

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Through Alice's looking glass darkly

By ALEXANDRA GILL

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Joining rocker Gwen Stefani and director Terry Gilliam, author Frank Beddor has penned a horrific take on Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, where decapitated queens, sadistic cats -- and violent cultural obsessions -- lurk down some very creepy rabbit holes. Twisted versions of Alice are all the rage, writes ALEXANDRA GILL.

VANCOUVER -- It was a golden afternoon in Minneapolis, Minn. The year was 1969. Young Frank Beddor was planning on heading down to the riverbank for a swim, when his mother suddenly yanked him indoors and forced him to read a dreary old tale called *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.



A portrait of Alice Liddell, who helped inspire Charles Dodgson, a.k.a. Lewis Carroll, to pen his *Wonderland* adventures.

What is the use, thought 10-year-old Frank, of a book about a silly girl and a stupid tea party? He was bored out of his mind. Some day, he swore, he would exact his revenge.

When Beddor grew up, he joined the U.S. freestyle ski team and was twice crowned world champion. His daredevil skill on the slopes led to a career as a stuntman in Hollywood, where he eventually became the CEO of Automatic Pictures and produced the huge hit comedy, *There's Something About Mary*. With the money he made from that movie, and the luxury of much leisure time on his hands, Beddor slid down the proverbial rabbit hole of his own imagination.

Five years later, he has finally popped up with a dark, modern twist on Lewis Carroll's children's classic. *The Looking Glass Wars* is just one -- albeit the most

controversial -- of several new *Alice* interpretations that plunge the spunky young heroine into gothic fantasylands full of horror and violence.

Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice herself might say.

In Beddor's debut novel, the first of a planned trilogy, Princess Alyss Heart has to grow up fast when her family's Crystal Palace implodes amid civil war. After her evil Aunt Redd gores Alyss's father and decapitates the girl's mother, the young orphan dives into the Pool of Tears, escaping to the mean streets of 1850s London with a sadistic killer cat on her tail.

Adopted by the Liddell family, Alyss clings tight to the claim that she is a princess. Rev. Charles Dodgson, a kindly family friend, listens to her story and promises to write it down in a book. But when his sickeningly sweet tale is published, she realizes she's been betrayed, and vows to move on with her life. Alyss forgets all about Wonderland, and comes very close to marrying a prince, until the day she is jerked back home to brave the treacheries of the Looking Glass Maze and fulfill her destiny as a warrior queen.

Off with Beddor's head, the critics cried. Who is he to so savagely reinterpret one of the most frequently quoted pieces of literature in Western history -- a story that is witty, whimsical and worshipped the world over (except perhaps in China, where the governor of Hunan province banned the book in 1931 on the grounds that animals should not use human language).



A drawing of Alice commissioned by Frank Beddor for *The Looking Glass Wars*.

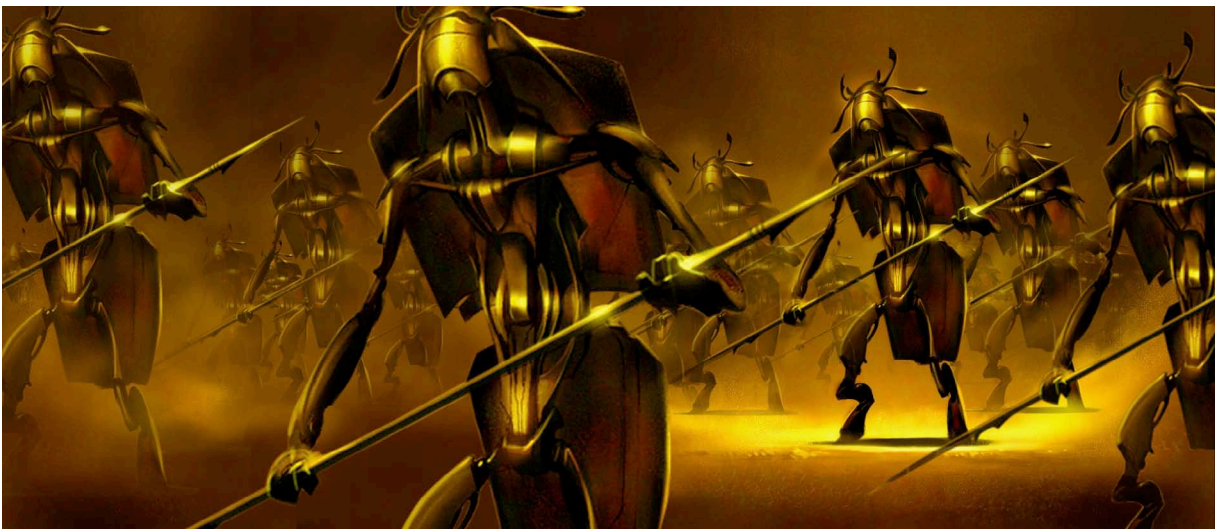
"It's a disgrace," fumed Jilly Cooper, journalist and best-selling British author of *Riders, Rivals and Polo*. "Of course writers sometimes take stories and legends as inspiration," she conceded to reporters last summer. "But to alter the intrinsic nature of the characters is just awful. It's cheating."

