

## LEWIS IN STORYLAND

JIM PUDER  
Saratoga, California

It is the peculiar fate of a few celebrated authors, whose personalities as well as whose works fascinate us, to experience, posthumously, new literary careers as characters in other writers' fiction. Such an author is Charles Dodgson, better known to many as Lewis Carroll, whose first of a score of appearances as a character in fiction occurred about 70 years ago. Hardcore Carroll devotees, of course, already know all about all such fictional "LC" apparitions, but more casual Carroll enthusiasts may thank Seattle writer N. Lee for compiling a list of eleven novels and one feature film in which Dodgson figures as a major or a minor character. (1) Of her list, Lee wryly remarks that one could, for that matter, "...argue that ALL portrayals of Lewis Carroll are fictional, including his letters and diaries [and] much of Carroll scholarship. ©" No doubt; nevertheless, here is her list, which I have taken the liberty of rearranging and augmenting with information from other sources, and in which I have replaced her comments with my own:

### FILM

***Dreamchild*** British, 1985. DVD. With Coral Browne, Ian Holm and Peter Gallagher. Directed by Gavin Millar; written by Dennis Potter.

While no one doubts that young Alice Liddell (2) was Charles Dodgson's muse and his inspiration for the heroine in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the precise nature of the Dodgson- Liddell relationship, particularly on Dodgson's part, remains after a century and a half a seemingly endlessly fascinating and disputable topic, and it is the subject matter of *Dreamchild*. In it, Dodgson is depicted as a shy, lonely, socially awkward bachelor to whom his friendship with Liddell comes to mean a great deal, and his feelings for her are portrayed as being platonic, sincere, touching, and ultimately sad. The story unfolds in flashbacks as 80-year-old Alice Liddell Hargreaves, on a visit to New York to help celebrate the centenary of Dodgson's birth, reminisces upon their long-ago friendship, perceiving at last that it may not have been as simple a thing as she had once supposed. Wonderland characters appear in fantasy sequences.

### NOVELS (Listed in order of publication date)

1983 ***Belladonna: A Lewis Carroll Nightmare*** (American title: ***Mad Hatter Summer***) by Donald Serrell Thomas (Viking Adult)

The author, now Professor Emeritus of English Literature at Cardiff University, has a lengthy list of fiction and nonfiction books to his credit. Among his more serious works is a full-scale biography of Dodgson entitled *Lewis Carroll: A Portrait with Background* (John Murray, 1996). This was published more than a decade after Thomas had made Dodgson the central character in *Belladonna*, a book written for the whodunit market. In it, some of the more sensational aspects of the Dodgson legend are exploited, as the young mathematician's child photography hobby causes him to become first a blackmail victim and then a suspect in a criminal investigation. One wonders how this novel, apparently the first in which Dodgson appears, might have been different had it been written after, rather than before, the biography.

1984 ***Alice at 80*** by David R. Slavitt (Doubleday)

In her 1999 Dodgson biography *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild* (Peter Owens; revised ed. 2009), Karoline Leach decried what she dubbed the "Carroll Myth," the once standard but now increasingly challenged view that holds, among other things, that Dodgson had scant interest in adult women but had considerable interest in little girls. Suffice it to say that Leach probably does not keep by her bedside a copy of *Alice at 80*, which carries these assumptions to simplistic extremes. In Slavitt's story, briefly, the

son of an aged Alice Liddell Hargreaves attempts, with the help of actress Isa Bowman (3) and a brothel madam, to elucidate a secret which his mother has supposedly harbored since childhood; in the course of the book, a pedophilic Dodgson is depicted in retrospect. It is interesting that the *Dreamchild* film, with its very different portrayal of Dodgson, was released the year after the publication of *Alice at 80*. Might the film have sprung, at least in part, from a desire to rebut elements of Slavitt's novel?

1991 *Neighboring Lives* by Tom Disch and Charles Naylor (Johns Hopkins University Press)

Thomas Carlyle was one of the first of an illustrious ensemble of Victorian-era artists and writers to move into the Thames-side Chelsea district of London, which was then the city's somewhat Bohemian artists' and intellectuals' quarter. In this 368-page fictional recreation of the private and working lives of Carlyle, Swinburne, J.S. Mill, Rosetti, Whistler, Wilde and others, and of their complex interactions with one another, Dodgson is seen in cameo; Carlyle's is the leading role. Reviews unanimously praise *Neighboring Lives* for its readability and for the thoroughness of its research.

