



## October Light

*John Gardner, Tom Bissell (Introduction)*

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Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award. New Directions is excited to reissue the Gardner classics, beginning with October Light, a complex relationship rendered in a down-to-earth narrative. October Light is one of John Gardner's masterworks. The penniless widow of a once-wealthy dentist, Sally Abbot now lives in the Vermont farmhouse of her older brother, 72-year-old James Page. Polar opposites in nearly every way, their clash of values turns a bitter corner when the exacting and resolute James takes a shotgun to his sister's color television set. After he locks Sally up in her room with the trashy blockbuster novel that has consumed her (and only apples to eat), the novel-within-the-novel becomes an echo chamber providing glimpses into the history of the family that spawned these bizarre, sad, and stubborn people. Gardner uses the turbulent siblings as a stepping-off point from which he expands upon the lives of their extended families, and the rural community that surrounds them. He also engages larger issues of how liberals and conservatives define themselves, and considers those moments when life transcends all their arguments.

## October Light Details

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## From Reader Review October Light for online ebook

### **Marc says**

This book was absolutely painful to read. There is simply too much truth in it for me to take in at one time. I had to put it down for days at a time while I digested and processed my feelings. Alongside Sunlight Dialogues and Grendal it is one of the most amazing and affecting novels I have ever read. The metadrama is absolutely central to the story. It stands alone as fiction and gives us a searing look into the subconscious of the two protagonists. Gardner is a literary genius, so completely underated even by so-called Book People that I feel like an evangelist spreading the word. READ THESE BOOKS!

The only book that I have read recently that is of comparable quality is Ford's "The Sportswriter".

good reading

marc g

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### **Matt Holloway says**

The opening scene justifies every book I've ever read.

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### **rich says**

I read this book so many years ago. I do not even barely remember it. I just remember I was obsessed with it and could not put it down. It has two stories throughout. A story within a story. That got in my way when I first started reading it. So I put it down. But, like so many books, I picked it up again and for some reason sailed right through it. It was gorgeously written. John Gardner was a phenomenal writer. I highly recommend this book. One of my absolute all-time favorites.

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### **Cynthia Frazer says**

Was absolutely struck by this novel in my youth, rereading it now I am struck again.

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### **Jenny D says**

It may just be because I'm a Vermonter, but I loved every second of this book. I know those people; I know stubborn old farmers and stubborn old women that say jeezem'crow all the time. I was a fan of John Gardner before, but after reading this I was in the clouds in love with his writing. Such precision, imagery and insight into humanity!

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### **Tamara says**

Usually I would rate a book I was unable to finish with 1 star but I am making an exception in this case. It is obviously a well written book with enough themes to keep a high school english class or intellectual book club busy arguing and analyzing for weeks. The two elderly, stubborn, Vermont siblings represent extreme opposites in terms of political and social viewpoints and there are many supporting cast members to represent the range in between. Like most good stories - there is a dysfunctional family at the core of the story and this family has enough dysfunction to propel any plot. But ultimately, the plot and characters felt like just a device to present the various philosophical points of view he wanted to explore rather than the plot and characters being the core of the story. I only made it 50% through and just wasn't enjoying the journey and opted out.

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### **j\_ay says**

A re-read. great to have this book back in print.  
Gardner is ridiculously under-appreciated.

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### **Irene says**

I am trying to read through all the winners of the Pulitzer Prize. Despite their literary acclaim, some of these leave me less than wowed. October Light is a story within a story, one of which worked for me and one did not. James and Sally, elderly widowed siblings, have recently moved in together in their childhood farmhouse. An argument over lifestyles, in particular the presence of the television, results in Sally locked in her bedroom and James threatening her with a shotgun. The secondary story is a strange paperback novel which is missing pages about drug smugglers, flying saucers and sex which Sally reads while locked in her room. The story of James and Sally and its impact on the larger community, is well rendered. The enfolded paperback felt like a distraction that would never end. Googling commentary on this book, I learned that the family feud was a microcosm of the Revolutionary War and that the paperback novel and the tension over the television was an exploration of the connection between art and morality. Even knowing to look for these themes, I was unable to tease them out. Sally and James gets 4 stars. The smugglers and flying saucer gets 1 star.

