Conversation with Martin Gardner, The Annotator of Wonderland

Author Martin Gardner explores the multiple meanings buried within the context of Lewis Carroll’s Alice books.
The first place many curious readers go when they want to learn more about Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland or Through the Looking-Glass is Martin Gardner's The Annotated Alice (Clarkson Potter, 1960). This compendium of all things Carrollian has never been out of print, although Gardner has updated it with Many Annotated Alice (Random House, 1990) and most recently with Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition (Norton, 1999). This most recent version contains his previous notes from the first two editions and also includes additional information and some of John Tenniel's pencil sketches for Alice in Wonderland. For those readers who love to explore the multiple meanings of the Alice books, The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition is a welcomed addition to their bookshelves.

While Annotated Alice remains Gardner's most successful book, having sold more than a million copies, he has published nearly seventy books on a wide range of subjects. Douglas Hoftyzer, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of Gödel, Escher, Bach (Basic, 1979) has called Gardner "one of the great intellectuals produced in this country in this century." A writer who is both knowledgeable in the worlds of science and mathematics, as well as the worlds of literature and art, Gardner is ideally suited to explore the complexities of Lewis Carroll and the Alice books. I interviewed Gardner at his home in Hendersonville, N.C., in December, 1998 about his work on Lewis Carroll.

Jan Susina: How did you get interested in Alice in Wonderland?

Martin Gardner: Well, to tell you the truth, I didn't know much about Alice in Wonderland when I was very young. It was sort of frightening, and the scenes changed so rapidly from one page to another that I really didn't read Alice carefully until I was an adult. I think I got interested in Alice primarily because I recognized Lewis Carroll as a mathematician who was very much interested in word play and in symbolic logic and in recreational mathematics. So I picked up a copy of Alice in Wonderland, I must have been in my twenties, and discovered what a marvelous and delightful book it was, which I had not realized. I came to Alice very late in life.

This was partly because L. Frank Baum's Oz books had replaced us for another fantasy. I had devoted every single Oz book to a child. The fantasy in Alice is so different from the fantasy in Oz. It's hard to appreciate the subtleties of the Alice books when you are in your teens or younger. I still think Alice shouldn't be read by children until they are in their early teens.

J.S.: Do you think the disjunctions between the Alice books and the Oz books is that one is English and the other American?

M.G.: I think that plays a big role. American children are not as much interested in Alice as British children. The Alice books are so much more English culture. The jokes and subtleties would be appreciated by English children but would be missed by American children.

J.S.: Do you see the two books as one imitating the other?

M.G.: No, I think they are quite separate. I don't think the Oz books are imitations of the Alice books, but Baum and Carroll did share a similar sense of humor. There is a lot of word play in Baum's books that young children miss. You have to look hard to discover it. In Ozma of Oz, Baum has a Princess Langwidere who keeps changing her books. She gets up in the morning with fifty different heads and puts on a new one. Baum spells it Langwidere, but it's an obvious pun on the lunatic air of a princess. There are similar puns throughout the Oz series. They have a very Carrollian quality.

J.S.: You mentioned you learned to appreciate the Alice books in your twenties. Was it your interest in philosophy and math that drew you to Carroll?

M.G.: I think I first got interested in Carroll through his mathematical and logic books. He had an interesting way of diagramming logic, and he published The Game of Logic based on a diagram. One of my early books, Logic Machines and Diagrams (1955), is a history of logic diagrams and logic machines. I was interested in Carroll as a logician and as a person interested in recreational mathematics. I was also interested in magic, and that appeals to me.

J.S.: When did the idea for Annotated Alice come to you?

M.G.: It was after World War II, and I was freelancing in New York. I had become acquainted with Clarkson Potter and a few other publishers. My original idea was to get in touch with Bertrand Russell and ask him to annotate the Alice books. I think one publisher actually did write half, but Russell was too busy and not interested. Most of the editors I spoke to about Annotated Alice thought the idea was ridiculous. This was a children's book, and what can you say about it? They thought it was all on the surface. Clarkson Potter was the first publisher who saw a possibility for the book and said, "Why don't you do it yourself?" So I said, "Okay."

I began reading everything I could on Lewis Carroll. There's not much original scholarship in the book. I just picked up the information that was floating around. What I did was pull it altogether in a single spot.
J.S.: Having written the most famous annotated book in modern times, what do you see as the relationship between an annotator and an author?

M.G.: The main purpose is to clarify the meaning of the text. Alice is wonderful in that respect because so many of the jokes are subtle. You really have to footnote them to know what they were about. They were jokes that would have been obvious to Alice Liddell and other English child readers of the time, but over the years editors fail to realize what Carroll was doing. A good example of this, which I missed in the first edition of Annotated Alice, is when Humpty Dumpty offers Alice two fingers to shake. Someone wrote me and pointed out that in Victorian England, it was the custom for upper-class people to just extend two fingers when shaking hands with their inferiors and servants. That would have been a very funny and obvious thing to British readers at the time. But no one in America would have noticed that, in offering her two fingers, Humpty considered Alice his inferior.