1993 *The Other Alice: The Story of Alice Liddell and Alice in Wonderland* by Christina Bjork. Illustrated by Inga-Karin Eriksson. Translated by Joan Sandin. (R & S Books)

An obvious Carroll admirer, Bjork manages to pack into her 100-page children's book a fictionalized account of the relationship between Charles Dodgson and Alice Liddell, the genesis of *Alice in Wonderland*, historical information on childhood in Victorian England, puzzles and games invented by Dodgson, biographical anecdotes and details (even family trees), a tour of the contemporary Oxford setting, many of Dodgson's own photographs and painstakingly researched and detailed period illustrations by Eriksson. All this might have been a little too much; reviewers tend to feel that, although *The Other Alice* is charming and well written, it is more likely to hold the attention of adults than children.

1997 *Tennyson's Gift* by Lynne Truss (Penguin Books)

Truss, whom readers may recall is also the author of the popular 2003 nonfiction book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, in which she laments a perceived decline in punctuational literacy in the English-writing world, sets her novel in Freshwater Bay, on the Isle of Wight, in July of 1864, a place and time selected because Dodgson is known to have been there then. Other real persons met with in her story are Alfred, Lord Tennyson, his neighbor and noted photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, painter G.F. Watts, the young actress Ellen Terry, and others. What is the book about? Neither Lee nor I have read it, so here is author Truss describing it herself in her blog: "*Tennyson's Gift* is about love, poetry, the beauty of girls with long hair, the questionable sagacity of men with beards, the language of flowers and the acquisition of famous heads; but it is mainly about the insane Carrollian egotism that accompanies energetic genius." Another circumspect portrayal hits the shelves.

1998 *The Problem of the Missing Miss* (Republished as *The Problem of the Missing Hoyden: A Charles Dodgson and Arthur Conan Doyle Mystery*) by Roberta Rogow (St. Martin's Minotaur)

Writers of detective yarns generally find it useful to give their protagonists companions to talk to, and having decided to make a crime-solver out of the Reverend Dodgson, author Rogow may have decided that she could furnish him with no better sidekick than the original model for Sherlock Holmes' Dr. Watson: Arthur Conan Doyle himself. In this first of Rogow's four Dodgson-Doyle mysteries, Dodgson and Dole become acquainted by accident, and the latter is immediately drawn into Dodgson's search for young Alice Liddell (her again), who has apparently been kidnapped.

1999 *The Problem of the Spiteful Spiritualist: A Charles Dodgson and Arthur Conan Doyle Mystery* by Roberta Rogow (St. Martin's Minotaur)

Dodgson is visiting his pal Doyle in Portsmouth when a patient of the doctor's, a retired sea captain, dies of what Doyle suspects were *not* natural causes. Then a rajah's emissary turns up, talking about a stolen treasure about which the captain may have known something. And then a spiritualist, who has offered to try to contact the dead salt, dies herself in mid-séance. Definitely something curious here...

2000 *The Problem of the Evil Editor: A Charles Dodgson and Arthur Conan Doyle Mystery* by Roberta Rogow (St. Martin's Minotaur)

Against the background of the 1888 London labor riots, Dodgson and Doyle investigate the murder of an unpopular editor. Lee, who has read all four, calls this one the best and funniest of Rogow's Dodgson/Doyle mysteries, adding that the presence of Oscar Wilde enlivens the proceedings considerably. (4)

2001 *The Problem of the Surly Servant: A Charles Dodgson and Arthur Conan Doyle Mystery* by Roberta Rogow (St. Martin's Minotaur)

In this final book in Rogow's Dodgson/Doyle mystery series, Dodgson finds himself a suspect in the murder of a much-disliked Oxford University "scout," or servant. Worse, his efforts to clear his name are hampered by restrictions placed upon his freedom of movement. It's all utter nonsense, of course...

2002 *Still She Haunts Me: A Novel of Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell* by Katie Roiphe (Delta)

Except for Bjork's gloss for young readers, previous fictional explorations of the Dodgson-Liddell relationship, as we've seen, have all been undertaken in the form of characters' reminiscences and recollections. Roiphe prefers to work in real time. In Roiphe's meticulously researched day-by-day recreation of events, the emotional landscapes of the two main characters, especially Dodgson's, are vividly imagined. Dodgson is perceived, not without empathy, by Roiphe as a shy, stuttering, lonely, woman-fearing neurotic who becomes increasingly infatuated with Liddell in some complicated and confused fashion which is not, at least to Dodgson, consciously erotic. Sticklers for historical accuracy may object that there are a good many assumptions in *Still She Haunts Me* which appear to be unsupported by any known evidence, but then Roiphe never claimed to be writing biography.