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### **Vit Babenco says**

Wheels within wheels... Stories within stories... Now that the television has been shot down dead by her brother, the heroine has nothing to do but to read indignantly a trashy thriller in isolation...

They might be a little like characters in movies—a good deal in her paperback reminded her more of movies than of life, and perhaps that was why, as she'd known from the beginning, it was trash, really, or at least not the kind of book Horace would read—but there was something, even in a novel like this one, that was more like life than any movie could be. You saw things from inside. You understood exactly why everyone did everything—or imagined you did—so that when something went false it seemed not merely silly but—what? A kind of cheat, a

broken confidence.

Caught between inanity of the farcical pulp fiction and the foolishness of the obstinate as a couple of mules aged siblings, I felt as if I've been caught between a rock and a hard place so I couldn't connect with the novel quite for a while. In fact I stayed unplugged almost throughout the entire text regardless of the good readability of *October Light*.

A stupid man, perhaps, and a vile toad even among stupid men, but nevertheless, well read. He has discovered beyond any shadow of a doubt that all life is mechanics, that faith, hope, and charity are the desperate stratagems of people who would blind themselves to truth. All men, he has come to understand, are victims, objects in fact no more rational than planets; good men, he's discovered by his books, are as much the victims of random concussions in the universe as are bad.

How often man is a master of his own troubles – the more wayward one becomes the deeper one sinks in bitterness.

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### **Donalee says**

As the novel opens, 72 year old James Page has just shot his sister's television. Sally Abbot, his penniless widowed sister, has returned home to the Vermont farmhouse in which she and James grew up. The two are polar opposites in nearly every way and become engaged in a bitter battle of ideology. James locks Sally in her bedroom, where she begins to read a trashy novel about drug smugglers, spaceships, and philosophy. This novel within the novel is a springboard to provide glimpses into the family events which created such stubborn and sad people. Through the siblings, Gardner brings into focus the rural community and extended family. The greater picture is one of how liberals and conservatives view themselves and others, and the moments in life that transcend all pettiness.

Gardner is one of my 5 favorite authors. If you are familiar with his writing, you know his novel *Grendel*, the weakest of his books (I think). He was a professor of early English lit, so it is understandable that he wrote the book. He is at his best when he writes about the human condition.

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### **H says**

From the start this is clearly the novel of a man actively striving after masterpieces. Each word is so perfectly chosen, it's unbelievable, and despite its length, the writing is so full of integrity that the reader can't possibly question or wonder if this could have been anything shorter than a 440 page book.

But it's a daunting read, like *Paradise Lost* was, and like most college classes are in the sense that the author assumes you are going to devote your whole being to participating in this novel, and have no other distracting obligations. I wonder if it's that I'm jealous as a writer or overwhelmed as a reader that made it so difficult to read this except in small bits.

And it's so worth it in the end. John Gardner is a champion of realism, and there are passages in the last 40

pages that are so full of love and wisdom that it can't not hit you hard. This is something I'll have to reread as I continue growing up.

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### **Stephen Weinberger says**

I first read Gardner's "Grendel" in high school soon after finishing Beowulf. It was a dark, grotesque, strange, enthralling book that still lingers and causes a mental spasm when I see the cover on my bookshelf. Years later I found Nickel Mountain with its cast of doomed but humane characters in the Catskills of NY. Now, I was able to pick up October Light. Once again, I am struck by his ability to depict flawed but compassionate people (in Vermont this time) while capturing a natural landscape of a change of seasons, staggering barns, decaying automobiles. Although I failed to grasp the story-within-the-story and some of the philosophical ramblings I was once again left with a real sense of place & person that makes his writing so lasting.

