

Martin Gardner: Annotator

Dana Richards

Martin Gardner was born to annotate. He only read what he was interested in, but he read with intensity. His library came to have tens of thousands of books and if you were to pick one at random from his shelf you would find the flyleaf contained a summary and it was copiously underlined with the occasional marginal remarks. The more philosophical the book the more comments to be found. He would take notes on cards about what he read and what he thought about it. He was constantly making notes on connections and then carefully filing them away. His filing system was legendary, both encouraging and rewarding correspondents.

In 1959 he wrote to Dennis Flannagan, his editor at *Scientific American*:

“I had another idea, much earlier, for a different sort of magazine. I was going to call it *Marginalia*. It was to contain famous short stories with annotations by an expert, some professor. For example a short story by Fitzgerald.”

He added that he would like to edit the magazine. The idea had intrigued him for over a decade. By this time he had already issued a lightly annotated *The Wizard of Oz and Who He Was* (1957), with a long discussion of L. F. Baum. More significantly, he had signed a contract early in 1958 to write *The Annotated Alice (AA)* (1960).

What is Annotation?

Annotation is an umbrella term covering many activities, each revolving around the central idea of “text.” The text could be old and disputed. It could be unintelligible. It could be different things to different audiences. It could be one of many variants. In short, it could be misunderstood or have unappreciated significance.

The modern “textual scholarship” includes:

- systematic bibliography --- organized subject-based
- descriptive bibliography --- for the collector
- textual criticism --- definitive editions
- non-critical editing --- explication
- critical editing --- correcting and interpreting, and many others.

The original subject matter was incunabula, typically religious. But as texts multiplied and libraries bulged, all subjects invited scholarly guidance. Even so it was rare to see the phrase “annotated edition” except for Talmudic/Biblical volumes. The “higher criticism” of nineteenth century German scholars was a prime example. “Critical editions” were common in the first half of the twentieth century; these featured light annotations (mostly glossary items) bound with scholarly articles.

Why is *The Annotated Alice* Different?

Martin Gardner did not model his book on any other prior work. He had a personal vision of what annotation should be. He was a free-lance writer raising a new family. Despite being loved by academics around the world he was not interested in adding to “the literature.” He was interested in entertaining the public ... by introducing them to the ideas, fascinating nuggets of gold, found in the scholarly literature. He would dig so they did not have to. He also cultivated the world of amateur scholars who, quite naturally, were interested in those aspects that the public would be too.

He began *AA* with “Let it be said at once that there is something preposterous about an annotated *Alice*.” He explains that the modern reader needs help but that is not his main goal.

“My task then was not to do original research but to take all I could find from the existing literature that would make the *Alice* books more enjoyable to contemporary readers.”

The goal was enjoyment. He was guided by his own sensibilities.

Yes, I often ramble, but I hope that at least some readers enjoy such meanderings. I see no reason why annotators should not use their notes for saying anything they please if they think it will be of interest, or at least amusing.”

In his *The Annotated Thursday* (by G. K. Chesterton, 1999) Gardner says, “Many of my notes obviously tell much more than one needs to know to understand the novel. I hope they will be of interest nonetheless”.

He had little interest in speculative academic exercises. He mainly did not imagine the public cared about academics arguing a thesis just to see if they could make it plausible.

There are two types of notes I have done my best to avoid, not because they are difficult to do or should not be done, but they are so exceedingly easy to do that any clever reader can write them out for himself. I refer to allegorical and psychoanalytic exegesis. ... Some learned commentaries of this sort are hilarious.

Vincent Starrett in a review stated, “I am certain of one thing: Nothing that ever can be discovered about *Alice* will make it a better story. Happily, Gardner feels the same way and has done his best to avoid inappropriate allegorical and psychoanalytic exegesis.” In his *The Annotated Ancient Mariner* (1965) Gardner says, “The notes in this volume are intended to deepen the reader’s understanding of the ballad as a straightforward narrative without going into more general questions of symbolic and moral intent.” However he does discuss these in an afterword.

How Did He Do It?