2010 *Alice I Have Been: A Novel* by Melanie Benjamin (Delacorte Press)

In this latest of the Dodgson and Liddell-analyzing novels, an 80-year-old Alice Liddell Hargreaves is once again imagined as reminiscing, on her visit to New York, upon the events of her life. This time, she thinks of her life as having been divided into three main eras: her childhood, with her odd friendship with Dodgson, her youth when she was in love with Prince Leopold (Queen Victoria's youngest son), and her later life with her husband Reginald; the book thus has three main parts. Reviews I have read disagree on exactly how Benjamin depicts Dodgson's feelings for Liddell in her novel, one reviewer finding those feelings "disturbing" and another saying only that they had been "misunderstood" by Liddell's family. All reviewers agree, however, that *Alice I Have Been* is well researched and admirably written. At the end of her story, Benjamin adds a long note explaining what in the novel is fact and what is fiction.

Conspicuously absent from Lee's list (perhaps because of its nonhistorical nature) is Frank Beddor's popular 2006 fantasy novel *The Looking Glass Wars* (Dial Press). In *The Looking Glass Wars* (which is also the name of the trilogy of which this is the first book), Wonderland is a real place located in a parallel universe. Princess Alyss, persecuted in Wonderland by Queen Redd Heart, escapes to our universe where she is adopted by the Liddells and befriended by Charles Dodgson. Trustingly, Alyss/Alice tells Dodgson of her adventures in Wonderland and asks him to write them up for her as a memoir; later, when a plagiarizing Dodgson publishes her Wonderland experiences under his own name as a children's fantasy, it causes a permanent rift between the erstwhile friends. Subsequently, Alyss returns to Wonderland and deposes the usurping Queen Redd with the help of a Dodgson-like friend named Dodge Anders. A film version of *The Looking Glass Wars* is said to be contemplated.

Also not listed by Lee is Bryan Talbot's 2007 graphic novel *Alice in Sunderland* (Jonathan Cape). Talbot, a renowned graphic novelist and a Sunderland resident, reports that it took him nearly six years to write and draw this labor-of-love exposition of the history, folklore, geography and culture of Sunderland and its environs in northeast England. Dodgson is thought to have written "Jabberwocky" in Whitburn and in Croft-on-Tees, both near Sunderland, and Talbot suggests that he probably also wrote most of the

two *Alice* novels, contrary to Oxford tradition, while on vacation in the area. Talbot further maintains that the settings of many of the scenes in those books were very likely inspired by Sunderland locales, and that even the name “Wonderland” itself was probably suggested to a punning Dodgson by “Sunderland.” (5) Throughout Talbot’s discursive “novel,” the lives of Dodgson and of Alice Liddell (who like Dodgson had family ties to the Northeast) are a recurring theme.

Lee does not attempt to encompass short fiction in her list, but of course there have been short stories, etc., in which Dodgson has been utilized as a character; here are two that I can recall:

- Dodgson and Alice Liddell take the stage briefly in “**Mimsy Were the Borogoves**,” a 1943 short story by “Lewis Padgett” (pseudonym of husband-and-wife writers Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore) in which Liddell and Dodgson serve as an unwitting conduit for a key part of a chilling secret. Padgett’s story, which was the inspiration for the 2007 film *The Last Mimsy* (in which Dodgson and Liddell do not appear), anticipates *The Looking Glass Wars* (see above) by more than 60 years in having Liddell, not Dodgson, be the source of at least some of the Wonderland tales. Dodgson’s appearance in it is, so far as I know, his first as a character in fiction—and Liddell’s first as well, if one discounts the original “Alice.”
- “**Dynamics of a Hanging**,” a short story by Tony Pi, is collected in John Joseph Adams’ anthology *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Night Shade Books, 2009). In this story, Sherlock Holmes’ associate Dr. Watson, during the interval in which Holmes is presumed to be dead following his affray with Dr. Moriarty at Reichenbach Falls, attempts to assist Dodgson in cracking the seemingly unbreakable cipher with which the late Moriarty perversely encoded his personal diaries. One “Arthur Doyle” is in the story too, but only as a young student of Dodgson’s who is murdered—on which occasion, oddly, Watson does not disappear.