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### **Mariel says**

Brother versus sister. James is in his '70s in the 1970s (have I ever shared my theory about guys who were hot in the '70s? The theory is that they are not hot any longer. D'oh! I'm trying to be a sane goodreader now). Sally has run out of money in her eighties (she'd be rich again in the '80s if she took the drug dealing tips from her trash novel) and is forced to move in with her miserly, life-hating brother. His hole forces her into her own hole inside his hole (er, house). Partly out of fear and anger, partly because she enjoys feeling put upon. It's back and forth between victim and victimizer. It's that cliche about women who hold onto every little thing until years later when they bring it back out to slap you in the face with how awful you are to them. James is just as bitchy of a woman as his sister. Both of them are mean little fuckers where it counts. The stewing is what makes them tick.

Old America versus new America? I don't think it was probably ever the old America that old man James Page holds festering in his angry heart (America with anyone but white people. No one wanted money and everyone worked hard. Ha!). It was something to get angry about. His bitterments work well as door closers against his family and countrymen. Sally is the kind of bigot that is okay with everyone else so long as she knows that she is still better than they are. This is what comes from talking to yourself too much.

There is more to James and Sally both in lives past than all of their versus mind games. BUT, the mind games sure get in the way of most everything else. Get ready for a lot of reading between the lines. And waaaaay too many commerical breaks (that would be the trash novel).

Mariel versus satire. I read on amazon that John Gardner's (the first one) wife dared Gardner to write one of those quasi philosophical 1970s novels like the wives of Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner put them up to writing "good" versions of popular works they enjoyed reading (don't know how that worked out for them). Okay... Sally's trash novel became a chore to read. Too much! I really felt that way about all of October Light because the interruptions became the whole program for much of the book. I was relieved to finish it. It wasn't a slow burn or a quick burn of rivalry between the sibling's countries as much as it was a skipped record. I did appreciate how Sally and James would go back to certain thoughts- Sally's husband Horace possibly having a crush on James's wife Ariah; James's guilt about his son's suicide- as if they couldn't quite admit to things, and would attempt to justify the harder truths.

Truth versus the not whole truths.

I really liked this passage: "Whether or not he could have said what he was feeling, and whether or not it would have mattered to the world or the company that runs it, the old man was right about the meaning of that doll. It was there to undo him, both him and his ghosts. Whether it was true, as he imagined, that once in his childhood he'd heard angels sing, and had seen them moving in the aurora borealis, it was undoubtedly true that the Muzak made certain he would hear them- if in fact they were still up there singing- no more."

I felt the most then that James's resistance to television and mass consumerism could replace what was pure in his life. But then he despised the Snoopy doll held by his daughter's adopted son in his sleep... I remember more being a kid and making company out of toys of Snoopy and the like. He can take his indignation and stuff it. It isn't all about him.

*Her heart churned and for an instant she remembered how everywhere she'd looked, just after her nephew had taken his own life, the world had seemed inert, like a half-fallen, long-abandoned barn on a still, cold day.*

To them, it is all about them. The world stopped after the bad shit.

This is from Sally's trash book: "It was one of life's mortally discouraging facts that if a psychiatrist understood you, he could beat you."

Nooooo!

Why do I keep reading books like this? This is Of Human Bondage all over again! Sally: "Books have no effect at all, no value whatsoever."

It's like the Snoopy doll. It isn't the psychiatrist beating you. If one truth has to be the entire truth, one person has to be the fucking be all to everything... But that's wrong!

"Where have we gone wrong?" (According to this book that was Tolstoy's question.) Sally asks herself this often. Weeeell.... I don't know shit. I'm thinking the difference between being a TOTAL asshole, and only being as much of an asshole as you can't help being, is thinking one thing = the answer to everything else. Keep on dancing your little Snoopy dance, Snoopy. Lucy can try and puzzle it out from her advice stand, if she's lucky (if she's lucky from Schroeder's piano bench).

