, the great scientists and mathematicians, are seldom mentioned, if at all."

That's all the more reason to mention him now, as October 21, 2014 will be the hundredth anniversary of his birth.

Martin, who passed away five years ago, would have been the first to jump in and object to his being characterized as a "great mathematician"—indeed, he often proclaimed that he was not really a mathematician at all. From a technical standpoint, that may be true; he did not possess a university degree; his study of math did not extend past high school. His entry into that world came by way of *magic*. In 1936, striving to make a living as a writer, he sold an article about hexallexagons, a type of topological oddity made out of folded paper, to *Scientific American* magazine. The piece drew so much reader interest, it led to his being asked to write a monthly column, "Mathematical Games," which ran for the next 25 years.

In order to explain ideas to the reader, he had to first understand them himself, as a man who did not have advanced mathematical training. This perspective, tied to a writing style that was often witty and always clear, led to a result that was highly accessible and appealing. As others have noted, Martin's work was responsible for inspiring more people to take up mathematics than any other stimulus in the latter half of the 20th century.

Magic was not merely the entryway into his column. It was a significant element that cropped up in its pages with

frequency. And, in addition to introducing his *Scientific American* readers to an array of magical ideas and their inventors, Martin also contributed a substantial amount of his own conjuring creations to our journals: *The Jinx*, *Pullbearers Review*, and many others.

His interests were boundless and diverse. In addition to his works on magic and math, he wrote several dozen books and hundreds of articles, ranging from fiction to philosophy, literary analysis, wordplay, skepticism, and much more. His 1960 book, *The Annotated Alice*—a delightful and informative commentary on the classic Lewis Carroll fantasy novels—sold well over a million copies, and has never gone out of print. Also still easily found, and priced at a fraction of what its contents are worth, is his seminal 1956 book, *Mathematics Magic & Mystery*; truly, one of the few books that every magician should own.

1993 saw the first biennial "Gathering for Gardner," a gathering in Atlanta, Georgia that brought together hundreds of magicians, puzzlists, mathematicians, scientists, skeptics, and others who occupy the prodigious central area defined in the Venn Diagram of Martin Gardner's interests. Martin, who was a bold writer but a shy man, only attended the first two, but the gatherings have continued. And, since Martin's death in 2010, each October there are dozens of "Celebration of Mind" events in his honor. These take place around the world, and range from small home parties to more elaborate festivities.

In 1995, at the tender age of 85, he said: "For as long as I can remember I have been impressed, perhaps overwhelmed is more accurate, by the vastness of the universe and the even greater vastness of the darkness that extends beyond the farthest frontiers of scientific knowledge." With typical Gardner efficiency, he thus summed up the love of magic and mystery that guided his prolific and remarkable life.

Happy Birthday, Martin! •

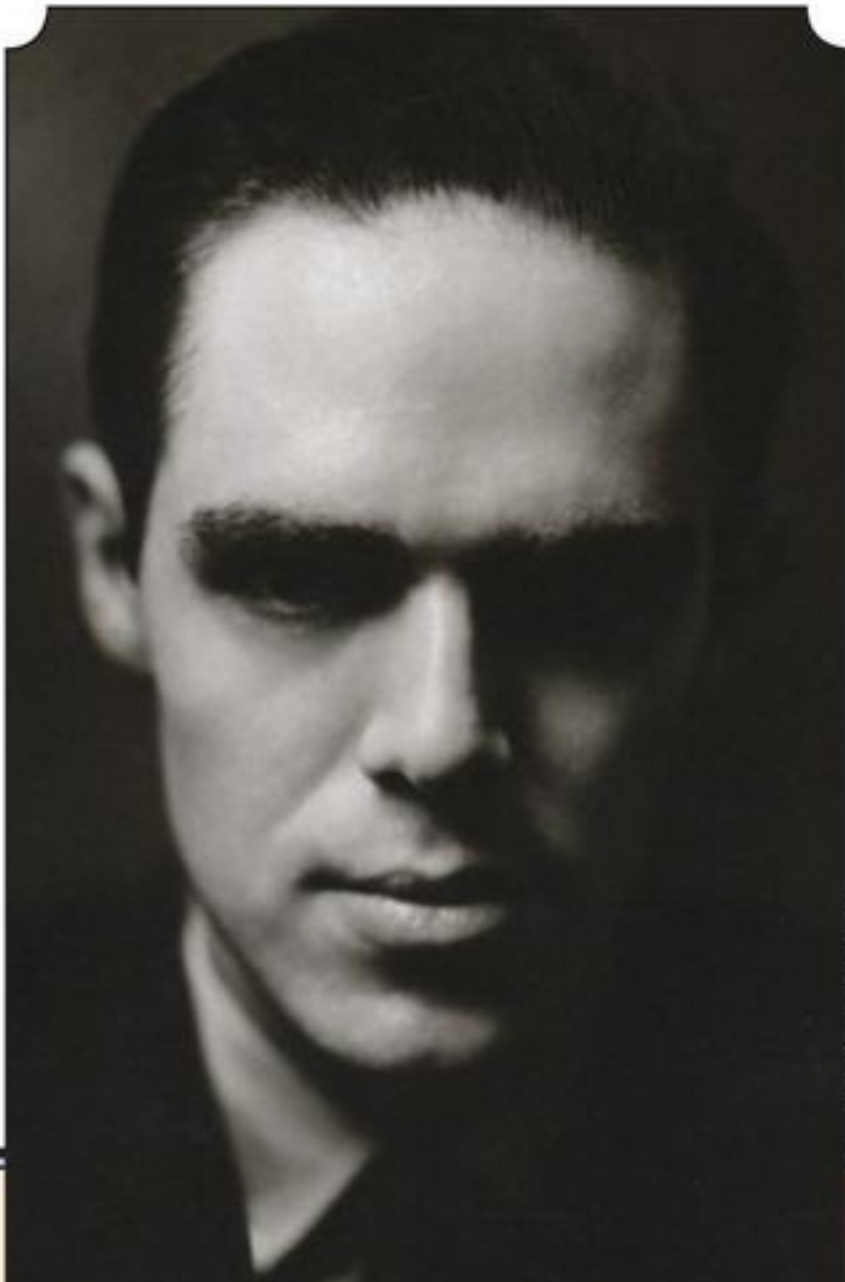


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