



PROJECT MUSE®

*Fashioning Alice: The Career of Lewis Carroll's Icon,
1860–1901* by Kiera Vaclavik (review)

Jan Susina

Children's Literature Association Quarterly, Volume 45, Number 1, Spring
2020, pp. 84–87 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2020.0007>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/749934>

Although he was called “the parent of modern nonsense-writers” in the *Spectator*, he saw himself more as one of the “odd, self-conscious misfits” present in his nonsense. Uglow explains that “All his life Lear had hidden essential aspects of his own nature: his epilepsy, of which he was ashamed; his troubled sexuality; his feeling of being an outsider” (383). Fittingly for a man of Lear’s talents, Uglow ends her wonderful story of his life and death with the limerick of “That tranquil Old Person of Hove” (521).

Sarah Minslow is an Assistant Professor of Children’s & Young Adult Literature at Cal State LA. She teaches children’s literature and British literature. Parts of her dissertation focused on Edward Lear, and she has published on the emancipatory qualities of his nonsense limericks.

***Fashioning Alice: The Career of Lewis Carroll’s Icon, 1860–1901.* By Kiera Vaclavik. Bloomsbury, 2019.**

Reviewed by Jan Susina

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* begins with Alice announcing, “and what is the use of a book, without picture or conversations?” (9). Kiera Vaclavik’s study would be very much to her liking, as it includes eighty-seven black-and-white illustrations and plenty of lively discussion concerning the evolving appearance of Carroll’s iconic character. *Fashioning Alice*, which uses “a dress-based approach” (5), offers an enhanced and revised understanding of Carroll’s heroine during the period 1860–1901. Vaclavik effectively provides the first extended analysis of Carroll, Alice, and the fashion indus-

try; in using a dress-based approach, Vaclavik reverses the usual privileging of word over image. She effectively shows that the nineteenth-century representations of Alice by various artists were many and wide ranging, and that these visual changes were actually initiated with slight variations provided by Tenniel in the two Alice books and, most dramatically, with the addition of color in *The Nursery “Alice.”*

Vaclavik’s relatively short study is divided into two parts. The first two chapters focus on the Alice books created by Lewis Carroll and John Tenniel. These include Carroll’s self-illustrated *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground* (1864), *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), all with black-and-white illustrations. Vaclavik then addresses *The Nursery “Alice”* (1890), which included the first authorized colored versions of Tenniel’s illustrations along with new cover art by Emily Gertrude Thompson. She also discusses the alterations found in *The Wonderland Postage-Stamp Case* (1890), one of the earliest of the non-book items to feature images of Alice in color, as well as the covers of the People’s Editions of the Alice books (1887), which also used a dash of color on the covers. The first two chapters focus primarily on print-based versions of the character found either in books or in cartoons published in magazines.

The two chapters that constitute the second half of the book examine a broader range of material produced in the 1890s when the amount of visual Alice material began to increase

dramatically. The second significant wave of new visual Alices appeared with the expiration of the copyright for Tenniel's illustrations in 1907, which is beyond the time frame of this book. Vaclavik's volume feels like an important first step in what could be a much more extensive study that examines the numerous sets of illustrations of the Alice books, in addition to looking at the character's evolving afterlife in a range of venues in print culture and material culture, including illustrations by other artists, stage production, fashion, and various other Alice-inspired products. Given the transnational scope of Alice materials that Vaclavik discusses in the second half of the study, here the analysis lacks some of the specific detail found in the first half, which is more tightly focused on the more limited, canonical versions of Alice created by the collaboration of Carroll and Tenniel. Vaclavik has previously published "Of Bands, Bows, and Brows: Hair, the *Alice* Books, and the Emergence of a Style Icon" in Colleen Hill's *Fairy Tale Fashion* (2016), which serves as a useful companion piece to the second half of this volume and picks up where it concludes.

Vaclavik convincingly shows in this book that even after the introduction of color in visual representations of Alice in the nineteenth century, there was hardly a uniform version of Carroll's heroine. Very little consensus developed on Alice's style of clothing. She appears in the illustrations wearing a rainbow of shades, although Vaclavik notes that red/dark pink and blue were the most common. Alice consistently is presented as an older

figure in the post-Tenniel illustrations and stage productions; she is almost always older than she is described in Carroll's novels. Alice remains extremely mutable in terms of dress and hair styles. While the other characters featured in the two Alice books rarely deviate from the models established in Tenniel's original illustrations, Vaclavik notes that subsequent images of Alice tend to echo popular contemporary fashions rather than Tenniel's illustrations. So, unlike the solemn girls in their dainty dresses and bonnets in Kate Greenaway's illustrations, or the velvet suits of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, Alice had yet to become a fashion icon. To paraphrase the Kinks, while she may have been seen everywhere, she remained a dedicated follower of fashion, rather than a trendsetter, until the twentieth century.

But *Fashioning Alice* has several drawbacks. In limiting her study period to the significant but fairly narrow range of 1860–1901, Vaclavik does not address the various fashion transformations that Alice undergoes during the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries, which influence contemporary readers' perceptions of the character's personality. (It is also unfortunate that the publisher did not include some of the illustrations in color, since the changing use of color is an important thread in Vaclavik's argument.) Vaclavik only examines the first stage of Alice's afterlife, although her conclusion briefly touches on two later periods of visual transformation for Alice: 1932, the centennial of Carroll's birth, saw the release of two film adaptations of the Alice books

and the visit of the elderly Alice Liddell/Hargreaves to the United States; and 1951, which saw the release of Walt Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*. Vaclavik points to Disney's animation as standardizing the popular image of Alice with blonde hair, hairband, blue dress, white apron, striped tights, and black shoes.

