

ON  
**BECOMING**  
A **NOVELIST**

**JOHN GARDNER**  
FOREWORD BY RAYMOND CARVER

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# ON BECOMING A NOVELIST JOHN GARDNER

*On Becoming a Novelist* was completed only a few weeks before John Gardner's death. Into it he poured his personal experience as an accomplished novelist and a committed teacher of fiction writing. In his foreword, Raymond Carver, a former student of Gardner's, tells us that he gave to the teaching of fiction writing the same devotion to its craft and moral values that he gave to his own work. He also gave to it the rare encouraging spirit that marks his presence behind each sentence of this book. His main objective, as he says early on, is to try "to deal with, and if possible get rid of, the beginning novelist's worries."

*On Becoming a Novelist* is organized around the three main questions that Gardner found young writers have on their minds: Am I talented enough? How should I educate myself? Can I make a living from writing fiction?

In responding at length—fully half of the book—to the first and principal question, and anxiety, of the beginning novelist, Gardner discusses the various "indicators" of a possible vocation for fiction. Some of these have to

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do with visible or potential ability—sensitivity to language, an eye for significant detail, the knack of sustaining a narrative, “a vivid and continuous dream.” Other indicators are aspects of character—the curiosity, self-awareness, detachment, nerve, that enable the novelist to inhabit other lives. Emphasizing that novelists are not born or trained as much as self-made, Gardner provides at every point specific examples, practical suggestions, exercises and other material, drawn from his writing and teaching experience, that can help one to strengthen the abilities and traits he or she possesses.

Gardner’s sagacity and helpfulness are equally in evidence in his discussions of writing programs, workshops, and mentors, or supplementary education and livelihoods. The mystique of the publishing world dissolves before Gardner’s clear-eyed presentation of what editors, agents and publishing houses do, along with his circumspect advice on how to deal with them. In his final chapter, Gardner counsels his reader on the major tests of the novelist’s will and spirit: writer’s block, revision, and rejection. Drawing upon convictions and practices that sustained him through the ups and downs of his career, Gardner provides the beginning novelist with a working faith that can sustain him in the years to come.

*On Becoming a Novelist* is the first in a projected series of books, each written by a leading figure in one of the professions, to provide information, counsel, and inspiration to those who are entering it.

*Jacket design* © Paul Perlow

Harper & Row, Publishers  
10 East 53rd Street  
New York, N.Y. 10022

“John Gardner’s book is worth a thousand pictures of the writer writing—bemused, puffing a pipe, one hand on the keyboard, one in his hair. John was a devoted teacher, and those of us who witnessed his generous attention must be grateful for these pages and his ongoing example. *On Becoming a Novelist* evokes the life of the writer, the student, the teacher as few other documents can; it gives rise to while describing ‘vivid continuous dreams.’ ”

—Nicholas Delbanco

“John Gardner was as impelled to teach as he was to write; in some way his students recognized instantly, writing and teaching were for him two parts of a single and seamless investigation. His brave voice is audible in every sentence of this book.”

—William Matthews

“It’s clear, after reading *On Becoming a Novelist*, that we lost more than a powerful novelist when Gardner died. We lost a powerful teacher as well.”

—Russell Banks



JOHN GARDNER published ten volumes of criticism, five books for children, two works of poetry, two collections of short stories, and eight novels. He died in September 1982 at the age of 49.

Joei Gardner

ISBN 0-06-014956-6

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ON BECOMING A NOVELIST

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*John Gardner*

Foreword by Raymond Carver



HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, New York  
Cambridge, Philadelphia, San Francisco, London  
Mexico City, São Paulo, Sydney

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FIRST EDITION

*Designer: Sidney Feinberg*

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Gardner, John, 1933–1982.

On becoming a novelist.

Includes index.

1. Fiction—Authorship—Vocational guidance.

I. Title.

PN3365.G37 1983            808.3'023            82-48662

ISBN 0-06-014956-6

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83 84 85 86 87 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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*For all my students*



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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Some of the plot ideas examined in this book came out of writers' workshop discussions at SUNY-Binghamton.



