

Originally published 05:45 a.m., December 27, 2009, updated 03:06 p.m., December 27, 2009

BOOKS: 'When You Were a Tadpole and I Was a Fish, and Other Speculations About This and That'

John Greenya

WHEN YOU WERE A TADPOLE AND I WAS A FISH, AND OTHER SPECULATIONS ABOUT THIS AND THAT

By Martin Gardner

Hill and Wang, \$26, 234 pages

REVIEWED BY JOHN GREENYA

"Martin Gardner has an inquiring mind" would be the winning entry in an understatement-of-the-year contest. After a slow start - he didn't write his first book until he was 38 - the Oklahoma native started turning out books, good, solid, well-researched and well-written books, so regularly that today his total exceeds 70.

Generally termed a "recreational mathematician," Mr. Gardner, who turned 95 in October without showing any signs of slowing down (when's the last time you read a book in which the author suddenly tells you he's 94 and writing from his room in an assisted living facility?), has also been called: "U.S. logician, mathematician, puzzle constructor, and popularizer of logic and mathematics"; "game inventor and author"; "American mathematics and science writer specializing in recreational mathematics"; "the world's best-known recreational mathematician"; and, "an incredibly prolific journalist and essayist with eclectic interests."

Not bad for a guy whose major, at the University of Chicago (about which more later), was philosophy.

In 1956, Mr. Gardner, having knocked around a bit doing public relations and journalism, was working on a children's magazine called "Humpty Dumpty" (I swear). Four years earlier, he'd written his first book, "In the Name of Science" and had another one due out that year ("Mathematics, Magic, and Mystery"), so it wasn't a total surprise when the editor of "Scientific American" asked him if he thought he might be able to come up with enough material for a monthly column about "recreational mathematics."

Even though he'd not taken a math class since high school, Mr. Gardner intuited the wisdom of the idea and immediately quit his job to do the column. More than half a century, and 68 books, later, he's still at it. And, as he shows in the essays, articles and reviews in this collection, he's still got it.

From the first essay ("Ann Coulter Takes on Darwin": "Ann Coulter is an attractive writer with green eyes and lopsidedly cut long blond hair, whose trademark is insulting liberals with remarks so outrageous that they make Rush Limbaugh sound like a Sunday school teacher ...") to the last, "Is Socialism a Dirty Word?," both Mr. Gardner's insight and his prose continue to sparkle.

In addition to his work on games and puzzles, Mr. Gardner is well-known as a debunker, in particular of such beliefs as New Age thinking, parapsychology, most organized religions and followers of Uri Geller - the book is dedicated to "James Randi, top magician, old friend, and the world's foremost debunker of bogus science and charlatans who claim paranormal power." Some might say Mr. Gardner deserves to share that distinction.

The book is divided into seven sections: Science; Bogus Science; Mathematics; Logic; Literature; Religions; and a very short one on Politics, all of which contain a virtual groaning board of food for thought, especially on a cold winter's day. Readers will find themselves contemplating some subjects not tackled since college bull sessions.

Personal note: eons ago, when I walked in to get the results of a pre-college aptitude test, the tester's opening line was "I hope you don't want to be an engineer."

No danger of that, but I mention it as preface to saying I suspect the section on Mathematics is very good, but I lack the equipment to evaluate it properly. Nonetheless, to the extent that I understood what Mr. Gardner was saying, I actually enjoyed such essays as "Dracula Makes a Martini," "Fibonacci Sequences," and "L-Tromino Tiling of Mutilated Chessboards," the last a paper Mr. Gardner wrote for the May, 2009, issue of "The College Mathematics Journal."

In some of the essays, the author indulges himself at too great a length, at least for my tastes. For example, "Was the Sinking of the 'Titanic' Foretold," in which he debunks the popular (in some circles) belief that the sinking of the great ship was predicted in Morgan Robertson's novel "Futility," published 14 years before the event, is longer than the entire sections on Logic and Politics combined. And I found my interest flagging a bit in the equally long essay "New Thought, Unity, and Ella Wheeler Wilcox," but not in the even longer essay entitled "Why I Am Not a Paranormalist."


Whether or not a particular topic is to your liking, you will still find much to enjoy in the way Mr. Gardner expresses his ideas. In the last essay mentioned above, he writes, "As I have often said, electrons and gerbils don't cheat. People do. There is a type of individual, extremely common in the history of psychic research, who has no financial motive for cheating but does have a strong emotional drive to cheat. Such persons get their kicks from being considered psychic by their parents, by their friends, by parapsychologists, and by the public."

In "Why I am Not an Atheist," Mr. Gardner, who counts himself a believer but not a member of any organized religion, after quoting Bertrand Russell's clever definition of faith as "a firm belief in something for which there is no evidence," writes, "Faith of this pure sort, uncontaminated by evidence, is easily caricatured. In 'The Will to Believe,' William James quotes a schoolboy remark: 'Faith is when you believe in something you know ain't true.' No fideist accepts this, of course, but if we alter it to 'Faith is believing something you don't know is true,' it is not a bad definition ... I am quite content to confess with [Miguel de] Unamuno that I have no basis whatever for my belief in God other than a passionate longing that God exist and that I and others will not cease to exist."

At several points in this intriguing book Mr. Gardner makes the nice distinction between poetry and verse, and even includes several poems in their entirety, including G. K. Chesterton's "A Second Childhood" and the amazing poem "Evolution," by Langdon Smith.

Back to the University of Chicago. Whenever I read of another interesting person who went there, I wonder anew about what it is that makes the place special. And I remember the marvelous comment made by William Niskanen, chairman emeritus of the Cato Institute, whose undergraduate degree is from Chicago and his Ph.D. from Harvard. When an interviewer said Niskanen had been "educated at Harvard," he corrected him: "No," said Niskanen, "I went to Harvard, but I was educated at the University of Chicago." Martin Gardner would know the difference. Buy his book.

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