

## The curious case of Alice

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POST-DISPATCH FILM CRITIC

02/28/2010

Alice Pleasance Liddell was 3 years old in 1855 when her family met a shy deacon named Charles Lutwidge Dodgson in Oxford, England. She was 10 when she urged Dodgson to make a book out of the stories he invented for the three Liddell girls on rowing trips. She was 11 when a mysterious rift ended their friendship. And she was 13 when "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" was published under the pen name Lewis Carroll and became an international sensation.

MORE ON 'ALICE'

The Alice in Carroll's nonsensical story is 7 years old, born on the same date as Liddell (May 4), and precisely 7½ in the sequel, "Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There."

Yet many of the devotees who have adapted the Alice character for other media insist on treating the girl as a curious adolescent and treating her trip down the rabbit hole as a parable of initiation.

A film version from 1933, featuring W.C. Fields, Gary Cooper and Cary Grant among Wonderland's creatures, starred Charlotte Henry, who was 19.

"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" was beloved by Vladimir Nabokov, who considered it akin to his scandalous "Lolita" and translated Carroll's book into Russian. The Jefferson Airplane made Alice a mascot of the hookah-smoking, mushroom-eating counterculture of the '60s.

In 1976, there was a soft-core porn "Alice in Wonderland" starring former Playboy centerfold Kristine DeBell. In 1981, Meryl Streep, then 33, played the character in a Broadway musical called "Alice in the Palace."

And in Tim Burton's "Alice in Wonderland," which opens Friday, Alice (Mia Wasikowska) is explicitly 19, with no memory of her previous visit to Wonderland.

The Burton film is a sequel of sorts, as the soon-to-be married Alice follows a harried hare back down the rabbit hole and gets caught in a war between the Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter) and the White Queen (Anne Hathaway). Johnny Depp co-stars as the Mad Hatter.

The revisionism is even more extreme in a fantasy-book trilogy called "The Looking Glass Wars" by Frank Beddor. In his books, the heroine is Alyss Heart, the exiled princess of Wonderland, who travels to Earth to seek refuge from her murderous Aunt Redd. While Alyss is waiting for her faithful bodyguard, Hatter Madigan, to spearhead her return to power, she tells her tragic tale to Charles Dodgson — and is shocked when he turns it into a children's story.

Beddor said last week from Hollywood, where he is developing a movie version of the board game Monopoly, that he wanted to liberate Alice from the bookshelves of young girls and make her story a source of excitement for teen boys. His franchise also includes a series of graphic novels called "Hatter M," in which the heavily armed Madigan scours Europe for the exiled princess; video games; a clothing line; and trading cards.

Beddor said that on a recent book tour to England, he was met at Heathrow Airport by a band of angry "Alice" aficionados waving placards that read "Off with his head!"

Yet Dodgson's reputation is hardly pure. Although he was a mathematics professor with a comfortable income, he never married, and some biographers have speculated that his relationship with young Alice Liddell was romantic — or even sexual.

An accomplished photographer, Dodgson is known to have taken many seminude portraits of preteen girls, including Alice, and the pages of his diary pertaining to this period were torn from their bindings and presumably destroyed.

When the author and his muse were reunited for tea two decades later, he wrote in his journal: "It was not easy to link in one's mind the new face with the older memory — the stranger with the so-intimately known and loved 'Alice,' whom I shall always remember as an entirely fascinating seven-year-old maiden." In the movie "Dreamchild," the grown Alice remembers his fascination as illicit.

Whether lurid or loving, Dodgson's devotion is spelled out on the final page of "Through the Looking Glass," in a poem that is also a puzzle. By reading the first letter of each line, alert readers can learn the inspiration for this timeless tale:

A boat, beneath a sunny sky

Lingering onward dreamily

In an evening of July —

Children three that nestle near,

Eager eye and willing ear,

Pleased a simple tale to hear —

Long has paled that sunny sky:  
Echoes fade and memories die:  
Autumn frosts have slain July.  
Still she haunts me, phantomwise,  
Alice moving under skies  
Never seen by waking eyes.  
Children yet, the tale to hear,  
Eager eye and willing ear,  
Lovingly shall nestle near.  
In a Wonderland they lie,  
Dreaming as the days go by,  
Dreaming as the summers die:  
Ever drifting down the stream —  
Lingering in the golden gleam —  
Life, what is it but a dream?

#### ALICE MOVIES THROUGH THE YEARS

Lewis Carroll's two "Alice" books have been adapted for the screen more than 20 times, including silent, animated and musical versions. Disney, the studio releasing the new Tim Burton version, has done at least three "Alice" movies, including a 1925 silent, "Alice's Adventure in Cartoonland." That mix of live action and animation is one of the few versions with a heroine who resembles the 7-year-old Alice in the books. Following are some of the many versions that have skewed Alice's age upward:

— "Alice in Wonderland" (1949), a British-French production, part live-action, starring Carol Marsh, 23.

— "Alice Through the Looking Glass" (1966), a made-for-TV musical starring Judi Rolin, 20; co-starring Jack Palance, Agnes Moorehead and Ricardo Montalban.

— "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (1972), a British movie musical starring Fiona Fullerton, 16; co-starring Michael Crawford, Peter Sellers and Dudley Moore.

— "Alice" (1990), a loose, contemporary adaptation by Woody Allen, starring Mia Farrow, 45.

— "Alice in Wonderland" (1999), a television movie starring Tina Majorino, 14; co-starring Whoopi Goldberg, Ben Kingsley and Martin Short.

— "Alice" (2009), a reimagining of "Through the Looking Glass" for the SyFy Channel, starring Caterina Scorsone, 28.

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