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## FOREWORD

A long time ago—it was the summer of 1958—my wife and I and our two baby children moved from Yakima, Washington, to a little town outside of Chico, California. There we found an old house and paid twenty-five dollars a month rent. In order to finance this move, I'd had to borrow a hundred and twenty-five dollars from a druggist I'd delivered prescriptions for, a man named Bill Barton.

This is by way of saying that in those days my wife and I were stone broke. We had to eke out a living, but the plan was that I would take classes at what was then called Chico State College. But for as far back as I can remember, long before we moved to California in search of a different life and our slice of the American pie, I'd wanted to be a writer. I wanted to write, and I wanted to write anything—fiction, of course, but also poetry, plays, scripts, articles for *Sports Afield*, *True*, *Argosy*, and *Rogue* (some of the magazines I was then reading), pieces for the local newspaper—anything that involved putting words together to make something coherent and of interest to someone besides myself. But at the time of our move, I felt in my bones I had to get some education in order to go along with being a writer. I put a very high premium on education then—much higher in those days than now, I'm sure, but that's because I'm older and have an education. Un-

derstand that nobody in my family had ever gone to college or for that matter had got beyond the mandatory eighth grade in high school. I didn't *know anything*, but I knew I didn't know anything.

So along with this desire to get an education, I had this very strong desire to write; it was a desire so strong that, with the encouragement I was given in college, and the insight acquired, I kept on writing long after "good sense" and the "cold facts"—the "realities" of my life told me, time and again, that I ought to quit, stop the dreaming, quietly go ahead and do something else.

That fall at Chico State I enrolled in classes that most freshman students have to take, but I enrolled as well for something called Creative Writing 101. This course was going to be taught by a new faculty member named John Gardner, who was already surrounded by a bit of mystery and romance. It was said that he'd taught previously at Oberlin College but had left there for some reason that wasn't made clear. One student said Gardner had been fired—students, like everyone else, thrive on rumor and intrigue—and another student said Gardner had simply quit after some kind of flap. Someone else said his teaching load at Oberlin, four or five classes of freshman English each semester, had been too heavy and that he couldn't find time to write. For it was said that Gardner was a real, that is to say a practicing, writer—someone who had written novels and short stories. In any case, he was going to teach CW 101 at Chico State, and I signed up.

I was excited about taking a course from a real writer. I'd never laid eyes on a writer before, and I was in awe. But where were these novels and short stories, I wanted to know. Well, nothing had been published yet. It was said that he couldn't get his work published and that he carried it around with him in boxes. (After I became his student, I was to see those boxes of manuscript. Gardner had become aware of my difficulty in finding a place to work. He knew I had a young family and



cramped quarters at home. He offered me the key to his office. I see that gift now as a turning point. It was a gift not made casually, and I took it, I think, as a kind of mandate—for that's what it was. I spent part of every Saturday and Sunday in his office, which is where he kept the boxes of manuscript. The boxes were stacked up on the floor beside the desk. *Nickel Mountain*, grease-pencilled on one of the boxes, is the only title I recall. But it was in his office, within sight of his unpublished books, that I undertook my first serious attempts at writing.)

When I met Gardner, he was behind a table at registration in the women's gym. I signed the class roster and was given a course card. He didn't look anywhere near what I imagined a writer should look like. The truth is, in those days he looked and dressed like a Presbyterian minister, or an FBI man. He always wore a black suit, a white shirt, and a tie. And he had a crewcut. (Most of the young men my age wore their hair in what was called a "DA" style—a "duck's ass"—the hair combed back along the sides of the head onto the nape and plastered down with hair oil or cream.) I'm saying that Gardner looked very square. And to complete the picture he drove a black four-door Chevrolet with black-wall tires, a car so lacking in any of the amenities it didn't even have a car radio. After I'd got to know him, had been given the key, and was regularly using his office as a place to work, I'd be at his desk in front of the window on a Sunday morning, pounding away on his typewriter. But I'd be watching for his car to pull up and park on the street out in front, as it always did every Sunday. Then Gardner and his first wife, Joan, would get out and, all dressed up in their dark, severe-looking clothes, walk down the sidewalk to the church where they would go inside and attend services. An hour and a half later I'd be watching for them as they came out, walked back down the sidewalk to their black car, got inside and drove away.