Quite true, the British children's laureate Michael Morpurgo harrumphed. "A storyteller of great originality should not need to take someone else's template."

Ahem! Beddor says he simply doesn't understand what all the fuss is about. The *Alice in Wonderland* motif has been reworked ad nauseam ever since Carroll (a pseudonym for Oxford mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) first published

his book in 1865, followed by its 1872 sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*.

"Why are the purists not upset that Jefferson Airplane did *White Rabbit*?" Beddor wonders aloud when we meet, oddly enough, over tea and cookies at Vancouver's Wedgewood Hotel. "Why are they not upset that Bob Dylan did *Tweedledee & Tweedledum*? Why is it okay that Ian Shrager can do a motif of *Alice in Wonderland* in the Clift Hotel [in San Francisco] or that [Salvador] Dali can do a statue? What is it that bothers them so much about a written interpretation versus all the other ways Alice has been used to communicate something? I'm really curious."



Card Soldiers is a conceptual drawing also commissioned by Beddor while writing *The Looking Glass Wars*.

In fact, after reading *The Looking Glass Wars*, some critics have now conceded they were unnecessarily harsh. In a recent interview on BBC Radio 4's *Today Programme*, Morpurgo called the book "brave," "vibrant" and "imaginative."

Beddor says it was never his intention to trash the original, and that in any case, children simply don't revere the classics the way most adults do. "They're looking back at it very fondly. When I read it as a 10-year-old, I was bored silly. It wasn't until later in life that I could appreciate the writing."

The once-reluctant reader now admits that Carroll's original story is "an amazing piece of writing. . . . It has whimsy," says Beddor. "It has these transformations and dream-like states and fascinating characters. It's childlike, but also mathematical. It just operates on so many levels. You can pull from it whatever you choose."

But why -- and perhaps this is really why the critics are aflutter -- need Alice's new adventures be so bleak? After all, Beddor's newfound appreciation for the story notwithstanding, he obviously isn't the only member of his generation who had some serious childhood issues with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Glance around the pop-culture cupboard today, and you'll find several knaves of hearts who stole these same tarts and are frosting them with a fresh layer of darkness.

Just last summer, a London theatre company called Chicken Shed debuted *Alice on the Underground*, a musical that casts the heroine as a teenage runaway who follows a break-dancing white rabbit onto the London tube, where she meets clubbers, crack dealers and a Cheshire pimp.

In South Africa, preproduction has already begun on *Living in Neon Dreams*, a horror film about a girl who falls into a fantasyland after a car accident puts her in a coma. Canadian Nia Vardalos (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*) plays the Duchess, while goth rocker Marilyn Manson vamps it up as the Queen of Hearts opposite Alan Cumming, *Cabaret's* Tony-winning androgynous emcee, as his King. To prepare for the role, Manson says he is "studying Joan Crawford." It should be a very queer-looking tea party indeed.

In Gwen Stefani's new Alice-inspired video for her hit single, *What You Waiting For?*, a bad case of writer's block lands the singer in an institution, where she is assaulted by a rabbit and chased around a maze while sporting a skirtless John Galliano frock.

Meanwhile, in Saskatchewan, Terry Gilliam is currently filming *Tideland*, based on Mitch Cullin's cult novel. This latter-day *Alice in Wonderland* is set in Texas, where 11-year-old Jeliza Rose (played by Vancouverite Jodelle Ferland) lives with her junkie rock-musician father and a macabre collection of Barbie-doll heads. After her groupie mother dies, Jeliza wanders through the landscape of her own scarred imagination, where she meets Dell and Dickens, a modern-day Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The director, a former member of the Monty Python comedy troupe, calls the film "a cross between *Alice in Wonderland* and *Psycho*."

