

A Mansion of a Book from a Sparkling Intellect

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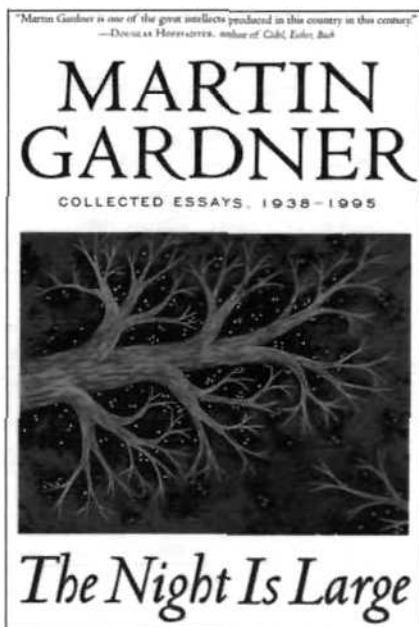
The Night Is Large: Collected Essays, 1938-1995. By Martin Gardner. St. Martin's, New York, 1996. ISBN 0-312-14380-x. 672 pp. Hardcover, \$29.95.

If Edmund Wilson was, as they say, the principal American man of letters in our time, then Martin Gardner must be our leading man of numbers. Best known for his long-running and much admired "Mathematical Games" column in *Scientific American*, Gardner is also the author of several important works of science popularization, chiefly *Logic Machines and Diagrams*, *Relativity for the Million*, and the magisterial *Ambidextrous Universe*, this last an introduction to symmetry and asymmetry that poet W. H. Auden once named as his favorite book of the year.



But, to his many fans, Martin Gardner is considerably more than a guy who knows his way around an algorithm. He is almost certainly the most eminent debunker of pseudoscience since World War II, having exposed the fraudulent, the gullible (reputable scientists taken in by the conjuring tricks of supposed clairvoyants and ESP adepts), and the true believers (in UFOs, Atlantis, New Age religions). Few books are as diverting or damning as Gardner's

classic *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* (or its sequels, starting with *Science: Good, Bad and Bogus*). With patient logic, faultless research, and the calm inexorability of a Greek fury on the scent, Gardner pursues those who victimize the weak-minded, sick and mis-



guided. Who else, now past 80 and full or honors, would take the time to write an entire book about the Urantia cult and its followers?

In truth, Martin Gardner seems positively alphanumeric in the range of his expertise and enthusiasms. Consider the

invaluable *Annotated Alice* and *More Annotated Alice*, his charming science fiction story about topology ("No-Sided Professor"), introductions to G. K. Chesterton's novels and stories, books about magic, two superb poetry anthologies (*Best Remembered Poems* and *Famous Poems of Bygone Days*), several appreciations of L. Frank Baum's Oz books, substantial essays on philosophical issues (proofs of God, pragmatism, modern Thomism), reflections on Penrose tiles and superstrings, a religious *Bildungsroman* called *The Flight of Peter Fromm*, even an edition of "Casey at the Bat"—all these are further aspects of this myriad-minded, multi-talented man. Not least, Gardner repeatedly shows himself to be without pretense, forthright, and fond of jokes: Using a pseudonym, he once reviewed his own *Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener*—negatively. And in the *New York Review of Books*, no less.

That last piece is included in *The Night Is Large*, a representative sampling of this mathematical magpie's essays and work since 1938(!). It's a superb volume, a mansion of a book in which one can live happily for a month or visit for a quarter-hour, a modern-day equivalent to one of those catchall classics like Montaigne's essays or Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Want to know about puzzles in *Ulysses*? The flaws in the Laffer

curve? "Quantum Weirdness"? The mystery of free will? Fractal music? The nature of induction? The Wandering Jew? The Wizard of Oz? Wilhelm Reich and the Orgone? Time travel? Physicist Richard Feynman? The significance of nothing? The irrelevance of everything? These, and dozens of other fascinating matters, are all addressed in these articles and reviews, prefaced with brief, sometimes personal remarks or followed by postscripts updating Gardner's views.