I am also skeptical of the emphasis placed on Michelle Moylan and Lane Stiles's suggestion in their introduction to *Reading Books* (1996) that "No one edition has primacy, no one edition has final authority" (qtd. in Vaclavik 89). Vaclavik uses this thesis to argue that the Carroll/Tenniel editions are "not intrinsically superior to the many other editions produced in the period" that frames the second half of her study (89–90).

The most useful sections of this volume situate the Alice books within the context of Carroll's interest in nineteenth-century children's fashion and costumes in theater productions, as well as the props used for his own photographs of children. While Carroll preferred more muted tones, such as grey and pink, for children's clothing, he recognized their attraction to brighter colors, which resulted in the use of red covers for both of the Alice books. Vaclavik shows how Tenniel's illustrations tend to frame Alice in ordinary dress in contrast to the exotic costumes that Carroll often used in his photographs. The visual cues of Alice appearing in a relatively short dress and pinafore clearly identify her as a little girl, as does her hair hanging down in a more natural and somewhat untidy manner rather than being put up, which denoted the end

of childhood. Tenniel's original Alice was intended to be an "ultra-ordinary girl" (50; orig. emphasis). Alice was supposed to blend in rather than stand out.

While the significant changes from Carroll's *Under Ground* to Tenniel's *Wonderland* illustrations have been addressed by previous scholars, Vaclavik reveals a number of small but important changes in Alice's dress from *Wonderland* to *Looking-Glass*. Perhaps the most significant is the addition of the dark band in her hair, which would subsequently come to be known as an "Alice band" and inspire the popular accessory still worn today. In addition to the increasing number of frills and flounces that Alice acquires in *Looking-Glass*, she undergoes a number of costume changes within the illustrations; her traveling clothes in the railway carriage, the addition of striped socks, and the more theatrical Queen Alice outfit are the most notable. But the most dramatic changes to Tenniel's illustrations are found with the introduction of color in *The Nursery "Alice,"* which feature Alice wearing a yellow dress with a blue-trimmed pinafore. Alice has clearly become a blonde with either a bow or a band in her hair, which is strikingly different from the dark-haired Alice of Carroll's *Under Ground*. Vaclavik suggests that this major reconceptualization of Alice in *The Nursery "Alice"*—in which the illustrations are colorized, enlarged, and in some cases redrawn—was inspired by a Dutch edition of *Wonderland* that featured eight color illustrations. While Carroll may have intended to modernize the image of Alice with the

changes that he made in *The Nursery "Alice"* illustrations, the delays in its publication—Carroll rejected the first printing as too gaudy—caused Alice to appear dated. As Vaclavik suggests, “she was not anti-fashion but *unfashionable*” (80; orig. emphasis). The featuring of the covers with the awkward illustrations by Carroll’s friend Thompson also signals Carroll’s willingness to have Alice interpreted by other artists than Tenniel.

When I first looked at the cover of *Fashioning Alice*, I was shocked since I assumed that Alice had made the classic fashion faux pas of coming dressed for an important event wearing the exact same dress as someone else. The cover features the same enlarged, colorized Tenniel illustration of Alice in the railway carriage from *Through the Looking-Glass* that appears on the cover of James Kincaid’s *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992). But after reading *Fashioning Alice* and applying Vaclavik’s process of close attention to the fashion details in the visual representations of Alice, I began to notice subtle differences between the two versions of the same illustration. The cover of *Fashioning Alice* features the gentleman dressed in the white paper suit, who is indeed wearing a white hat, but an orange jacket, while the same figure on the cover of *Child-Loving* wears an orange hat and a blue jacket. Alice on *Fashioning Alice* wears a white dress, but the *Child-Loving* Alice’s dress is violet, as is the plume in her porkpie hat. There are also subtle differences in the coloring of the conductor and the Goat as well.

With her careful examinations of the many visual representations of Alice within the context of fashion study, Vaclavik reveals how Carroll’s heroine has been visually transformed over the years and guides readers in addressing well-known texts with new eyes.

Works Cited

- Kincaid, James. *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. Routledge, 1992.
- Moylan, Michelle, and Lane Stiles. Introduction. *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America*, edited by Moylan and Stiles, foreword by Michael Winship, U of Massachusetts P, 1996, p. 6.
- Vaclavik, Kiera. “Of Bands, Bows, and Brows: Hair, the *Alice* Books, and the Emergence of a Style Icon.” *Fairy Tale Fashion*, edited by Colleen Hill, Yale UP/ FIT, 2016, pp. 253–68.

Jan Susina is a professor of English at Illinois State University, where he teaches courses in children’s and young adult literature. He is the author of The Place of Lewis Carroll in Children’s Literature (2010).

***Children’s Literature and Imaginative Geography*. Edited by Aida Hudson. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019.**

Reviewed by Laurel Krapivkin

Aida Hudson situates her edited collection at the intersection of three concentric ideas surrounding place: Edward Said’s imaginative geographies, Lawrence Buell’s place attachment, and the idea of mythical spaces. The volume’s seventeen essays are divided into four sections with two