Sally's dead husband, Horace: "Yes, sir, it's the last frontier. You'd think we'd all get together and try to speak one language, wouldn't you? It would improve understanding, advance the cause of peace. Well, we never will," he'd said, shaking his head, still grinning that private, insufferable grin that wasn't mean to be understood.

Fuck psychiatrists pinning you down. Anyone pinning anyone down. Horace grew quieter, stopped speaking to Sally. Sally began not being able to speak enough, to anyone. James resented her talkity talk, as if she were trying to beat him verbally with what he beat her with literally (sticks and guns would break her bones and words also hurt). So Sally accepts that it is "natural to be watchful and suspicious". Books are the letting down the walls because they are not asking anything in return. OF COURSE they are good for something. Their whole problem was this pinning shit. My heart can't take this. Too much time in here. I need a vacation! And NOT with drug smugglers!

I'm going to rate this three stars because I was so very relieved to finish it. Have you ever had an

uncomfortable conversation with a family member who drags up shit you don't want to relive? And you KNOW full well what they are saying but they go over and over again beating the same thing to death anyway? *October Light* is a whole lot of that. Yeah, they aren't my family. But I still felt that queasy feeling in my stomach. It's not that I'd like something less for making me feel bad (at least it hasn't stopped me in the past). The partial truths are too much truths? Too much philosophical stuff? Too much side taking in all of their heads. I feel like turning Horace and going quiet on Sally and James. I'm glad I was only alive for a little under three months of the 1970s.

P.s. *October Light* reminded me a lot of Sam Shepard's play *True West*. Two brothers fight it out about true life, true to life stories, changing 'scapes, dead family history. They pretty much try to kill each other.

P.s.s. I'll like this more when the relentlessness falls away to reveal the hideaway and restless truthy times.

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### **Jen says**

this book was a challenge. I will admit I certainly started skimming paragraphs along the way. the "book within the book" was interesting until it jumped the shark and I completely lost interest in its story whatsoever. it was a clever trick... although I didn't understand the point of the missing pages.. other than perhaps the author was just as sick of that tale as I was and this was a way to skip ahead.!

however the tale of James and sally is deeply personal. the insightfulness., stubbornness, pain, loneliness, and regret are truly remarkable. I really cared about these characters. and that makes it a good book to me. so much understated and makes you realize how much you miss when you focus on getting your way. the characters were very unique in their perspectives and surprisingly you cover many of them before time with this book is over.

this is a rare book when I want to research the author and his intention with this book. I am clearly not academic enough to get all the satire or political commentary on my own ... but I can recognize the imprint.

this book will make me look at fall, Vermont, norman Rockwell, and Ethan Allen differently!

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### **Meghan Wyrd says**

Oh man, did I go through some ups and downs with this book. In all honesty, it took me a month and a half to finish, rivaling *The Goldfinch* this year in my fickle pick-up-and-put-it-down routine. But *October Light* is not even functioning on the same plane of existence as *The Goldfinch* (can you tell I was disappointed?), or anything that I've ever read before, except perhaps *Pale Fire*.

Right now I have a very tenuous grasp on the mirroring from the novel-within-a-novel. Maybe right now this book is a bit too slippery for me. But I will return to you, several times in my life if I'm lucky. Can I even recommend this book to friends? I barely survived, awed and then bored (disconnected to the text) and then slapped on both cheeks into attention. It's crazy, insane! yet alluring, warm, wacky. I look forward to figuring out why pages are missing where they are, why we must be constantly jarred from the narrative flow, the connections between Sally's "trash" novel and the primary book's characters. And what of all that philosophical extolling near the "trash"'s end?? Its absurdist end? Is it absurdist at all, or are we to believe

that hope and salvation comes in many forms? We must look outside our paradigm of understanding??? Ugh, see, I'm trying.

John Gardner is my favorite author. I will live up to his expectations as a reader.

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