



The Story of Alice: Lewis Carroll and the Secret History of Wonderland

By Robert Douglas-Fairhurst

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Following his acclaimed life of Dickens, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst illuminates the tangled history of two lives and two books. Drawing on numerous unpublished sources, he examines in detail the peculiar friendship between the Oxford mathematician Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and Alice Liddell, the child for whom he invented the Alice stories, and analyzes how this relationship stirred Carroll's imagination and influenced the creation of Wonderland. It also explains why *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), took on an unstoppable cultural momentum in the Victorian era and why, a century and a half later, they continue to enthrall and delight readers of all ages.

The Story of Alice reveals Carroll as both an innovator and a stodgy traditionalist, entrenched in habits and routines. He had a keen double interest in keeping things moving and keeping them just as they are. (In Looking-Glass Land, Alice must run faster and faster just to stay in one place.) Tracing the development of the Alice books from their inception in 1862 to Liddell's death in 1934, Douglas-Fairhurst also provides a keyhole through which to observe a larger, shifting cultural landscape: the birth of photography, changing definitions of childhood, murky questions about sex and sexuality, and the relationship between Carroll's books and other works of Victorian literature.

In the stormy transition from the Victorian to the modern era, Douglas-Fairhurst shows, Wonderland became a sheltered world apart, where the line between the actual and the possible was continually blurred.

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Editorial Review

Review

Remarkable...[**Douglas-Fairhurst**] casts a wide net, brilliantly bringing together the stories of Carroll, Alice Liddell and the Alice phenomenon itself to provide the most nuanced and convincing picture yet of Wonderland's quirky, self-effacing creator...Thanks to *The Story of Alice*, we have not merely "The Secret History of Wonderland" that its subtitle promises, but also a secret history of our virtual age. (Michael Saler *Wall Street Journal* 2015-06-06)

Offer[s] a thoughtful, far-reaching narrative, the story of three very different lives: those of Lewis Carroll, Alice Hargreaves, née Liddell, and the literary creation they both had a part in...**Douglas-Fairhurst**'s ability to make room for...doubts without giving in to them is one of his book's great attractions. (Michael Wood *New York Times Book Review* 2015-06-14)

The latest entrant to the Carrollian maze is **Robert Douglas-Fairhurst**, who has written *The Story of Alice*. As someone who teaches English at Magdalen College, Oxford, he is nicely positioned for the task?a stroll away from Christ Church, the college where the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson taught mathematics, and the longtime residence of Lewis Carroll, who was almost, but not quite, the same person. The pair of them tussled, like Tweedledum and Tweedledee. (Anthony Lane *New Yorker* 2015-06-08)

The Story of Alice is the best book on the myriad enigmas of Carroll's heart-breaking wonderland I have ever read. (Robert McCrum *The Observer* 2015-03-22)

Shot through with energy and ideas...*The Story of Alice* takes us, full throttle, back to the unalloyed passion of reading. This is what it is like to open a book, and to wonder. (Frances Wilson *Daily Telegraph* 2015-04-04)

Douglas-Fairhurst [has] precision and liveliness as a narrator. He is constantly surprising and often shocking, quietly and carefully. *The Story of Alice* is splendidly interesting about the world in which the Alice books were written...Douglas-Fairhurst is a startling and exciting writer...[The Alice books] are eventually books for solitary, surprised children. How did [Carroll] do that? This book helps us to see, even while unraveling our innocence. (A. S. Byatt *The Spectator* 2015-03-28)

Alice's sesquicentennial--how Lewis Carroll would have loved that word--will be marked globally by events large and small...And there will be books, of course...Few are liable to be as compulsively readable as **Robert Douglas-Fairhurst**'s *The Story of Alice*. [It] is informative on what went into the making of *Wonderland*, from the Victorians' intense focus on the underground--both literal (the tube) and fantastic (Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*)--to Carroll's anxiety about rapid change (like the Red Queen, he always thought he had to run faster and faster, just to stay where he was). And it's brilliant in the way it mirrors Carroll's own protean nature, offering no overarching theme, except to establish that its subject was not a man to provide two possible meanings for all he did and said, not so long as he could stuff in three or more. (Brian Bethune *Maclean's* 2015-06-01)

An eager, zestful book that is hard to define. With perceptive delicacy [**Douglas-Fairhurst**] mixes the outwardly staid factual biography of Dodgson with the weird emotional development of Carroll. He writes with lightly worn authority about Victorian literature. He excavates some unlikely sources submerged in