For instance, in the introduction to "How Not to Talk about Mathematics" Gardner writes about the mathematician Morris Kline, who died in 1992. "I had the pleasure of lunching with him some twenty years earlier. We agreed

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that the 'new math,' then a craze among teachers, had been a disaster, and that the best introduction to calculus, to give a high school student, was Sylvanus Thompson's *Calculus Made Easy*. This amusing book was first published in 1910, and is still in print although no one has troubled to update its terminology." I can hardly be alone in feeling awestruck at the prospect of an amusing guide to calculus (though the autodidact in my soul is already panting for a copy). Here's a bit from the postscript to "Klinton and Other Artificial Languages":

"Mangani is the language spoken by the great apes who raised Tarzan. Several hundred of its words are scattered through Edgard Rice Burroughs's Tarzan novels. I first learned about this from Joel Carlinsky who wrote that as a boy he and his brother actually learned to speak Mangani, and that a full vocabulary is in one of the biographies of Burroughs. A related language spoken

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by the tailed men in *Tarzan the Terrible* is given in that book's ten-page glossary, along with grammatical rules."

One gathers, through acknowledgments and by such phrases as "I see from my files," that Gardner methodically collects clippings, letters, and notes on the many subjects that interest him. His archives must be hugely impressive, considering the variety of anecdote in *The Night Is Large*. Coleridge, writing about *Lyrical Ballads*, recalled "that he had been told by the publisher that most of the . . . sales had been to sailors who, having heard of 'The Ancient Mariner,' thought it was a naval songbook." Did you know that "in Europe 16, like 69 in the United States, is a symbol of oral sex"? Or that George Eliot twice had her

head shaved so that she could undergo phrenological analysis of the bumps on her skull?

In the whimsical "Mr. Appollinax Visits New York," Gardner creates a mathematician who, by means of a remarkable function, is able "at one stroke to 1) prove Fermat's last theorem, 2) provide a counterexample . . . to the famous four-color theorem of topology, 3) lay the groundwork for . . . the discovery, three months later, of a 5,693-digit integer—the first of its kind known—that is both perfect and odd." All these are, of course, notable mathematical conundrums. The droll and salacious Mr. Appollinax is quite irresistible; during his New York visit he neatly observes, "I like your Village non-conformists. They're all so much alike." A similar taste for paradox characterizes much of Gardner's prose, as in the sorrowful observation that opens an essay on H. G. Wells: "Today's college students, preoccupied with everything except a liberal education . . ."

Gardner's own education, it becomes clear, is at heart that of a philosopher. He attended the University of Chicago

in the '30s, where he edited a campus literary magazine, studied a year of Greek (which he has forgotten), admired Robert M. Hutchins, and majored in philosophy. Several sections of *The Night Is Large* take up issues of modern metaphysics and religion; these pages are written with their author's usual clarity and panache but require keen attentiveness on the part of the reader. Through them we learn that Gardner is a Platonist, an opponent of cultural relativism, a man who believes that the universe is "real" (and not, in some way, the construct of an observer's mind), a thinker who has concluded that it is impossible to find a logical justification for God's existence, and finally a fideist: "What does it mean to say that belief in God works? To fideists it can mean only this—that belief in God is so emotionally rewarding, and the contrary belief so desolate, they cannot not believe. Beneath the *credo quia absurdum* [I believe because it is absurd], as Unamuno said, is the *credo quia consolans*. I believe because it consoles me. The true water of life, says our Spanish brother, is that which assuages our thirst."

Not too surprisingly, *The Night Is Large* will probably only heighten one's own thirst for further refreshment from this sparkling intellect: There are, for instance, 15 volumes of the math puzzles from *Scientific American*, many more first-rate essays (on, for example, the fantasies of Lord Dunsany, G. K. Chesterton and Ray Bradbury), a collection of stories about the ingenious numerologist Dr. Matrix, and, not least, *The Universe in a Handkerchief*, a just-published volume (Copernicus/Springer-Verlag, \$19) of "Lewis Carroll's Mathematical Recreations, Games, Puzzles and Word Plays." One can only be grateful that Martin Gardner, at 81, continues to think and work and take unceasing delight in what Chesterton once referred to as "the glory of everything."

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