And for something completely twisted, check out *American McGee's Alice*, the video-game creator's shoot-'em-up creation, developed by Rogue Entertainment and published by Electronic Arts. The game opens with 18-year-old Alice strapped to a grimy bed in an insane asylum, still shell-shocked 10 years after her parents perished in a house fire. When her mind flitters back to Wonderland, a younger, kick-butt Alice tries to exorcise her demons by carpet-bombing the card soldiers and slaying the Red Queen with a butcher knife.

When McGee first tried to sell the concept, his ghastly version of Wonderland was reportedly met with skepticism and alarm. "Alice has a knife?" the developers asked. "She kills stuff?" But even before the game was published four years ago, advance demos prompted PC Gamer magazine to nominate McGee one of the "next game gods." Given the huge popularity of the game, young slayer Alice has clearly tapped a major collective vein.

That said, to begin at the beginning (and borrow from the King of Hearts), this sinister take on the Alice myth is not exactly new. As Will Brooker, a professor of communications at the American International University in London, points out in a new book, the iconic young Alice and her enigmatic creator have long straddled a central contradiction in the popular imagination.

In *Alice's Adventures: Lewis Carroll in Popular Culture*, Brooker narrows in on late 20th-century adaptations, revealing the many ways in which Alice has been used and adapted in cartoons, movies, computer games, theme parks, heritage sites, novels, illustrations, toys, websites and fan clubs. On one level, asserts Brooker, the work has been interpreted as joyous nonsense. In this traditional view, one that evolved in Carroll's lifetime, the author was seen as an eccentric but shy Oxford don with a kind heart, a flair for linguistic puzzles and an old bachelor's prissy Victorian affection for young children.

Over time, this sanitized version has been reflected in everything from Disney's animated classic to Nelvana's *The Care Bears Adventure in Wonderland* to Grace Slick's rainbow-coloured canvasses, for which little mushroom-munching Alice and the blue-hookah-smoking Caterpillar became mind-altering but essentially benign metaphors for '60s recreational drug culture.

On the flip side, the Alice stories are seen as disturbing allegories for Dodgson's depraved obsession with prepubescent girls. As Brooker points out, this predatory interpretation harkens back to 1933, when one A. M. E. Goldschmidt delivered a speech at Oxford University, claiming to have found all sorts of sexual symbolism in the book. Though the speech was meant to be a parody of Freudian literary analysis, Goldschmidt's innuendoes about deep rabbit holes and long skeleton keys clearly penetrated public consciousness.

This darker reading of Dodgson's life and works rose to climactic heights in the late nineties, when the centenary of the author's death in 1998 produced at least four new biographies that probed Carroll's rapturous diary entries, examined the nude photographs he had taken of girls, and debated the true nature of his feelings for these little misses.

Brooker doesn't buy that simplistic pedophile myth. Nor does he attempt to psychoanalyze the full extent to which these biographies and other related texts might have sparked A. M. Homes's gruesome 1996 pedophilic thriller, *The End of Alice*, and a vast underground network of overtly pornographic Alice websites that depict the heroine as an archetypal image of Victorian innocence.

Brooker does suggest that these sexual readings, not unlike the psychedelic readings of the sixties, reveal more about the social and historical moments that produced them than they do about the author. Contemporary fears of childhood vulnerability, and fascination with sordid celebrity scandal, are what allow Alice to live on in some of the darker, depraved worlds that his book analyzes.

Moving on to the more recent crop of 21st-century Alice interpretations, where does our flaxen-haired heroine go from here? Although dark and violent, McGee's game, Stefani's music video and Beddor's novel don't portray Alice as a passive, sexual victim. On the contrary, she's a tough fighter who gives as good as she gets, and seeks revenge on her tormentors.

A postfeminist analysis, or Quentin Tarantino, might say that Alice has hiked up her crinoline, pulled out a machete and scolded herself for going on crying that way -- the shame!

As for whether Alice can handle the responsibility of ruling her own queendom, carry the guilt of a thousand deaths, fend off the envy of men in her ranks, and find a decent seamstress to repair her designer frocks -- well, we'll just have to wait for the sequels.