J.S.: When you were doing the annotations for Annotated Alice, did you come up with a working definition of what needed to be explained for the contemporary reader?

M.G.: No, not really. Whenever I came across something I thought relevant and that helped someone understand the text, I stuck it in. I didn't have any formal definition of what would make a footnote.

J.S.: Your eclectic background seems to have made you a particularly good annotator for the Alice books. Your knowledge of mathematics allowed you to notice allusions that might have been overlooked.

M.G.: That didn't play a role. I was very much interested at the time in mirror symmetry and physics. Eventually, I wrote The Ambidextrous Universe (1964), a book about mirror reflection symmetry. I spotted at once that Carroll was fascinated by mirror reflection symmetry and that there was more of it in the Alice books than anyone had realized. Even in the illustrations. When Tenniel illustrated "jabberwocky," he includes some spiral forms. I'm sure he put them there since a spiral is asymmetrical and is different from its reflection. Carroll has Alice wonder if Looking-Glass milk is drinkable and would it hurt you? It's now known that reflected milk wouldn't be quite different from ordinary milk, and might very well be poisonous. Milk has all kinds of molecules that are different in their mirror reflected form. Tweedledum and Tweedledee are mirror images of each other; Tenniel brought that very clearly in his illustrations.

J.S.: What inspired you to do More Annotated Alice?

M.G.: I kept getting letters from readers telling me of what I had missed in The Annotated Alice. They filled a large canister over a period of thirty years. I had so much material that I didn't put into the first book that I wanted to do a new edition of Annotated Alice with twice as many footnotes. I decided to do an entirely new book, using the illustrations by Peter Newell, so readers would know it was different.

One interesting note that isn't in either of the books came from Teller—of the Peri and Tellermagic.com team. He's a big Alice fan. Teller pointed out that at the time Carroll was writing the Alice in Wonderland, there was a big feud in London where people accused strangers and said, "Who are you?" Everybody was going around to strangers, saying, "Who are you?"

Recent Illustrators of Alice in Wonderland

Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland (1865) begins with the young heroine asking herself, "What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?" Ever since, John Tenniel drew his stunning black-and-white illustrations that effortlessly seem to blend with Carroll's comic nonsense, other book illustrators have attempted to redraw the illustrations of Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass (1872). Noted illustrators have included Peter Newell, Arthur Rackham, Mervyn Peake, Anthony Browne, and Barry Moser.

Two recent illustrated editions of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland that will be of interest to readers of the Alice books are Alice in Wonderland (Dutton, 1998), illustrated by Abbie Morrell, with an introduction by Leonard S. Marcus; and Alice in Wonderland (North-South Books, 1999), illustrated by LisaBeth Zweiger, winner of the Verna Christian Award.

Morrell's use of photographs to illustrate Wonderland seems especially apropos since Carroll was an ardent and proficient amateur photographer. Using excerpts of Tenniel's illustrations, Morrell regroups and regroups them with the simple addition of a few other props, such as a dictionary or a child's tea set. Although the layouts are reminiscent of Tenniel's illustrations, they provide subtle variations and the black- and-white photographs give form a three-dimensional quality. They invite the reader to enter into the pages of the book in a way that is very much in the Carrollian spirit.

Zweiger's muted palette of her elegant watercolors give a very dream-like feel to Wonderland. Rather than relying on Tenniel's famous illustrations, Zweiger has drawn some of her inspiration from Carroll's photographs of young girls. Like those photographs, Zweiger's Alice is a bit more of a melancholy maiden rather than that spunky girl. The final image shows an Alice rushing off the page, quite willing to leave her unpleasant dream. The illustrations vary in size from comic, small insets to full-page images. Her colorful creatures inhabit both the humor and horror that lurk within Wonderland.

To denote a good day Carroll would note in his diary, "I mark this day with a white 19.0/9." These two new editions of Alice in Wonderland are certainly worthy of that "white 19.0/9" endorsement.

LisaBeth Zweiger
Illustration by LisaBeth Zweiger for Alice in Wonderland (North-South Books, 1999)

"I mark this day with a white 19.0/9." These two new editions of Alice in Wonderland are certainly worthy of that "white 19.0/9" endorsement.

