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*The Story of Alice: Lewis Carroll and the Secret History of
Wonderland* by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (review)

James Hamby

The Lion and the Unicorn, Volume 41, Number 1, January 2017, pp. 132-134
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2017.0012>



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Emily Murphy is a writing lecturer at NYU Shanghai. She has published essays on children's literature in The Lion and the Unicorn, Children's Literature Association Quarterly, and Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, and Cultures. Her book manuscript—Growing Up with America: Myth, Childhood, and National Identity from 1945–2011—is currently under contract with the University of Georgia Press.

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst. *The Story of Alice: Lewis Carroll and the Secret History of Wonderland*. Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2015. Print.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books have always been curiosities. For generations, readers and scholars have debated their depth and literary merit. While some scholars look for allegorical interpretations of Carroll's characters and narratives, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst takes a different approach by examining how the *Alice* books are a product of the rich tapestry of ideas and experiences of Carroll's entire life. In many ways, Carroll is as enigmatic as the works themselves, and this literary biography elucidates the connections between Carroll's brilliant, quirky personality and the wonderful world he created.

The word "story" aptly appears in the title of Douglas-Fairhurst's work because it truly does read as engagingly as a novel. Douglas-Fairhurst begins the work describing Alice Liddell Hargreaves's trip to New York City in 1932, noting how the press insisted on creating the narrative that the literary Alice had strayed into modernity from her mid-Victorian world, and was once again off on a strange adventure. The aging Alice Hargreaves seems to have played along by giving interviews and posing for pictures. At any rate, the media's attention to Hargreaves's visit and their need to conflate her with the literary Alice demonstrate just how deeply ingrained the *Alice* books had become in popular imagination, a popularity that continues to this day as movies and television still produce adaptations of Alice fairly regularly.

Like any gifted novelist who begins at the end, Douglas-Fairhurst then shifts back to the very beginning of the story of Alice and examines the life of the man who created her.

In many ways, Douglas-Fairhurst's text reads like a *kunstlerroman* as he traces the development of Carroll's personality. Even as a child, Carroll exhibited many idiosyncratic traits. He had unusual affinities for everyday items such as thimbles or gloves. He loved word games and was fascinated by language's ability to bring together dissimilar things and to create absurd situations. As a school child, he came to be especially proficient at mathematics, seemingly drawn to that discipline by its ability to impose order upon a chaotic world. In fact, the idea of bringing order from chaos seems to have been a driving force for Carroll throughout his entire life. Douglas-Fairhurst notes that many of Carroll's other intellectual and artistic pursuits, such as theology, journal-writing, and photography, often aided Carroll in his need to exert control on the world around him. Douglas-Fairhurst observes that, when Carroll had taken up photography, he "had chosen a pastime that was measured in equally uncompromising terms. It left little room for creative accidents; like religion or mathematics, it was a matter of all or nothing" (79). Ultimately, the desire for such absolutes is destined to fail, and the world around us will always remain a strange admixture of order and chaos. Carroll shaped his *Alice* books from these various ideas, producing a world where nonsense and rationality maintain an uneasy tension with one another.

Douglas-Fairhurst also pays particular attention to the emotional matrix from which the *Alice* books evolved. Not only was control over chaos an integral component of Carroll's intellectual pursuits, but it also maintained a prominent place in his emotions as well. Control over time was particularly important to Carroll. Douglas-Fairhurst notes that Carroll held a fascination for incomplete things, such as unfinished paintings or unsolvable riddles, that force time into a state of perpetual suspended animation (17). Carroll found the idea of finality in anything to be depressing, and the passage of time painful. Perhaps worst of all was the loss of childhood. According to Douglas-Fairhurst, when Carroll befriended the Liddell sisters and began taking their photographs, he was fixing them forever in their childhoods, which he highly idealized. Carroll did the same when he began writing down what had begun as an ephemeral tale told to pass the time while resting on the shore from a boat trip one summer afternoon. It took Carroll more than two years to complete writing the story, and by the time he had finished, Liddell had changed from the small, eight-year old girl she once was to a girl on the cusp of adolescence, and she would soon change even more, much to Carroll's dismay.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland allowed Carroll to keep the young girl that so fascinated him forever captured in time, like a butterfly pinned down under glass. It also allowed him to explore through the guise of a dream all of the absurdities that both amused and unsettled him. As Alice grew older and changed, Carroll turned to his memory of her as a girl to once again explore a world of nonsense in *Through the Looking-Glass*. In many ways, it was both an homage to a childhood that was lost as well as a lamentation that Carroll was, as Douglas-Fairhurst puts it, “a creature slowly disappearing” from Alice’s life (194). Though Carroll continued writing for many years after the Alice books, he never quite met with the same success as he had while trying to capture the essence (as he saw it) of Liddell’s childhood. His idealization of her was his greatest artistic achievement, and it was the closest he ever came to his fantasy of imposing order on chaos, of forcing time to stand still.

The *Alice* books have continued to find resonance for many reasons. They express that twilight time in childhood when anything seems possible, and when the actions of adults oscillate without reason between benevolence and cruelty, or between measured control and randomness. Alice also persists as a haunting symbol of the Victorian period, with a young child impotently trying to impose the order she has been raised with on an uncontrollable world. But perhaps most importantly of all, the *Alice* books tell stories of trying to make it in a world that is hostile and confusing.

Douglas-Fairhurst’s study of how Carroll brought the *Alice* books into being is a brilliant work of scholarship. It is both rigorously researched and engagingly written, so that both scholars and general readers alike may enjoy it. Douglas-Fairhurst draws upon a wide range of documents, including Carroll’s and Liddell’s diaries, letters, contemporary journalism, and decades of Carroll scholarship. His attention to the matrix of Carroll’s inner world, his relationship with Liddell, and the creation of the *Alice* books provides a keen understanding of how these novels came to be. This is a must-read for anyone with an interest in the *Alice* books, especially those who teach them. In all, this book provides an excellent framework for understanding Carroll’s enigmatic heroine and her journey through a fantastic and unsettling world. It is a world eerily similar to our own, rife with cruelty and confusion. Only a writer of Carroll’s artistry could make it all look so charming, and succeed in capturing something of the essence of childhood on a golden afternoon.

James Hamby is the Assistant Director of the Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University, where he also teaches courses in composition and literature, including “Victorian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale.” His dissertation, David Copperfield: Victorian Hero, examines Dickens’s use of archetypes in his semiautobiographical novel.