Gyles Brandreth’s play *Wonderland*, which explores the relationship between Dodgson and actress Isa Bowman (3), was performed in Edinburgh in 2010. Dodgson may also have a stage role in Alan John and Andrew Upton’s 2008 opera *Through the Looking Glass* (see below).

Inasmuch as Alice Liddell figures almost as prominently as Charles Dodgson in this list, it seems not unreasonable to append to it an adjunct list of those few (so far) works of fiction in which Liddell is employed as a character independently of Dodgson. Accordingly, here are three such items mentioned in the “Alice Liddell” article in Wikipedia:

- Liddell is a recurring main character in Philip José Farmer’s *Riverworld* series of science fiction novels.
- Liddell and her two sisters closest in age, Lorina and Edith, are each featured in “**Alice in the Country of Hearts**,” a manga created by QuinRose.
- Of uncertain status is the 2008 opera *Through the Looking Glass* by Alan John and Andrew Upton, in which both Liddell and the fictional Alice are given roles. One would suppose that if Liddell has a part in the libretto, Dodgson would have one too, but as that is not confirmed, the opera is provisionally left in Liddell’s column.

Lastly, although this is a catalog of *fictional* works featuring Dodgson, I can’t resist mentioning one nonfiction book which seems to me to be almost entirely a work of imagination. I am referring to Richard Wallace’s *Jack the Ripper, Light-Hearted Friend* (Gemini Press, 1996), in which Wallace, with what seriousness I do not know, advances the theory that the “Jack the Ripper” murders were committed by Dodgson and his Oxford colleague, Thomas Vere Bayne. And on what evidence does Wallace base this startling theory? Anagrams, for the most part. Incredible as it may seem, certain passages in books which Dodgson is known to have been writing at the time of the murders can be anagrammed into sentences implicating himself and Bayne in the crimes, and Wallace has reluctantly drawn the inescapable conclusion. For more information on Wallace’s theory, see his book’s Wikipedia article and its links.

## NOTES

1. Among the several esoteric lists of this sort that Lee has contributed to Amazon.com's online bookstore, I was intrigued to notice one entitled "Romance Novels with Portly Heroes." Evidently, heroes of a certain circumference have at last broken through (probably from the floor above) the glass ceiling that has long barred them from this genre.
2. According to what I have read, neither Dodgson's nor Liddell's surnames are pronounced as spelled; rather, "Dodgson" is pronounced as if spelled "Dodson," and "Liddell" as if spelled "Liddle."
3. Isa Bowman (1874-1958) was (to cite Wikipedia) an actress and close friend of Dodgson, and was the author of a memoir about his life, *The Story of Lewis Carroll: Told for Young People by the Real Alice in Wonderland*. She met Dodgson in 1886 when she played a small role in the stage version of *Alice in Wonderland* (she played Alice in the 1888 revival). Between the ages of fifteen and nineteen she visited and stayed with Dodgson, who introduced her to actress Ellen Terry. Dodgson dedicated his last novel *Sylvie and Bruno* to her in 1889, embedding her name in a double acrostic poem in the introduction. Her actress sisters Empsie, Nellie and Maggie Bowman were also friends of Dodgson.
4. Speaking of Wilde, he is currently featured in a series of whodunits written by Gyles Brandreth, and although there is no mention of Dodgson in any of the three Oscar Wilde mysteries published so far, that state of affairs seems unlikely to last; at the rate that author Brandreth is running through notable *fin de siècle* personalities in the series, surely his irrepressible playwright must soon get around to inveigling the retiring don into some further crime-solving collaboration.
5. In most of these ideas, Talbot follows the lead of Michael Bute, who in his 1997 book *A Town Like Alice's* advanced what might be called the "Sunderland Thesis" of the Northeast's geographical primacy in the *Alice* tales. Talbot and Bute both think it likely, for instance, that Dodgson's conception of the Jabberwock is based on a local Sunderland folktale known as the Legend of the Lambton Worm ("worm" being an archaic term for a snake or serpent).



Isa Bowman,  
ca. 1908  
"The Real Alice"

Alice Liddell as  
a young woman  
(Photograph by  
Julia Margaret  
Cameron)

