

Gardnering at Night

How many of us share a hometown with our favorite writer? Anaïs Nin and Ayn Rand did, but I'm not talking about self-love. Since I wasn't born in West Point or

Sauk Center or Baltimore or Henry County, I'm outta luck. But we play the hand we're dealt, which is why on a Saturday evening for the last dozen Octobers about 20 of us have gathered to read from the works of Batavia's John Gardner, the once prominent novelist whose audacious ambition was to reinfuse American literature with a moral purpose.

Gardner, one of the last American writers to grow up on a farm, was a hippie Republican anarchist who explained his politics to the *Atlantic*: "I am, on the one hand, a kind of New York State Republican, conservative. On the other hand, I am a kind of bohemian type. I really don't obey the laws. I mean to, but if I am in a hurry and there is no parking here, I park."

His best-known novel—the only one still read, as far as I can tell—is *Grendel* (1971), told from the Beowulfian monster's point of view. He set *The Resurrection* (1966) and *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972) in our town, to which he dreamed of returning and finally did in a coffin, killed in a 1982 motorcycle accident. Here he is buried and remembered, even as English departments shoot him from the canon.

Our literary-culinary venue is the Pokadot, Gardner's favorite diner, the unselfconsciously funky eatery at the epicenter of the Italian-Polish southside. (Gardner, a Welsh Presbyterian, frequently teased his people for their anti-Italian-Catholic prejudices while sharing them: a neat way to have your *torta* and eat it too.) A middling speller, Gardner

wrote his mother—a former English teacher—just before *The Sunlight Dialogues* came out boasting that in the book he had set a scene in the diner and spelled "Polkadot" correctly. Alas, in a nod, perhaps, to simplified spelling, the diner dispenses with that silent "l."

Pokadot readers have included Gardner's family and friends and people mentioned in his books, but most of us—teachers, a dairy salesman, our independent bookseller, and my wife, daughter, and I—know him only through the stories he wrote and the stories that are told about him still. (My dad, a few years behind him in school, said that Gardner was "weird.")

A few regulars sit at the counter and sip coffee, bemused by the proceedings—maybe even edified, I like to kid myself.

I read this year from Gardner's *Poems* (1978), which he prefaced by saying that "relatively little of this present assembly ... is worth the life of a buttonwood tree." Not exactly an advertisement for himself.

He was a man of overwhelming regrets, as you would expect of someone who as an 11-year-old boy dragged a cultipacker, hitched to the tractor he was driving, over his 6-year-old brother's skull. What man wouldn't spend the rest of his life seeking nepenthe? (Gardner's best short story, "Redemption," is a barely fictionalized account of the accident and its aftermath.)

I closed with "Persimmons," in which he writes of being

suddenly grieved over things long forgotten—
the farm where I grew up, in New York State,
where I paid no attention to all my father taught,
so that now I cannot tell for sure a Baldwin
from a Jonathan or some other breed of apple.

Learn your apples and listen to your fathers, I sententiously instructed the teenagers in the audience.

At evening's end, Leonard, a southside character, invited us all to step outside and drink with him from a bottle of Polka Dot Riesling, which he noted was \$9.99 (minus a \$2 rebate) at the liquor store. Why not? Gardner was a boozehound. Leonard poured the wine into coffee mugs and we helped him drink it.

Ellicott Street, home of the Pokadot, is undergoing reconstruction, and we of the anarchic (no officers, no dues, no rules, but somehow we survive) John Gardner Society have offered to install a polkadot bench blazoned with the word LOVE, the graffito that sets in motion *The Sunlight Dialogues*. The polkadot Batavia LOVE bench—bet no one does that for Updike or Bellow.

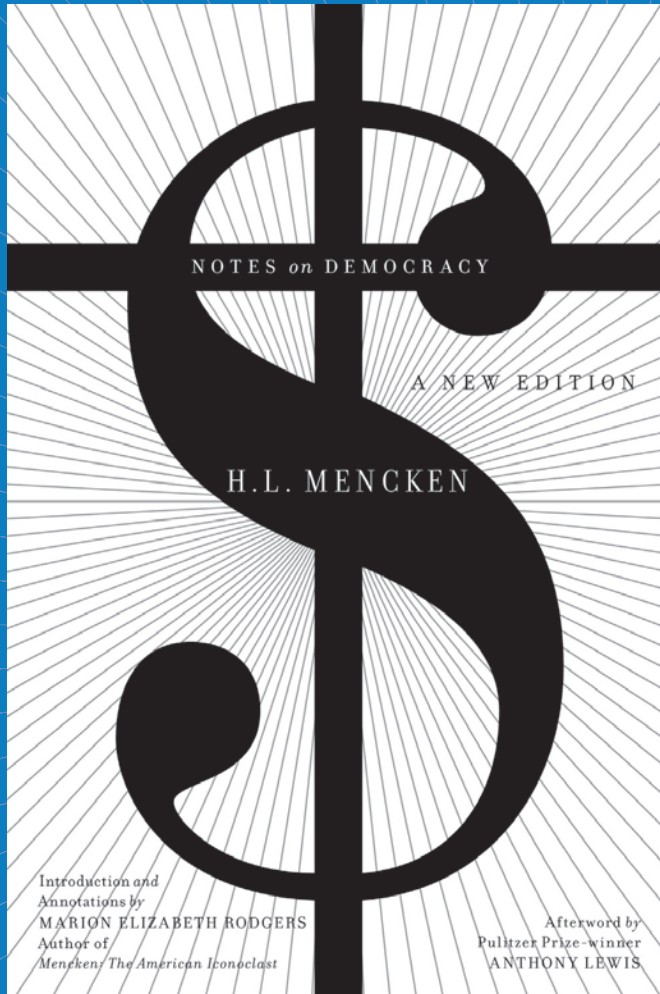
You know what? Gardner is not even among my hundred favorite American novelists. But he is ours. That is enough.

In "The Death of the Hired Man," Robert Frost wrote, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in."

The literati against whom John Gardner railed have formed a circle to keep him out. That's okay. We are his home, and we take him in. Hell, we'll even read him, if it comes to that. ■

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