

WHO WAS ARMAND T. RINGER?

Jeremiah Farrell, Dana Richards and Thomas Rodgers

In 1992, Dover published *Best Remembered Poems*, edited and annotated by Martin Gardner. In this collection Gardner includes those poems that he assumes will be the best remembered ones in the future. Some, he admits, are not even among his personal favorites.

Almost all of the poems should be familiar to readers even if the authors may not be. And why is the obscure Armand T. Ringer so often quoted by Gardner? On page 32, commenting on Sam Walter Foss' "The House by the Side of the Road", Gardner notes "Of many parodies that have been written of this poem, I like best one by Armand T. Ringer that begins:

I'm a hermit soul that lives withdrawn
 In the peace of my self-content.
Far from the fumes of the cars and trucks
 That pollute the firmament.
There are souls that love to congest the paths
 Where once the rabbits ran.
But let me live far away from the road,
 As far from the road as I can.

On page 196, commenting on "The Old Oaken Bucket" by Samuel Woodworth, Gardner adds: "Recently Armand T. Ringer has praised 'the bold-spoken lass who hung out at the well'."

And an answer to an old problem is given by Gardner on page 172 where Jane Taylor's poem "The Star" is recorded. "Children today no longer wonder what a star is. As Armand T. Ringer has put it":

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
I know *exactly* what you are.
You're just a sun. How do I know?
My science teacher told me so.

Never heard of Armand T. Ringer? Why do you think **MARTIN GARDNER** thinks so much of **ARMAND T. RINGER**?

Gardner wrote over 70 books and used pseudonyms, pen names and alter egos over 50 times. We will describe those that we are aware of in this article.

Some of our poetic favorites include these two reprinted in *Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?*, Norton, 2003. On page 135:

Jane
Said: "I'd be insane
To shoot my poor husband in the head

When I can shoot Ernest Hemingway instead.”
-a clerihew by Armand T. Ringer

On page 177:

Little Red Riding Hood
Went walking through a wood.
She met a wolf and stopped to chat.
Don't ask what happened after that!
-Armand T. Ringer

In regard to this last poem Gardner notes:

One of the funniest of all games played by Freudian literary critics is that of finding sex symbols in old fairy tales. It is a very easy game to play. Freud is said to have once remarked that a cigar sometimes is just a cigar, but psychoanalysts who write about fairy tales seem incapable of seeing them as just fantasies intended to entertain, instruct, and at times frighten young children.

In *Weird Water & Fuzzy Logic*, Prometheus 1996, a collection of “Skeptical Inquirer” columns and book reviews, Gardner offers on p. 19 a comment about the difficulty of “confirming instances of a conjecture”.

As rhymester Armand T. Ringer once put it:
I never saw a purple cow,
But if I ever see one,
Will the probability crows are black
Have a better chance to be 1?

Gardner also used Armand T. Ringer in:

Casey at the Bat (3rd Edition)
Annotated Night Before Christmas
Poetic Parodies (many examples)
“Wandering Jew” (a clerihew in a book review)
“Word Ways: The Journal of Recreational Linguistics (vol. 40, pp 38-9)

But Armand was not only a poet. In her “Parade Magazine” column “Ask Marilyn”, Marilyn vos Savant twice cited him:

December 25, 2005. A Speed problem with apparently too little data.
February 7, 1999. The four bugs problem.

Vos Savant had made arrangements to use Gardner's material in her column, not always using Armand T. Ringer as author. On March 12, 1995 she listed 13118209147118414518 as author

of a column on codes. Can the reader decipher this name into Martin Gardner? It uses a simple substitution code.

Other pseudonyms used by Gardner include Nitram Rendrag, in the several versions of *The Annotated Casey at the Bat*, Martin George in "Cram Course" in April 1958 *Gent*, Walter Stacey in "Ice Breakers" *Rogue* (Jan 1962), and Uriah Fuller in Karl Fulves' *Confessions of a Psychic* 1975 and *Further Confessions of a Psychic* 1980.

Even more obscure is the name "Dr. Milton A. Ray" on *Aint That a Peach?*, No Date, Phondlehiene Gootch.

