

# Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore

*Ellen Handler Spitz*

## The Alice Behind Wonderland

by Simon Winchester

Oxford University Press, 128 pp., \$11.95

IN A MERE HUNDRED PAGES, Simon Winchester's new book encapsulates reams of research and commentary in the overcrowded field of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (alias Lewis Carroll) studies. Dodgson, born in 1832, was a mathematician, logician, writer, Oxford don, and a devoted portrait photographer who for most of his adult life occupied rooms in Christ Church College, where he befriended the children of Dean Henry George Liddell, the eminent classicist and lexicographer. Winchester's suggestive title hints at revelations heretofore unsuspected, but these are not forthcoming, as his account is principally factual rather than interpretive. But a canny reader might notice, and wonder at, Dodgson's dramatic shifts in sensibility. His photographs of children, including those of Alice Liddell, the dean's fourth child, of whom he made eleven portraits, radiate an intensity and ambiguity of mood, an aura of melancholy, often a sense of muted loss, that catch a viewer's attention and sustain it. Dodgson's child portraits (which he made by the dozens and preserved in lovingly labeled albums) attract and perturb; they slow us down and compel us to pay them unmeasured heed. Whereas his masterpiece of children's literature sets a wholly different pace—brisk and vibrant.

Right from its second page, when that waistcoated rabbit consults his pocket watch and exclaims over his lateness, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* propels us forward impatiently, so much so that we cannot really linger over its every instance of logical mischief and playful nonsense, or parse its verbal jocularity. It leaves us delighted, bemused, and bewildered. How shall we account, then, for Carroll's inconsistent aesthetic modes? Do they complement each other or compete? Winchester's book stimulates this question without asking it directly, but the contrast is worth exploring.

A parallel discrepancy concerns Dodgson's visualizations of Alice. After making his own drawings to go with the story, which he had invented one summer afternoon and told to ten-year-old Alice Liddell, whom he had taken rowing with her sisters and who later asked him to write it down, Dodgson requested John Tenniel to do the famous illustrations, ubiquitously reproduced. These portray his heroine as a frizzy long-haired blonde, with an over-sized head and absurdly small feet. The now canonical image, clearly approved by Dodgson himself, differs dramatically from the likeness that emerges in his own photographs of the *cuius causa*, Alice Pleasance Liddell. She appears before us with delicate pre-Raphaelite features, graceful limbs, and a crown of rich chestnut brown bobbed hair. Not to mention her rather large feet. If Alice Liddell is indeed the model for the literary Alice, rather than simply a motive for the work, how should we understand this divergence? Should we see it as an element in some arcane process of distinguishing one Alice from the other, and deliberately not melding the two?

The literary character Alice, in my re-reading of the original alongside Winchester's new book, recalled to mind a lecture in which I heard someone describe a poignant sense of loss for what is unrealized in each human being in terms of gender, an unconscious grief at the fateful assignment, male or female, that causes the relinquishing forever of the possibility of living as that which one is not. The idea harks back, of course, to Aristophanes' speech in

Plato's *Symposium* and to the ancient myth of Tiresias. Dodgson, for all sorts of personal and cultural reasons, created his protagonist as a little girl. But even though he loved to play with and photograph little girls, both clothed and unclothed, and probably thought he knew them quite well, there is, regarding Alice, an uncanny quality, a strangeness, a sangfroid, and there is the inescapable fact that she is often frightening to children, even when they are attracted to the charms of Wonderland. A century of re-workings and updates have tamed and feminized her considerably, so that very few American children today encounter her any more in her original incarnation.

Children are sometimes frightened by Alice as much as for her. Sudden falling doesn't faze her. (She even peeks into a marmalade jar on the way down.) Lost, she scarcely worries or misses anyone she ever cared for before the fall (except of course her cat Dinah, who, as she is fond of announcing to the rodent and avian population of Wonderland, enjoys eating birds and mice). She never fears that she will be missed at home by those who love her. Indeed, she meanders through Wonderland as if all her former human relationships have ceased to be. Whereas decades later in 1900, across the Atlantic, Dorothy desires desperately to go home, Alice, when asked by the Cheshire Cat where she wants to go, says she does not much care so long as she gets somewhere. She never befriends the peculiar creatures she meets in Wonderland or attaches herself to them as Dorothy does the oddball types she meets in Oz, whom she fiercely champions and staunchly defends, or, as Wendy does in Neverland, where she tenderly nurtures the Lost Boys and Peter. The menacing denizens of Wonderland fail to intimidate Alice. She holds her own, even when threatened by the Queen's "voice of thunder." Cruelty abounds in Dodgson's fantasy, but it is children who feel it most.

Other girl characters in children's fiction, while equally brave and independent, connect emotionally as Alice does not. This, I suggest, is because Dodgson, obsessed with intellectual puzzles, rhymes, word play, and games of all sorts, had little if any capacity to create a believable girl. Like playing cards and later chess pieces, Alice is a manipulated speaking object. To reassure herself that she is still herself after having changed size so many times, she tries a math problem: "Four times five is twelve," she states, "and four times six is thirteen." Thus, Dodgson pokes fun at her himself, adding another layer of emotional distance. Relying exclusively on cognition, Alice attempts to make her way by means of rudimentary logic and adherence to the rules of polite conduct. When the cook throws saucepans and hits the howling baby whose mother the Duchess has called a Pig, Alice responds by discussing the earth's rotation. Literally remote from herself ("Good-bye, feet ... I wonder who will put on your shoes and stockings for you now"), she inhabits a world in which characters use and abuse one another with no grave consequences and where all that matters is the game.

Dodgson, as has been the case with many brilliant and successful authors of children's books, seems to have experienced childhood as a perennially available state—preserved out of time, like a photographic image—to which he could return and in which he could perpetually dwell. Childless, like Hans Christian Andersen and Beatrix Potter, he had no responsibility for the upbringing of children, a task that radically changes the rules of the game. Which is why the Alice behind Alice may really be the shy, curious, emotionally naïve Oxford mathematics don himself rather than, or as well as, the living, breathing Alice Liddell, even though it was to her he gave his first copy, called *Alice's Adventures Underground*, in 1864, as a Christmas present. Perhaps he chose to write about a girl character as another way of approaching girlhood—along with the photographs—as his own lost idyllic state.

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