The answer is research, research, and more research. The first type of research, as mentioned above, was a lifelong habit of careful reading. While he must have read for pleasure he never seemed to read to fill time. He was very fond of fantasy fiction (Dunsany, Chesterton, Cabell, etc.). He sought it out, catalogued it and analyzed it, all while enjoying it. Everything was recorded on tens of thousands of file cards originally, and later, when he had the space, in a roomful of file cabinets. He was not necessarily researching a subject. His life seemed to be spent getting ready to write on a hundred subjects.

The second type of research was goal-oriented; when he had a book contract or when he was writing a column. We know when he was working on *In the Name of Science* and the *Annotated Alice* that he was a fixture at the New York Public Library. For many of us it is hard to imagine a time when research was not a click away. You had to read the footnotes, follow the notes, write to the authors (scores of them), and wait for the poor quality photostats. A shelf or two of reference works helped.

The third type is through cultivated correspondence. The follow-up to *AA* was *More Annotated Alice*. He said that he could put out a second volume without repeating any note from the first volume because he had accumulated a large box of letters from scholars and readers correcting, extending and adding to the existing notes. In addition there were decades of steady correspondence with a more focused set of experts who kept him abreast of the latest thing. He was a conduit more than a receiver inasmuch as every update he learned of he passed along in another letter.

Leslie Klinger, who has annotated many books (several with the same editor as Gardner, Robert Weil), reminded me that the true talent of the annotator lies in knowing when to ask, "What does that mean?" That is, knowing your reader and when something will be missed or misunderstood by that reader.

Why Is the Book So Successful?

This can only be speculated on. But the answer must lie with his successful tenure at *Scientific American*, where he delighted the public with monthly essays on mathematics for twenty-five years. He was successful in both ventures for the same reasons, I would argue. He did not write about math as a series of theorem-proofs. He made it come alive by analogies, parallels, and side-trips into magic, literature, art and other topics the public could relate to. Similarly, trusting his instincts, he knew that a popular annotated edition must be unfocused, wide-ranging and fun.

Recall that this is not patterned on prior work. Gardner single-handedly invented the genre. It was an immediate critical and financial success. His friend and editor Clarkson Potter, wrote to him, "[Your] fears for this book were groundless---for as I believed it would, it is as splendid as it has been successful." It was so successful that by 1962 Gardner's *The Annotated Snark* (Simon & Schuster) appeared.

Annotated editions of *Ancient Mariner* and *Casey at the Bat* soon followed. Further, Gardner introduced Potter to W. S. Baring-Gould who published the *Annotated Mather Goose* (1962) and the *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (1967). He then advised Potter to have Michael Patrick Hearn produce the *Annotated Wizard of Oz* (1973). He encouraged Isaac Asimov and others. The number of annotated editions grew steadily in the 70's and 80's until the genre exploded (see appendix). The vast genre traces back AA, no further, and nearly all are patterned on Gardner's blueprint.

What Is the Future of Annotation?

Without a doubt, the future of annotation involves computers. However, as many have pointed out, the researcher who uses search engines lacks perspective. Search engines are remarkable, but they have "flattened" the landscape; you can go directly to something without the benefit of knowing how you got there. Annotation is the opposite. Annotation is all about the context.

Evan Kindley (*New Republic*, September 21, 2015) says it succinctly, "Not all rabbit holes are worth going down." He discusses the future of annotation and begins with the elephant in the room ... crowd-sourcing. Consider Rap-Genius, now just Genius ("Annotate the World"). It started as a wiki-style website for rap lyrics. It now allows readers to annotate books. They even allow people to comment on *Alice*, but most of the "tates" are cribbed from Gardner. It is nice for people who have new insights to have an outlet for those. However, it should surprise no one that the signal-to-noise ratio is low on such sites. People without filters rarely say anything original and often are blithely wrong.

The legacy of AA is not just felt by Carrollians, it is that so many other books and communities have now bridged the gulf between scholarship and the public. I feel the world needs a new crop of "Martin Gardner"s. People that both research and filter, with humility and wisdom. We have many who have proven themselves, like Michael Patrick Hearn, Maria Tatar and Leslie Klinger, so there is hope.

Appendix

The point that AA was the root of a burgeoning endeavor is supported by this growing list of "annotated" editions.