Gardner had a crewcut, dressed like a minister or an FBI man, and went to church on Sundays. But he was unconven-

tional in other ways. He started breaking the *rules* on the first day of class; he was a chain smoker and he smoked continuously in the classroom, using a metal wastebasket for an ash-tray. In those days, nobody smoked in a classroom. When another faculty member who used the same room reported on him, Gardner merely remarked to us on the man's pettiness and narrow-mindedness, opened windows, and went on smoking.

For short story writers in his class, the requirement was one story, ten to fifteen pages in length. For people who wanted to write a novel—I think there must have been one or two of these souls—a chapter of around twenty pages, along with an outline of the rest. The kicker was that this one short story, or the chapter of the novel, might have to be revised ten times in the course of the semester for Gardner to be satisfied with it. It was a basic tenet of his that a writer found what he wanted to say in the ongoing process of *seeing* what he'd said. And this seeing, or seeing more clearly, came about through revision. He *believed* in revision, endless revision; it was something very close to his heart and something he felt was vital for writers, at whatever stage of their development. And he never seemed to lose patience rereading a student story, even though he might have seen it in five previous incarnations.

I think his idea of a short story in 1958 was still pretty much his idea of a short story in 1982; it was something that had a recognizable beginning, middle, and an end to it. Once in a while he'd go to the blackboard and draw a diagram to illustrate a point he wanted to make about rising or falling emotion in a story—peaks, valleys, plateaus, resolution, *denouement*, things like that. Try as I might, I couldn't muster a great deal of interest or really understand this side of things, the stuff he put on the blackboard. But what I did understand was the way he would comment on a student story that was undergoing class discussion. Gardner might wonder aloud about the author's reasons for writing a story about a crippled person, say,

and leaving out the fact of the character's crippledness until the very end of the story. "So you think it's a good idea not to let the reader know this man is crippled until the last sentence?" His tone of voice conveyed his disapproval, and it didn't take more than an instant for everyone in class, including the author of the story, to see that it wasn't a good strategy to use. Any strategy that kept important and necessary information away from the reader in the hope of overcoming him by surprise at the end of the story was cheating.

In class he was always referring to writers whose names I was not familiar with. Or if I knew their names, I'd never read the work. Conrad. Céline. Katherine Anne Porter. Isaac Babel. Walter van Tilburg Clark. Chekhov. Hortense Calisher. Curt Harnack. Robert Penn Warren. (We read a story of Warren's called "Blackberry Winter." For one reason or another, I didn't care for it, and I said so to Gardner. "You'd better read it again," he said, and he was not joking.) William Gass was another writer he mentioned. Gardner was just starting his magazine, *MSS*, and was about to publish "The Pedersen Kid" in the first issue. I began reading the story in manuscript, but I didn't understand it and again I complained to Gardner. This time he didn't tell me I should try it again, he simply took the story away from me. He talked about James Joyce and Flaubert and Isak Dinesen as if they lived just down the road, in Yuba City. He said, "I'm here to tell you who to read as well as teach you how to write." I'd leave class in a daze and make straight for the library to find books by these writers he was talking about.

Hemingway and Faulkner were the reigning authors in those days. But altogether I'd probably read at the most two or three books by these fellows. Anyway, they were so well-known and so much talked about, they couldn't be all that good, could they? I remember Gardner telling me, "Read all the Faulkner you can get your hands on, and then read all of Hemingway to clean the Faulkner out of your system."

He introduced us to the “little” or literary periodicals by bringing a box of these magazines to class one day and passing them around so that we could acquaint ourselves with their names, see what they looked like and what they felt like to hold in the hand. He told us that this was where most of the best fiction in the country and just about all of the poetry was appearing. Fiction, poetry, literary essays, book reviews of recent books, criticism of *living* authors *by* living authors. I felt wild with discovery in those days.

For the seven or eight of us who were in his class, he ordered heavy black binders and told us we should keep our written work in these. He kept his own work in such binders, he said, and of course that settled it for us. We carried our stories in those binders and felt we were special, exclusive, singled out from others. And so we were.

