

Martin Gardner



1914 - 2010

Martin Gardner (October 21, 1914 – May 22, 2010) was an American mathematics and science writer specializing in recreational mathematics, but with interests encompassing micromagic, stage magic, literature (especially the writings of Lewis Carroll), philosophy, scientific skepticism, and religion. His books, about 70 works, have also had a huge impact on popularising mathematics.

His father was a geologist, with a Ph.D. in geology who dug for fossils for the Smithsonian Institution before starting up his own very small oil company. His mother was a primary school teacher in Lexington before her marriage but, once the children were born, she stayed at home to look after them - she did, however, keep up her hobby of painting. He was the eldest of three children. Before he entered primary school, Martin had learnt to read taught by his mother. He grew up playing chess, practicing magic tricks and reading the *Wizard of Oz*, which he later satirized in the 1998 novel *Visitors from Oz: the Wild adventures of Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Woodman*.

He graduated from the University of Chicago with a degree in philosophy in 1936, then worked as a journalist and public relations man before during World War II as a Navy yeoman aboard a destroyer escort.

After the war, he was a freelance writer for Esquire until the magazine got a new editor who didn't appreciate his quirky style. To support himself, Gardner took a job as an editor at the children's magazine Humpty Dumpty, where he wrote regular stories and a monthly "poem of moral uplift." He wrote his first book during this period, *In the Name of Science* which was republished as a paperback in 1956 under the title *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. Another of his books *Mathematics, Magic and Mystery* was published in 1956.

In December 1956 the editor of Scientific American asked him to write a regular column in the magazine. Gardner accepted the invitation leaving the edition of Humpty Dumpty. His column appeared monthly in 1957 with the title Mathematical games for twenty five years.

The problem, he later said, was that he knew very little about mathematics. "Beyond calculus, I am lost. That was the secret of my column's success. It took me so long to understand what I was writing about that I knew how to write in a way most readers would understand." Gardner scoured book stores in New York, looking for rare books containing the puzzles and other materials that became the lifeblood of his column.

In 1976, Gardner, Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov and others formed the *Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Paranormal* to debunk false science. The group, now known as the *Committee for Skeptical Inquiry*, publishes a journal, the Skeptical Inquirer, for which Gardner wrote a monthly column until 2002.

Today Gardner is famous for mathematical puzzles, many would say that he is the most famous modern writer of mathematical puzzles in the world, and this interest in puzzles came early in his life when his father gave him a copy of Sam Loyd's *Cyclopedia of Puzzles*.

Gardner has received a number of honours for his remarkable contributions including an honorary doctorate from Bucknell University in 1978 and the American Institute of Physics science writer of the year award for 1983. The American Mathematical Society awarded Gardner the Leroy P Steele prize at the summer meeting in Salt Lake City in 1987.

His best-selling book was *The Annotated Alice*, an analysis of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, followed by a sequel, *More Annotated Alice*.

He married Charlotte Greenwald in 1952. They had two sons, Jim and Tom. Charlotte died in 2002.

Gardner died on May 22, 2010, at 95 years of age, at his home in Norman, Oklahoma.

Quotation

“Many have tried to emulate him. No one has succeeded”. “Martin has turned thousands of children into mathematicians, and thousands of mathematicians into children” - mathematician Ronald Graham said of Martin Gardner in 2009.

Sources

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