



## Contributors

# John Gardner's lesson about teaching

01:00 AM EST on Monday, February 19, 2007

STUART VYSE

NEW LONDON

I FOUND HIM alone in his office at Southern Illinois University and asked if he'd had a chance to read my story. I was a long-haired undergraduate English major, and he was a professor and author of a recent bestselling novel. I had never taken any of his classes. I was just a kid he might have seen in the hallway — or heard about from one of his colleagues. But, a few days earlier, in an act of brazen foolishness, I slipped a draft of a short story in his mailbox with a note asking him to read it.

The professor was John Gardner, author of *Grendel*, a retelling of the Beowulf epic from the point of view of the monster — a modern classic that, over three decades after it was first published, still delights thousands of readers a year.

Gardner's life and career were a brilliant mess. As an 11-year-old boy in Batavia, N.Y., John was driving the family tractor when his younger brother Gilbert fell to his death from a cultipacker towed behind. After his successes with *Grendel*, *The Sunlight Dialogues*, and *October Light*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, Gardner published a book of criticism, called *On Moral Fiction*, in which he took better-known contemporaries, including Saul Bellow, John Updike, and John Barth, to task. The controversy that ensued became a front-page story in *The New York Times Magazine*, and suddenly Gardner had lost his luster. Reviews of his subsequent novels always made reference to *On Moral Fiction* and were much more likely to be negative. Then came the accusations that he had plagiarized parts of his biography of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Gardner's personal life was no more orderly. He drank heavily, sponsored wild parties at his home, and had a number of love affairs. He died in 1982, when his motorcycle spun out on a curve near Susquehanna, Penn., days before he was to be married for the third time. Guests who planned to attend a wedding went to a funeral instead.

In the years after Gardner's death, all his novels but *Grendel* went out of print; however, two books, *The Art of Fiction* and *On Becoming a Novelist*, remain popular guides for aspiring writers. Perhaps this is Gardner's greatest legacy. He was a great novelist, but he was an even better teacher. He mentored Raymond Carver, Charles Johnson, winner of the National Book Award for fiction, and many other writers. Including, in a small way, me.

Gardner hadn't read my story the day I appeared at his door. He quickly retrieved it from a pile on his desk and began to turn the pages while I sat nervously waiting. I still have a copy of that story. It is dreadful. Truly embarrassing. Showing that story to John Gardner is a moment of my life I wish I could do over.

But if I hadn't given him the story, I would have been denied an important lesson about teaching. Somehow this great writer found something to praise and chose just one or two things to gently criticize. Then he handed me a piece of paper on which he had written the names of three books. Two were on the craft of fiction — he had not yet written his own books on writing — but another was a basic grammar handbook. I might have found this last a bit insulting, but somehow I did not take it that way. I probably recognized that my syntax was weak at best, and it would be many more years before I could write well. But had he struck a different tone, I might have felt like giving up. Instead, I was honored by the attention he gave me and mildly encouraged.

Today, I, too, am a teacher, and I can appreciate the wisdom of Gardner's attitude. Other professors think they are doing students a favor by dashing false hopes of success in a chosen field. Better to learn now that you are no good and get on to something else. But given the right conditions and enough time, people do change. Students who struggled in my classes have gone on to greatness. Thus, I believe the teacher's challenge is to give criticism that will help students improve without squelching dreams and dampening motivation. On that day in his office, John Gardner did it perfectly.

After many years in the shadows, Gardner's best novels are being published in new editions. *October Light* and *The Sunlight Dialogues* have been reissued, and additional releases are planned in the next few years. In the end, John Gardner may be best remembered for his novels, and that is as it should be. But I will never forget the lesson about teaching he gave me that day in his office. I did not understand it at the time, but years later I did.

Stuart Vyse, an occasional contributor, is a professor of psychology at Connecticut College.