



WILLIAM GADDIS
Credit: Miriam Berkley

William Gaddis

by Steven Moore

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William Gaddis

Steven Moore

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About the Author

Steven Moore was born in 1951 outside Los Angeles, educated mainly in Colorado and later at Rutgers University in New Jersey (Ph.D., 1988). He is the author/coeditor of two previous books on William Gaddis and also edited *The Vampire in Verse: An Anthology* (Dracula Press, 1985). He has published essays and reviews on a number of contemporary American writers and since 1987 has been an associate editor of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*/Dalkey Archive Press.

Preface

William Gaddis is in the paradoxical position of being one of the most highly regarded yet least read novelists in contemporary American literature. Those who have taken the time to work their way through his massive, labyrinthine novels have usually emerged making extravagant claims on his behalf, but too many have been put off by the forbidding length and complexity of his work. His first novel, *The Recognitions* (1955), is nearly a thousand pages long and features a large cast, a dense plot, and a heavy cargo of erudition. His second, the National Book Award-winning *J R* (1975), is nearly as long, complex, and hugely cast and has the additional challenge of being presented almost entirely in dialogue without a single chapter break. Only Gaddis's third and most recent book, *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985), runs to conventional length, but even it packs into its 262 pages enough material for a novel twice its size. As daunting as these novels may appear, however, they are among the highest achievements of modern fiction and deserve far greater attention than they have hitherto received.

The Flemish painter, says Wyatt in *The Recognitions*, did not limit himself to a single perspective in a painting but instead took as many as he wanted. I follow his example in this book by taking not one but several critical approaches to Gaddis's novels. Thus chapter 2 on *The Recognitions* is a Jungian analysis of its mythic materials, while chapter 3 is an old-fashioned set of compare-and-contrast character analyses. Chapter 4 on *J R* is a set of mini-essays on such matters as style, intellectual background, the use of children as spokespeople, the Freudian implications of money, mechanization metaphors, and the plight of the artist, while chapter 5 studies the novel's principal allusions to Wagnerian opera, Victorian literature, and Greek philosophy. Chapter 6 is a genre study of *Carpenter's Gothic*, or more specifically, of Gaddis's adaptation of various genres within this novel. These chapters are preceded by an introductory chapter that skates on the thin ice of such topics as autobiography, influences, and intentions, and are followed by a conclusion that locates Gaddis in the various traditions of American literature he has both followed and enhanced.

Mr. Gaddis looked over a draft of the first chapter and kindly gave his permission to quote from his published and unpublished writings. Richard Scaramelli read each chapter as it was written and offered innumerable suggestions for improvement; I thank him for those and for his moral support, and also thank our mutual friend Clifford S. Mead for continuing to send me materials I might otherwise have missed. Barry Qualls of Rutgers also read the manuscript and made many valuable suggestions. David Markson and Charles Monaghan provided useful background materials. Thanks also go to Miriam Berkley for her photograph of Gaddis's "haggardly alert face" and for sharing the typescript of her interview with him; to Lucy Ferriss at Bard College for Gaddis's course description; to Grace Eckley for permission to publish a letter Gaddis wrote her; to my editors Liz Traynor and Warren French, the first for her patience, the second for his warm encouragement; and to Random House, Inc., for permission to reprint the concluding lines of "Wise Men in Their Bad Hours," from *Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, copyright 1924 and renewed 1952 by Robinson Jeffers.

Steven Moore

Chronology

- 1922 William Thomas Gaddis born 29 December in Manhattan, an only child. His parents divorce three years later, and thereafter he lives with his mother.
- 1928–1941 Attends Merricourt School in Berlin, Connecticut, until age thirteen, then Farmingdale High School near Massapequa, Long Island.
- 1941–1945 Attends Harvard; joins staff of the *Lampoon* in 1943 and becomes its president the following year. Leaves in 1945 without a degree.
- 1945–1946 Works as a fact checker at the *New Yorker*.
- 1947–1952 Travels widely and works on *The Recognitions*.
- 1955 *The Recognitions* published on 10 March to unsympathetic reviews. Marries Pat Black, by whom he has two children, Sarah and Matthew.
- 1957 Begins a series of jobs in industry—public relations, films for the U.S. Army, speeches for corporate executives—and begins work on both *J R* and an unpublished play, "Once at Antietam."
- 1962 *The Recognitions* published in England. Works on a book for the Ford Foundation on the use of television in schools, abandoned the following year.
- 1967 Teaches a class in creative writing at the University of Connecticut, as he will occasionally do in later years, mostly at Bard College. First marriage ends in divorce; second marriage to Judith Thompson (which ends in divorce a decade later).
- 1970 First appearance of opening pages of *J R*.
- 1975 *J R* published 29 October; wins the National Book Award the following year.
- 1976 *J R* published in England.
- 1982 Awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship.

- 1984 Inducted into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.
- 1985 *Carpenter's Gothic* published 22 July along with reissues of first two novels.
- 1986 *Carpenter's Gothic* published in England.
- 1987 Begins contributing more regularly to periodicals and works on a fourth novel.