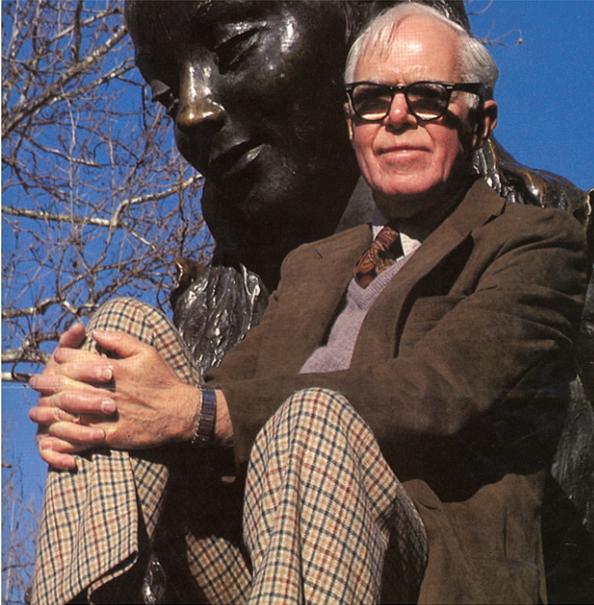


Martin Gardner, 1914-2010

Magical Man of Numbers and Letters

Don Albers



May 22 Martin Gardner died. For 25 of his 95 years, he wrote “Mathematical Games and Recreations,” a monthly column for *Scientific American* magazine, which was without a doubt the most popular and influential column on mathematics that has ever existed. His columns inspired thousands of readers to delve more deeply into the large world of mathematics that he loved to explore and explain. His readers included amateur and professional mathematicians and a host of people from many other fields. Among his correspondents were many famous mathematicians and scientists, including John Horton Conway, Persi Diaconis, Ron Graham, Douglas Hofstadter, Richard Guy, Don Knuth, Sol Golomb, and Roger Penrose. His extensive network of friends often enabled him to bring new developments in mathematics in clear English to his legions of fans.

What is astounding is that he never took a single college course in mathematics. He excelled in mathematics as

a high school student and wanted to attend Caltech, but at that time (1932), Caltech required two years of liberal arts at a college before transferring. So he went to the University of Chicago, where he became hooked on philosophy. After service in World War II, his writing career began to blossom with a position at *Humpty Dumpty’s Magazine for Little Children*. In 1957 he began writing his monthly column for

Scientific American. Most mortals find the idea of writing a significant column on mathematics every month for 25 years to be mind-boggling.

Although many of his columns dealt with topics from computer science, Gardner always composed at a typewriter, and the manuscripts that he sent to me when I was editor of *Math Horizons* and the *College Mathematics Journal* contained his revisions in pencil. Given that he was the author, I would have been happy if he had submitted his manuscripts written with crayons on lined paper. It’s very pleasing that today the MAA is the publisher of nearly all of his books on mathematics and a CD containing the 15 books of all his *Scientific American* columns.

Mathematics, however, was only one of Gardner’s interests. He wrote extensively about close-up magic and counted some of the best-known magicians among his friends. His book *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of*

Science, a brilliant debunking of pseudoscience, remains a best-seller 58 years after publication. His *Annotated Alice* has sold over 400,000 copies, and the first printing of the most recent revision sold out a few days after publication. His works on philosophy, especially the philosophy of science, continue to be very popular. Over the course of his life, Gardner wrote more than 70 books, of which half are still in print.

As a young editor, I was greatly impressed by his kindness, generosity, and gentle manner. We talked frequently on the phone, and finally in 2000 I met him in person for the first time at his home in Hendersonville, North Carolina. For most of the day we chatted in his library about his life and books. I was also treated to a demonstration of some of his magic tricks and a tour of his extensive files. By late afternoon, he said that it was time to go upstairs and join our wives in the living room where he proudly demonstrated his ability to prepare martinis.

I knew Martin Gardner for 32 of his 96 years. As he was an inspiration to the end, I regret that it could not have been longer.

About the author: Don Albers is currently the editorial director of the books program at the MAA. He is also the founder of *Math Horizons*, serving as its first editor from 1993 through 1998. He is co-editor of a number of books, including *Mathematical People: Profiles and Interviews*, which contains an in-depth conversation with Martin Gardner.

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