- 1960 *Alice*, Potter
- 1962 *Snark*, Potter
- 1962 *Mother Goose*, Potter
- 1964 *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Eriksson
- 1965 *Ancient Mariner*, Potter
- 1967 *Sherlock Holmes*, Potter
- 1967 *Casey at the Bat*, Potter

- 1970 Walden, Potter
- 1970 Lolita, McGraw Hill
- 1972 Don Juan, Doubleday
- 1973 Wizard of Oz, Potter
- 1974 Paradise Lost, Doubleday
- 1976 McGuffey Reader, Reingold
- 1976 Jules Verne, Crowell
- 1976 Christmas Carol, Potter
- 1977 Familiar Poems, Doubleday
- 1977 Frankenstein, Potter
- 1978 Shakespeare, Potter
- 1980 Gulliver's Travels, Potter
- 1981 Huckleberry Finn, Potter
- 1981 Poe (Tales), Doubleday
- 1982 Oscar Wilde, Potter
- 1986 Dickens, Potter
- 1987 Innocence of Father Brown, OUP
- 1988 Gilbert and Sullivan, Doubleday
- 1988 Ulysses, UCP
- 1988 Hobbit, Mifflin
- 1990 More Alice, Random House
- 1991 Night Before Christmas, Summit
- 1993 Sherlock Holmes, OUP
- 1994 Charlotte's Web, Harper
- 1995 Walden, Houghton Mifflin
- 1995 Jekyll and Hyde, Plume
- 1996 Gilbert and Sullivan, OUP
- 1997 Call of the Wild, UOP
- 1997 Lovecraft, Dell
- 1999 More Lovecraft, Dell
- 1999 The Man Who Was Thursday, Ignatius
- 2000 Definitive Alice, Norton
- 2000 (New) Wizard of Oz, Norton
- 2001 Huckleberry Finn, Norton
- 2001 Sherlock Holmes, Gasogene
- 2002 Classic Fairly Tales, Norton
- 2002 Flatland, Perseus
- 2004 Christmas Carol, Norton
- 2004 Brothers Grimm, Norton
- 2004 (New) Walden, YUP
- 2005 New Sherlock Holmes, Norton
- 2007 Secret Garden, Norton
- 2007 Uncle Tom, Norton

- 2007 Cat in the Hat, Random House
- 2008 New Dracula, Norton
- 2008 Hans Christian Anderson, Norton
- 2008 Turing, Wiley
- 2009 Origin (of Species), HUP
- 2009 van Gogh's Letters, Norton
- 2009 Wind in the Willows, Norton
- 2009 Maine Woods, YUP
- 2010 Pride and Prejudice, HUP
- 2010 Persuasion, Norton
- 2011 Phantom Tollbooth, Knopf
- 2011 Peter Pan, Norton
- 2011 Paradise Lost (Biblically), Mercer UP
- 2012 Frankenstein, HUP
- 2012 Emerson, HUP
- 2012 (New) Brothers Grimm, Norton
- 2012 Little Women, HUP
- 2012-2014 Sandman, DC
- 2014 New Lovecraft, Liveright
- 2014 Wuthering Heights, HUP
- 2014 Northanger Abbey, HUP
- 2014 Treasure Island, Fine & Kahn
- 2015 150th Alice, Norton
- 2015 Poe, HUP
- 2015 Importance of Being Earnest, HUP
- 2015 Malay Archipelago, NUS
- 2015 Emma, Anchor
- 2015 Grateful Dead, Simon & Schuster
- 2015 Little Women, Norton
- 2016 Mansfield Park, HUP
- 2016 Lincoln, HUP
- 2017 New Frankenstein, Liveright
- 2017 African American Folk Tales, Liveright
- 2017 Watchman, DC

While such a list contains biases it is fairly complete. I am aware of at least three additional editions that are in press; these 84 will soon be a hundred. Many "annotated" volumes have been excluded. For example *Bleak House* (Norton, 1977), *Green Gables* (OUP, 1997), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Norton, 2007), and *Frankenstein* (MIT, 2017) are more accurately described as critical editions. And the CUP edition of Catullus, is a scholarly translation. With the *Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (Liveright, 2018) a new American History Annotated Series has begun.

Please contact me if you think this list needs to be updated.