

Another Pass through the Looking Glass

an interview with *Frank Beddor*

WHAT IF WONDERLAND really existed? In his debut novel for young adults, *The Looking Glass Wars* (Dial Books, \$17.99), Frank Beddor starts with this premise and from there re-imagines an alternate universe where flowers sing, caterpillars predict the future, and card soldiers kill with their razor sharp edges. It may sound sort of familiar, but Beddor's Wonderland bears little resemblance to the beloved yet silly realm Lewis Carroll created. Sure, it's filled with marvels like the Pool of Tears and the Looking Glass Continuum, but it also holds numerous dangers—foremost among them, the vengeful machinations of the would-be queen Redd, whose bloodthirsty coup forces young Princess Alyss to run away and inadvertently enter another grim world: 19th-century England. So what's a seven-year-old princess to do? She confides in a seemingly sympathetic young professor at Oxford, who foolishly thinks she imagined the whole thing—and to top it off, he misspells her name, calling her Alice. And so



the sad tale of the exiled Alyss begins...

Beddor, a Hollywood film producer whose credits include *There's Something About Mary*, has created an intricate tale with characters taken from Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* books—though his 21st-century characters go beyond the rather flat, card-like personalities we know from our childhood lore. Bibwit Harte, Generals Doppel and Gänger, Dodge Anders, Hatter Madigan: all must do their best to fight against Redd's "Black Imagination" and to keep the idea of Alyss alive, while Alyss must live out her childhood and adoles-

cence in a dreary, imagine-less world, hoping to be understood but gradually losing sight of her true homeland. Will the power of Imagination—the good kind, the kind that creates and upholds "love, justice, and duty to the people"—win over the destructive and undisciplined frenzy of fantasy that could destroy Wonderland forever? It's a choice that we too must face every day. How do we imagine our world?

by *Kelly Everding*

KELLY EVERDING: You spent three years researching the world behind your book *The Looking Glass Wars*, the first in a trilogy exploring this universe. Were you a big Lewis Carroll fan? How did the idea to re-imagine his world originate?

FRANK BEDDOR: I would not call myself a fan of Lewis Carroll prior to beginning the work on the trilogy; in fact, I was distinctly underwhelmed by *Alice in Wonderland* as a boy. The inspiration to write *The Looking Glass Wars* came from a discovery I happened to stumble upon while I was in London for the European premiere of *There's Something About Mary*. I went to the British Museum and saw an exhibit of hand-painted playing cards—cards on which, for example, Napoleon had hired artists to depict his many victories in bat-

tle—but what caught my attention, at the very end of the exhibit, was an incomplete deck of cards illuminated by an unusual glow, almost as though they were alive. I was intrigued by the exhibit and captivated by the images on the cards, which showed a much darker version of Wonderland.

For the remainder of my trip I was preoccupied with the images and told several friends, one of whom suggested I meet with an antiques dealer he knew who specialized in collecting playing cards. The next morning, on the way to the airport, I stopped at the dealer's shop. When I told him about the exhibit, he revealed that he, in fact, owned the cards missing from the deck! I was stunned. He brought out this old, worn leather box filled with

cards and he flipped one card over at a time, revealing the saga of *The Looking Glass Wars*. I knew then I was meant to tell the story.

KE: Like Carroll, you juxtapose the nonsense world of Wonderland with the somewhat dreary reality of 19th-century London. Neither world is idyllic, especially when Queen Redd seizes power and rules as a despot—and the grim war that ensues in Wonderland seems to mirror the events of our day. Were you conscious of creating a commentary on the current world?

FB: Very—it's really central to the whole trilogy—it's the horror and the hope of the symbiotic connection between our two worlds, and the catalyst for both is Imagination. If you can imagine the horror

of a war you can also imagine peace. So who will ultimately win, Alyss or Redd? Whose Imagination is stronger? Basically, the theme should empower readers to try it for themselves. Like the words in John Lennon's Christmas song: "War is over if you want it."

RT: Certainly, Alyss must overcome many obstacles, not the least of which is the challenge to her own identity when she is stranded in London. Here, her imagination threatens to destroy her—everyone thinks she is mad—whereas the lack of imagination in Wonderland also could mean certain death.

FB: Imagination is the essence, the very IT of everything. While the Wonderland Queens possess an extraordinary level of Imagination, it is not theirs alone—everyone in Wonderland is encouraged to value and enrich and develop their Imaginations. Here on earth, Imagination is seen with a somewhat more jaundiced view by many, but thankfully, not all.

KE: How does this feed into the fundamental fantasies all humans entertain about reality and the image of a world they strive to create?

FB: The fundamental fantasy being that the world I see is the world that I create? I was watching a documentary on Robert Anton Wilson, who co-wrote *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* among other great mind and reality expanding books, and he was speaking about the "tunnel of reality" that we each possess and how these tunnels are in a very powerful sense, distinct, separate worlds. Well, if you are imagining your own world, why not go for it? Why imagine anything less than magnificence? Why censor yourself? I would hope everyone realizes that they possess the power to imagine the wonders of the universe and not just black clouds of fear and need—which all too many seem to get stuck on.

KE: Since every little girl thinks she's a princess, it's great that Alyss really is one. This mythology is visited by many authors in very different ways—Paul Park's *Princess of Roumania* and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman: A Game of You* come to mind—what does this kind of story tap into for little girls in particular?