I don't know how Gardner might have been with other students when it came time to have conferences with them about their work. I suspect he gave everybody a good amount of attention. But it was and still is my impression that during that period he took my stories more seriously, read them closer and more carefully, than I had any right to expect. I was completely unprepared for the kind of criticism I received from him. Before our conference he would have marked up my story, crossing out unacceptable sentences, phrases, individual words, even some of the punctuation; and he gave me to understand that these deletions were not negotiable. In other cases he would bracket sentences, phrases, or individual words, and these were items we'd talk about, these cases were negotiable. And he wouldn't hesitate to add something to what I'd written—a word here and there, or else a few words, maybe a sentence that would make clear what I was trying to say. We'd discuss commas in my story as if nothing else in the world mattered more at that moment—and, indeed, it did not. He was always looking to find something to praise. When there was a sentence, a line of dialogue, or a narrative passage that he liked,

something that he thought “worked” and moved the story along in some pleasant or unexpected way, he’d write “Nice” in the margin, or else “Good!” And seeing these comments, my heart would lift.

It was close, line-by-line criticism he was giving me, and the reasons behind the criticism, why something ought to be this way instead of that; and it was invaluable to me in my development as a writer. After this kind of detailed talk about the text, we’d talk about the larger concerns of the story, the “problem” it was trying to throw light on, the conflict it was trying to grapple with, and how the story might or might not fit into the grand scheme of story writing. It was his conviction that if the words in the story were blurred because of the author’s insensitivity, carelessness, or sentimentality, then the story suffered from a tremendous handicap. But there was something even worse and something that must be avoided at all costs: if the words and the sentiments were dishonest, the author was faking it, writing about things he didn’t care about or believe in, then nobody could ever care anything about it.

A writer’s values and craft. This is what the man taught and what he stood for, and this is what I’ve kept by me in the years since that brief but all-important time.

This book of Gardner’s seems to me to be a wise and honest assessment of what it is like and what is necessary to become a writer and stay a writer. It is informed by common sense, magnanimity, and a set of values that is not negotiable. Anyone reading it must be struck by the absolute and unyielding honesty of the author, as well as by his good humor and high-mindedness. Throughout the book, if you notice, the author keeps saying: “it has been my experience. . . .” It was his experience—and it has been mine, in my role as a teacher of creative writing—that certain aspects of writing can be taught and handed over to other, usually younger, writers. This idea shouldn’t come as a surprise to any person seriously interested in education and the creative act. Most good or even great

conductors, composers, microbiologists, ballerinas, mathematicians, visual artists, astronomers, or fighter pilots, learned their business from older and more accomplished practitioners. Taking classes in creative writing, like taking classes in pottery or medicine, won't in itself make anyone a great writer, potter, or doctor—it may not even make the person *good* at any of these things. But Gardner was convinced that it wouldn't hurt your chances, either.

One of the dangers in teaching or taking creative writing classes lies—and here I'm speaking from my experience again—in the overencouragement of young writers. But I learned from Gardner to take that risk rather than err on the other side. He gave and kept giving, even when the vital signs fluctuated wildly, as they do when someone is young and learning. A young writer certainly needs as much, I would even say more, encouragement than young people trying to enter other professions. And it ought to go without saying that the encouragement must always be honest encouragement and never hype. What makes this book particularly fine is the quality of its encouragement.

Failure and dashed hopes are common to us all. The suspicion that we're taking on water and that things are not working out in our life the way we'd planned hits most of us at some time or another. By the time you're nineteen you have a pretty good idea of some of the things you're *not* going to be; but more often, this sense of one's limitations, the really penetrating understanding, happens in late youth or early middle age. No teacher or any amount of education can make a writer out of someone who is constitutionally incapable of becoming a writer in the first place. But anyone embarking on a career, or pursuing a calling, risks setback and failure. There are failed policemen, politicians, generals, interior decorators, engineers, bus drivers, editors, literary agents, businessmen, basket weavers. There are also failed and disillusioned creative writing teachers and failed and disillusioned writers. John Gardner was

neither of these, and the reasons why are to be found in this wonderful book.

My own debt is great and can only be touched on in this brief context. I miss him more than I can say. But I consider myself the luckiest of men to have had his criticism and his generous encouragement.

—RAYMOND CARVER





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