Alice in Wonderland. He unpicks and interprets Carroll's ideas and techniques in his two pendant works for 'child-friends'--*Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871) and the richly inventive poem *The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits* (1876)...Douglas-Fairhurst is fascinating on the afterlife of Alice Liddell...*The Story of Alice* is a pantechnicon of a book neatly loaded with good things. (Richard Davenport-Hines *Sunday Times* 2015-03-22)

Scholarly, playful and richly entertaining...[**Douglas-Fairhurst**'s] literary insights are--as you might expect of an Oxford professor of English--illuminating (he links the sighing expiration of the gnat in *Looking-Glass* to Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*). His knowledge of subjects such as Victorian theatre, children's books, photography, inventiveness, seaside holidays and the cult of prepubescent girls is compendious but lightly worn. On the tricky subject of Carroll's sexuality he is bracingly sensible. (Jane Shilling *London Evening Standard* 2015-04-02)

Few have been more thorough than **Robert Douglas-Fairhurst** in studying Carroll's nature and the principal object of his affections, Alice Liddell...Even though the creation of the books has been well-documented, it's the shifting social and historical context that makes *The Story of Alice* so compelling...[A] magnificent book. (Charlotte Heathcote *Sunday Express* 2015-03-29)

[A] masterful biography. (Anne Cunningham *Irish Independent* 2015-04-11)

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland turns 150 this year, and **Robert Douglas-Fairhurst**...has written a timely book about both its author and its putative real-life subject, Alice Liddell. *The Story of Alice* is a fascinating, unsettling read, giving us a clear-eyed view both of Liddell's ambivalence about her fictional counterpart and of Dodgson's preoccupation with young girls. (Lev Grossman *Time* 2015-06-08)

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst's *Becoming Dickens* was one of the best literary biographies ever written about Dickens. This is no less fascinating, incisive, elegantly written and insightful...Douglas-Fairhurst has produced a work of a literary sensibility perfectly attuned to Carroll's, yet intellectually discrete from it. (Amanda Craig *The Independent* 2015-03-28)

The Story of Alice is much more than its coy title. It is the story of several Alices...Above all it is the story of Lewis Carroll, fastidious, surpassingly eccentric, perhaps even a trifle addlepated and certainly persnickety. (Brian Sewell *The Independent* 2015-04-12)

More than a biography of Lewis Carroll...It is also the story of the books themselves, their inspiration, their writing, and their impact on the worlds of literature and popular culture...Will be catnip for serious Carroll enthusiasts and academics. (Michael Cart *Booklist* 2015-05-01)

The author is in his element as **Carroll**'s greatest fan. Readers will rush to their childhood copies of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* to reread them. (Kirkus Reviews 2015-03-15)

Douglas-Fairhurst offers readers a glimpse behind the curtain--the story of Lewis Carroll's Alice is told through the account of her creator's life (1832-98). This biographical approach delivers a unique perspective not only on the character but also on Carroll...The backstory of *Alice in Wonderland* is almost as enchanting as the tale Carroll wrote, and Douglas-Fairhurst skillfully presents it here. [An] engaging work. (Keri Youngstrand *Library Journal* 2015-06-01)

Douglas-Fairhurst's *The Story of Alice* belongs with the best books ever written in the field of Carrollian studies...For a total work of criticism, a scholarly *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *The Story of Alice* can't be beat. In it,

Douglas-Fairhurst examines the tangled lives of Carroll and Alice Liddell (later Alice Hargreaves) up until the latter's death in 1934, while also tracking the publication history of the "Alice" books, their popularity and their ongoing cultural influence. The Oxford don's own prose is, moreover, a delight to read: fact-filled, nicely balanced between exposition and quotation, confiding and witty. In fact, high among the pleasures of *The Story of Alice* is its willingness to amuse as well as instruct. (Michael Dirda *Washington Post* 2015-06-11)

Anyone who loves the Alice books will here find new reasons to love them. (Rob Hardy *Columbus Dispatch* 2015-06-11)

In this enormously entertaining and thoughtful new book, **Robert Douglas-Fairhurst** pens a kind of triple portrait of Carroll, his fictional Alice, and Alice Liddell, the books' inspiration and first audience...Where *The Story of Alice* is at its richest and most rewarding is when Douglas-Fairhurst unspools the story of the fictional Alice, 'a heroine with a thousand faces,' whose adventures changed how readers understood children's books forever. (Kate Tuttle *Boston Globe* 2015-06-21)

About the Author

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst is Professor of English Literature and a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford.

Users Review

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Christina Moss:

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