He said at that time that "Dr. Milton A. Ray was chosen by the publishers". He recalled two other pen names "Nitram Rendrag" and "George Groth". Gardner claimed he could not remember why he had earlier used the pseudonym "George Groth". George Groth was first used as the author of the short science fiction tale "Thang" in the 1936 University of Chicago literary quarterly "Comment" which was edited by Gardner (reprinted several times, for example in *100 Great Science-Fiction Short Short Stories*, Isaac Asimov, et. al., 1978, Doubleday).

Marilyn vos Savant used George Groth three times in "Parade Magazine":

January 31, 1993. Poses a conditional probability problem
November 28, 1993. A parity problem is presented
November 3, 1996. A logic problem

Chapter Forty, p. 482, in Gardner's *The Night is Large*, 1996, St. Martin's Press reprints a George Groth review of Gardner's *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* 1983, Wm. Morrow. Douglas Hofstadter suggested that Gardner should review the book negatively and Gardner agreed. So George Groth was chosen to write it. Here is an excerpt.

To put it bluntly, Gardner is a simpleminded fideist who sees himself in the tradition of Kant, William James, and Miguel de Unamuno. It is impossible to imagine anyone reading his outrageous confessional (unless the reader is a clone of Gardner) who, however impressed he may be by the author's wide-ranging erudition and rhetorical skill, will not be infuriated by his idiosyncrasies.

The publisher gave away the hoax by insisting the last line "George Groth, by the way, is one of Gardner's pseudonyms" be included. Gardner also used George Groth for:

An article in "Fate" (October 1952) about his friend Stanley Jakes
His puzzle column ("On the Light Side") for "Science World", vol. 2-5, 1957-1959 (he used his real name for vol. 1).

After getting out of the Navy in WWII Gardner went to Chicago and started selling short stories to "Esquire Magazine". His first of twelve "The Horse on the Escalator", Oct. 1946, produced considerable mail to the editors. This included letters by Gardner himself signed William Blackstone, asking about the joke about the horse and grapefruit as described on page 43 of *The No-Sided Professor*, 1987, Prometheus Books. The horse on seeing a grapefruit would always sit on it and not get up. A man bought the horse from a dealer and took him to his home where there was no grapefruit. But when crossing a bridge on a river the horse suddenly sat down and would not get up. When the buyer complained to the dealer, the dealer said "I guess I forgot to tell you, he sits on fish too."

Gardner learned later that Red Skelton on his popular radio show told a horse joke that bombed. Skelton quipped that the joke must have come from that fellow who wrote the “Esquire” story. Gardner had told Dana Richards more than once that Skelton’s remark was a Godsend as “Esquire” liked the publicity and ordered more stories.

In 1952, Gardner moved to New York and was hired by the Parent’s Institute to edit several magazines. One was as editor of a magazine for girls called “Polly Pigtales”. An interview in “The College Mathematics Journal”, vol. 36, #3, May 2005 reports Gardner saying “I was Polly Pigtales.” His term lasted about six issues.

When Parent’s Institute started “Humpty Dumpty’s” in 1952, Gardner was hired as contributing editor and held the job until he began in earnest “Mathematical Games” for “Scientific American”. He wrote as Humpty Dumpty (an egg) supplying a poem, puzzles and a read-aloud short story to his son Humpty Dumpty, Jr. (a little egg) for ten times a year.

In all the “Humpty Dumpty’s” we have seen, the following poem is on the Table of Contents page.

Humpty Dumpty
sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty
had a great fall;
All the King’s horses and
all the King’s men,
Couldn’t put Humpty
together again.
But an American doctor
with patience and glue
Put Humpty together
-better than new;
And now he is healthy
and back on the scene,
Busily editing
this magazine.

Could this little ditty have been composed by Gardner? We think so.

Starting in 1960 in his “Mathematical Games” column in “Scientific American” Gardner introduced the numerologist Dr. Irving Joshua Matrix. Gardner always insisted that Dr. Matrix was real and in fact Matrix was the “author” of at least two summaries of Gardner’s life. One, “Martin Gardner: Defending the Honor of the Human Mind” in Vol. 10, #4, September 1979 of “The Two-Year College Mathematics Journal”. This was a praiseworthy description.

We cannot resist adding an historical note about Dr. Matrix. In Gardner’s *The Incredible Dr. Matrix* 1976, Scribners, Gardner gives the date February 21, 1908 as Dr. Matrix’ birthday. His father was Rev. William Miller Bush and at the age of 8 “Bush” was encoded 2,21,1908, i.e. his birth date. Later Bush was changed to Matrix.