

Martin Gardner: A “Documentary”

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I’ve never consciously tried to keep myself out of anything I write, and I’ve always talked clearly when people interview me. I don’t think my life is too interesting. It’s lived mainly inside my brain. [21]

While there is no biography of Martin Gardner, there are various interviews and articles about Gardner. Instead of a true biography, we present here a portrait in the style of a documentary. That is, we give a collection of quotes and excerpts, without narrative but arranged to tell a story.

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 “New Color Divination” in the magic periodical *The Sphinx*, a month later. Also below are two quotes showing a strong childhood interest in puzzles. The early interest in science, magic, puzzles, and writing 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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“Enclosed find a dollar bill for a year’s subscription to *The Cryptogram*. I am deeply interested in the success of the organization, having been a fan for some time.” [2]

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

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[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.” [3]

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“My mother was a dedicated Methodist who treasured her Bible and, as far as I know, never missed a Sunday service unless she was ill. My father, I learned later, was a pantheist.... Throughout my first year in high school I considered myself an atheist. I can recall my satisfaction in keeping my head upright during assemblies when we were asked to lower our head in prayer. My conversion to fundamentalism was due in part to the influence of a Sunday school teacher who was also a counselor at a summer camp in Minnesota where I spent several summers. It wasn’t long until I discovered Dwight L. Moody ... [and] Seventh-Day Adventist Carlyle B. Haynes.... For about a year I actually attended an Adventist church.... Knowing little then about geology, I became convinced that evolution was a satanic myth.” [22]

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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 the 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, thus 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. [19]

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“My fundamentalism lasted, incredibly, through the first three years at the University of Chicago, then as now a citadel of secular humanism.... I was one of the organizers of the Chicago Christian Fellowship.... There was no particular day or even year during which I decided to stop calling myself a Christian. The erosion of my beliefs was even slower than my conversion. A major influence on me at the time was a course on comparative religions taught by Albert Eustace Haydon, a lapsed Baptist who became a well-known humanist.” [22]

"After I had graduated and spent another year at graduate work, I decided I didn't want to teach. I wanted to write." [24]

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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. [17]

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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. [9]

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[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 as 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. The son of a well-to-do Tulsa, Oklahoma, family that is the essence of upper middle-class substantiality, Gardner broke 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 shoe boxes, are now his most precious, and almost only possession. The card 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 doing his stint again 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 one quotation it would be Lord Dunsany’s: “Man is a small thing, and the night is large and full of wonder.” [5]

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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 a 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? [4]

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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. [18]

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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.” [15]

About 1947, he moved to New York where he soon became friends with such well-known magic 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. [12]

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"Ever 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 it 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, which 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 about those three things in an article for the *Antioch Review*, 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." [20]

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Their first son was born in 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*." [15]

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Although Gardner is a brand-new children's writer, he has a good 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*." [6]

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Every Saturday a group of conjureres would gather in a restaurant in lower Manhattan. “There would be 50 magicians or so, all doing magic tricks,” Gardner reminisces. One of them intrigued him with a so-called hexaflexagon — a strip of paper folded into a hexagon, which turns inside out when two sides are pinched. Fascinated, Gardner drove to Princeton, where graduate students had invented it. [23]

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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. [16]

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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 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." [11]

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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 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." [20]

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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. [8]

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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 a 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: "The 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." [19]

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"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." [13]

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Gardner himself does not own a computer (or, for that matter, a fax or answering machine). He once did — and got hooked playing chess on it. "Then one day I was doing dishes with my wife, and I looked down and saw the pattern of the chessboard on the surface on the water," he recalls. The retinal retention lasted about a week, during which he gave his computer to one of his two sons. "I'm a scissors-and-rubber-cement man." [23]

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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 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. [10]

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"Certain authors have been a big influence on me," Gardner says, and enumerates them. Besides Plato and Kant, there are G. K. Chesterton, William James, Charles S. Peirce, Miguel de Unamuno, Rudolf Carnap, and H. G. Wells. From each Gardner has culled some wisdom. "From Chesterton I got a sense of mystery in the universe, why anything exists," he expounds. "From Wells I took his tremendous interest in and respect for science." ...

"I don't believe God interrupts natural laws or tinkers with the universe," he remarks. From James he derived his notion that belief in God is a matter of faith only. "I don't think there's any way to prove the existence of God logically." [23]

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"In a way I regret spending so much time debunking bad science. A lot of it is a waste of time. I much more enjoyed writing the book with Carnap,

or *The Ambidextrous Universe*, and other books about math and science.” [26]

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“As a member of a group called the mysterians I believe that we have no idea whether free will exists or how it works.... The mysterians are not an organized group or anything. We don’t hold meetings. Mysterians believe that at this point in our evolutionary history there are mysteries that cannot be resolved.” [25]

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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.’ ” [7]

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“In the medical field [scientific ignorance] could lead to horrendous results. People who don’t understand the difference between a controlled experiment and claims by some quack may die as a result of not taking medical science seriously. One of the most damaging examples of pseudo-science is false memory syndrome. I’m on the board of a foundation exposing this problem.” [21]

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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.... It really is wonderful that he achieved what he achieved.” [19]

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