FB: Empowerment, I think, and in the very best sense, *noblesse oblige*. If a little girl believes she is a princess with great powers of Imagination and compassion, then in the best of worlds she will feel a sense of duty towards others. If you tell your daughter that she is a princess, don't forget to mention what incredible powers she possesses to help others! I think most

will be thrilled to know there's more to being a princess than plastic tiaras and pink party dresses.

KE: What really breaks Alyss's spirit when she is trapped in our world is that nobody truly believes her; Lewis Carroll takes her story and creates a delightful yet fairy-tale-like version of it, but to Alyss it is an insult. Are works of fantasy important to such a practical and science-centric society as ours, and how so?

FB: The strictly utilitarian nature of science, and the "only what is useful is valuable" mentality of our world, are extremely limiting and dangerous. If something is only valued for its use then you begin drawing lines and saying what and who should be valued. Judging is a dangerous mindset that needs to be shattered. Fantasy can do that because it cannot be judged by any rules of logic. It's beyond all that and quite maddening to the status quo.

KE: On your web site you are holding a contest to write an "Imaginary Manifesto" that will "proclaim the aims of imagination and its purpose." Can you touch on what you think is the aim of imagination?

FB: Basically, the freedom and power and fun of creating a reality that you may share with others, or not. And remember, it's not just any Imagination, it's YOUR Imagination. That's a big leap in perception from denigration to exaltation. I wish everyone luck in making it.

KE: You chose certain Carroll creations and fleshed them out, really changed them. Can you talk a bit about the characters you developed for this book and the books to come?

FB: When I discovered the truth behind the deck of playing cards, it soon became clear that after Alyss had told Lewis Carroll her harrowing tale of exile, he took it upon himself to change everything and everyone—including the identity of her Royal Bodyguard. In fact, as we know from voluminous research, Hatter Madigan is an expert bladesman, a ranking High Cut of the Wonderland Millinery, and not the tea-guzzling madman of nursery lit. But in Carroll's hands, the monsters and heroes of Alyss's lost world became a slew of cheery reinventions. It was such a betrayal on Carroll's part—and was, in fact, the reason for the rift that eventually occurred between the writer and his muse.

The characters we know as the White Rabbit, the Red Queen, the Cheshire Cat, and of course, the Mad Hatter, all appear in *The Looking Glass Wars* as they were originally described to Lewis Carroll by

Alyss. The White Rabbit was in fact Bibwit Harte, the six-foot-tall albino tutor for all Wonderland Queens (Carroll anagrammed his name to create “White Rabbit”), while the Red Queen was in truth Alyss’s aunt Redd, the revenge-maddened usurper to the throne ably assisted by her top assassin, The Cat—a man-sized feline who morphs from adorable kitten to giant mutant when called upon to kill.

KE: You’re also writing a comic book, *Hatter M*—does it essentially tell the same story? If not, how does it inform the novel?

FB: The comic book mini-series *Hatter M* tells the parallel story of Alyss’s 13-year exile through the travels of her Royal Bodyguard, Hatter Madigan, as he crisscrosses the globe in a desperate search to find the lost princess after they are separated in the Pool of Tears while escaping a bloody coup in Wonderland. Aggressively focused on the one purpose in his life, Hatter’s search for Alyss commences immediately and continues incessantly, leaving the whispers and totems of myth in the wake of his quest. *The Looking Glass Wars* is basically told through Alyss’s experiences, while the *Hatter M* comic covers similar but also expanded ground told totally from Hatter’s perspective.

Coming from Wonderland, Hatter must

learn to navigate our world. Since Wonderland’s language consists of a system of energy and rhythm, Hatter faces no language barriers and is able to transmute and translate everything from Zulu to Icelandic as he crisscrosses the globe in search of Alyss. But while he begins his search intent upon finding the lost princess, he gradually comes to discover that his travels have a purpose above and beyond this initial motivation, and that purpose is to protect and serve Imagination. As revealed in *The Looking Glass Wars*, Wonderland’s great gift to our world is Imagination. As a traveler from the source of wonder, Hatter will continually find himself facing off against those who wish either to suppress Wonderland’s gift or to channel Black Imagination for their own diabolical use. This discovery and service to humanity will act upon Hatter and his own humanity as he continues to develop throughout the series.

KE: You’ve announced that the next book in the trilogy will be called *Seeing Redd*. Can you give a small preview of what’s in store for Alyss?

FB: Well, the title alone should provide a hint: Alyss’s aunt will be making a rather powerful re-appearance in Book Two. Alyss at age 20 will be ruling Wonderland,

and will find herself in a similar situation to that which her mother faced with regard to the Black Imagination of her aunt Redd. The neighboring realm of Boarderland will play a big part in Alyss’s upcoming challenges, and readers will get to know more about this land of nomadic tribes and their custom of violent, non-stop game play. Alyss and Dodge—both strong, independent personalities—will try and find a way of being together and Homburg Molly will develop into one of Wonderland’s more engaging characters.

KE: You’ve worked as an actor, a stunt man, a Hollywood producer . . . has any of this cinematic experience helped in creating the alternate world of your trilogy?

FB: Yes—film was my first “creative language” and it is still the one I rely on to envision, communicate, and entertain, even if the medium is the written page or a comic book panel.

KE: As a writer, what other books and writers have inspired you?

FB: Rather than writing a list, I’d like to dedicate this interview to Robert Anton Wilson, who I believe is currently under hospice care. If you go to his web site you will see written “Robert Anton Wilson 1932-NEVER”—which I think is an excellent tunnel of reality that we should all strive to imagine. ♦