



Classics in Short No.11: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

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Classics in Short

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Helen Levene on Lewis Carroll's **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**.

Helen Levene

The Knave of Hearts, the Mad Hatter, the Queen, the White Rabbit . No, it's not the Millennium Dome planning committee but ...

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

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First published?

1865

Lewis Carroll's real name?

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. Displaying his love of word-play, Dodgson translated his first two names into Latin as Carolus Ludovicus, then reversed them and re-anglicized into Lewis Carroll.

Written for?

Alice Liddell, one of the young daughters of the Dean of Christ Church college, Oxford, whom Dodgson had befriended. With his own illustrations, he presented the handbound manuscript, entitled *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, to Alice after first recounting the story to her and her sisters on a picnic boat trip in 1864. The inscription read: 'A Christmas Gift to a Dear Child in Memory of a Summer Day'.

With encouragement from his contemporary, the writer George Macdonald, Dodgson then expanded the tale and commissioned John Tenniel, the *Punch* magazine cartoonist, to reillustrate it. Dodgson then sent it to the Macmillan publishing firm, having re-named it **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**.

Claim to fame?

Alice has never gone out of print and has been translated into almost every spoken language, third only to Shakespeare and the Bible. It is one of the best known children's books in the world.

Alice's adventures:

Alice follows a White Rabbit into a rabbit hole, tumbles down into the depths of the earth, and lands in a long dark

passageway. As the Rabbit races on ahead, Alice's attempt to go through the tiny door into the beautiful garden beyond, fails, as she has grown extra large from drinking all the liquid in a bottle marked DRINK ME. In a pool of her own tears, Alice finds herself swimming ashore. Still in pursuit of the White Rabbit, Alice encounters all sorts of fantastic creatures and characters along the way, including the Caterpillar, the Duchess, the Cheshire Cat, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare, and many others. On her way through the woods she is led strangely back into the long hall, where, after nibbling on her special mushroom, she is able to shrink to the right size to go through the tiny door into the rose garden. Here, packs of cards are busily painting white roses red, and the Queen challenges Alice to a perilous game of croquet. The White Rabbit appears and calls upon Alice as witness in the trial of the Knave of Hearts (who stands accused of stealing the Queen's tarts). Alice, gradually returning to her normal size, boldly dismisses them all as nothing but a pack of cards whereupon she finds herself lying beneath the trees with her sister telling her it is time to wake up ...

Catchphrases:

?Curiouser and curiouser?

?Off with her head!?

?You should learn not to make personal remarks ... it's very rude.?

Most yummy description:

The bottle of liquid DRINK ME ? ?a mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, toffee and hot buttered toast.?

About the author:

Born in 1832, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was the oldest boy in a family of eleven ? seven girls and four boys. He grew up in a remote rectory in the small Cheshire village of Daresbury where his father, a former Fellow and Mathematics Tutor of Christ Church college, Oxford, also took in paying pupils to supplement his meagre income after being ordained as a parish priest. His mother was an energetic woman, who ran the household and educated her own children when they were small. Even as a young boy, Dodgson was always full of ideas and invention and loved to entertain his younger siblings with family magazines which display his love of parody, word games and puzzles. In 1846 he was sent to Rugby where, despite being bullied for lack of sports ability and a speech impediment, he worked hard and gained a place at Christ Church. Whilst still an under-graduate he was awarded a Studentship ? allowing him life-long residence at the college, provided he took Holy Orders and never married. He stayed on, becoming a tutor in Mathematics in 1855, and although he took Orders, he never went into the Priesthood.

When he was not teaching, he read widely, visited London theatres with friends and began pursuing his earlier interest in photography. He also began to publish comic poetry which appeared in *The Comic Times*, a rival to *Punch*. During 1862 his friendship with the Liddell children flourished, and he took many photographs of them, particularly of Alice. Dodgson has been described as ?the nineteenth century's most outstanding child photographer?. There was a rift between Dodgson and the Liddell children as they grew up, thought to be initiated by Mrs Liddell to prevent him from forming any ideas about *marriage to Alice*.

In 1872, some years after *Wonderland* was published, he finally finished work on a second *Alice* volume ? *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, followed by his epic nonsense verse *The Hunting of the Snark* in 1876. He wrote many other books, not all of them were successful. The two *Sylvie and Bruno* adventures were described as ?one of the most interesting failures in English literature?.

Dodgson suffered from recurring ill-health in his later years and died from bronchitis in 1898. He is buried in the Old Cemetery in Guildford, Surrey.

Classic qualities:

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland revolutionized children's literature. An inspired fantasy of loosely connected dream sequences, the book contains brilliant nonsense rhymes and highly imaginative characters, many of whom have been printed indelibly in our memories. There are multiple levels of meaning in particular expressions or turns of phrases, many of which (eg 'curiouser and curiouser?') have become part of everyday discourse. The story was created entirely for the amusement and entertainment of children. It was the first of its kind with a storyline which did not attempt to preach or moralize to its readers, but was simply written for fun whilst maintaining a high literary standard of writing. *Alice* has become an integral part of childhood, a book that works on many levels for children and adults alike.

The riddle of Lewis Carroll:

In our post Freudian times, some commentators believe that Dodgson's friendships with little girls were some sort of unconscious substitute for sexual needs, and that he contemplated marriage to some of them, notably to Alice Liddell. But there has been no concrete evidence. However, Dodgson did not maintain his friendships with his young companions into their adulthood and despite being a most accomplished photographer, he gave up his much-loved hobby as being too time-consuming alongside his teaching and writing. It may have been suggestions of impropriety about his photographic work that prompted him to retire from it.

There have been many studies of Dodgson's life and fascinating, multi-sided personality - mathematical genius on the one hand, imaginative, anarchic satirist on the other.

First adapted for stage and film?

The first play of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was written in and performed in 1886. It was first produced as a film in 1906.

Some other Carroll books:

Phantasmagoria (1869), **Rhyme and Reason** (1883), **Collected Verse** (1929). And numerous books on Mathematics.

The illustrations are taken from **Alice**, a centenary edition with illustrations by John Tenniel, published by Macmillan, 0 333 72272 8, £20.00

Helen Levene works in publishing.

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