LisaBeth Zweiger
Illustration by LisaBeth Zweiger for Alice in Wonderland (North-South Books, 1999)
you?' with the emphasis on who and you. There is a very strong possibility that this is why Carroll has the caterpillar take the hookah out of his mouth and say, "Who are you?". J.S.: Do you think to yourself, here's another footnote? M.G.: Oh yes. I keep them carefully on file whenever I come across anything that might make another note. J.S.: How did you gather all this research material? What is your writing process? M.G.: When I started amassing the Alice books, my process was to read everything I could find about Lewis Carroll. Whenever I ran across something that led to explicating something in the Alice books, I made a special note of it. More Annnotated Alice is almost entirely from letters I got from people who wrote, "How come you missed this?" J.S.: How did you physically do it? How would you keep track of all these different references? M.G.: Mainly in folders that I put in my files. I started out taking notes on file cards. When I was a poor student at the University of Chicago, I used to keep them in ladies' shoe boxes. They would fill a coat closet. I gave up to folders. I have several drawers of files on Lewis Carroll filled mostly with letters from readers and articles I have clipped. J.S.: I'm sure you have read Morton Cohen's Lewis Carroll: A Biography. What did you find most interesting or new in that biography? M.G.: I was most impressed by his narration of evidence that Carroll had probably proposed to Alice in some spiritual way. "That theory has been floating around, but he was the first to bring to bear a lot of circumstantial evidence on it. I hadn't realized that, and he makes such a strong case. I'm convinced that Cohen is right in that Carroll had said something to Alice's parents like, "Would you consider my asking for her hand when you come of age?" or something, that. That would explain the fury with which Mrs. Liddell burned all of Carroll's letters and refused to let him see Alice. It would explain the missing pages of the diary. I found that quite interesting, startling, and new. J.S.: You worked for the children's magazine Humpty Dumpty and were responsible for the puzzle page, tear-out activities, and creating stories and poems. This sounds remarkably like Carroll, who, as a child, created family magazines to entertain his brothers and sisters. Did your involvement with Humpty Dumpty compel you toward Carroll? M.G.: No, I think they were independent activities. The principle influence for what I did on Humpty Dumpty was John Martin's Book and its activities and puzzle pages. I just made the stories up with nothing particular in mind. J.S.: The notion of dreams and reality is a theme in your fantasy writings From Oz (1988). That connects it to Alice in Wonderland and the film version of Wizard of Oz, which introduces the dream frame. What are your thoughts on that? M.G.: I think it's terrible to turn a fantasy into a dream. That defeats the whole purpose of fantasy. When you think about it, some great literature has been sheer fantasy, begin- ning with Homer's Odyssey, Dante's Divine Comedy; Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream, and so on. The whole point of fantasy is to make it sound real and not turn it into a dream. J.S.: We've talked about Carroll, but we should address the illustrations. Many critics have suggested that Tenniel was almost a co-writer of the book in that his illustrations are such an essential aspect of the text. What is your attitude toward Tenniel as contributor to the Alice books? M.G.: He made a lot of interesting contributions. I didn't notice where I did Annnotated Alice that you see Humpty Dumpty perched on a wall and look at the right side of the picture, the cross section of the wall, comes up to a point. Obviously Tenniel was skillfully implying that the punch was extremely precarious. That detail adds to the scene. It explains why Humpty fell off the wall so easily. There are a lot of other little touches like that which just aren't realizable. Michael Chanslor did a whole book on Tenniel's illustrations and points out a lot of interesting aspects about Tenniel's art. I'm sure even child readers in England missed many of these subtleties. J.S.: What were the biggest surprises you've uncovered in doing research on Alice? M.G.: I certainly didn't appreciate all of the wordplay. I missed it completely until I began doing research. I was surprised to find so much of it in Alice and so many subtle references to the Liddell children and Oxford. I was surprised by the depth of the humor of the book and the word play in both books. J.S.: Carroll fills the Alice books with poems and parodies of well-known poems. What do you think of Carroll as a poet and as a parodist of poetry? M.G.: He was not a great poet, although some of his poetry is quite good. I think the best poems in Through the Looking-Glass is an excellent poem, one of his best. I also think "Phantasmagoria" is a very funny poem, very well done. It had a lot of depth which I missed when I first read it. I think he was a pretty interesting parodist. J.S.: What do you make of Carroll's most famous poem, " Jabberwocky?" M.G.: It's the great nonsense poem of the English language. There is no doubt about it. One of the most parodied. J.S.: People seem fascinated by his so-called split personal- ity of Dodgson vs. Carroll. The dry mathematician vs. the cre- ative children's author. Is this an important aspect of Carroll? M.G.: I don't know. Somehow it all got unified in his personal- ity, but he was a complex man—a deeply religious man, not fond of the stage. He had unorthodox religious views, a deep love of mathematics, and an affection for little girls. It's an interesting combination. You can see why people are fasci- nated by it and try to figure him out. Jon Santer is an associate professor of English at Illinois State University where he teaches courses in children's literature. He is the editor of Lewis Carroll: The Letters of Charles Dodgson to Members of G.J. Rowell Family (1988).