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 ANNOTATED Alice

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND & THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

BY LEWIS CARROLL

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN TENNIEL

With an Introduction and Notes by MARTIN GARDNER
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 More Annotated Alice (Random House, 1990) and most recently with Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition (Norton, 1999). This most recent version combines his previous notes from the first two editions and it 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 Hofstadter, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning author of Gödel, Escher, Bach (Basic, 1979) has called Gardner, "One of the great intellects 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 much care for 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 spoiled me for other fantasy. I had devoured every single Oz book as 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 distinctions 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 relate so much to 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 heads. 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 languid 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 interests 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. He was also interested in magic, and that appeals to me.

J.S.: When did the idea for Annotated Alice occur 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 him, 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.
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 certain interest to readers of the Alice books are Alice in Wonderland (Dutton, 1998), illustrated by Abeardo Morelli, with an introduction by Leonard S. Marcus; and Alice in Wonderland (North-South Books, 1999), illustrated by Lisbeth Zwerger, winner of the Hans Christian Andersen award.

Morelli's use of photographs to illustrate Wonderland seems especially apropos since Carroll was an ardent and proficient amateur photographer. Using extracts of Tenniel's illustrations, Morelli refuges 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.

Zwerger's mixed palette of her elegant watercolors give a very dream-like feel to Wonderland. Rather than relying on Tenniel's famous illustrations, Zwerger has drawn some of her inspiration from Carroll's photographs of young girls. Like those photographs, Zwerger'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 burst with both 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 spot." These two new editions of Alice in Wonderland are certainly worthy of that "white spot" endorsement.
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.K.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.K.S.: How did you gather all this research material? What is your writing process?

M.G.: When I started amassing the Alice books, my psychoanalyst was just reading 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. Most Annotated Alice is almost entirely from letters I got from people who wrote, "How come you missed this?" J.K.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 closet. Later, I moved to folders. I have several drawers of files on Lewis Carroll filled mostly with letters from readers and articles I have clipped.

J.K.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 materializing 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 bothered that, and he makes such a strong case. I'm convinced that Cohen is right in that Carroll had said something to Alice's parent's like, "Would you consider my asking for her hand when you came of age?" or something like 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.K.S.: You worked for the children's magazine Humpty Dumpty and were responsible for the puzzle page, neat-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 you involve him 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 books. I just made the stories up with nothing particular in mind.

J.K.S.: The notion of dreams and reality is a theme in your fantasy novels From Oz (1998). 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, begins-

Cover Design by Deby Morton Hows for the Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition (Norton, 1999)

ing 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.K.S.: We've talked about Carroll, but we should address the illustrations. Many critics have suggested that Tenniel is 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 Annotated Alice that you see Hussey 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 trying to suggest that the porch was extremely precarious. That detail adds to the scene. It explains why Hussey's fall off the wall goes so easily. There are a lot of other little touches like that which you just don't realize. Michael Hanchard 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.K.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.K.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 poem in Through the Looking-Glass is an excellent poem, one of his best. I also think "Phantasmagoria" is a very funny poem, and very well done. It had a lot of subtitles which I missed when I first read it. I think he was a very interesting parodist.

J.K.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.K.S.: People seem fascinated by his so-called split personality of Dodgson vs. Carroll. The dry mathematician vs. the creative children's author. Is this an important aspect of Carroll?

M.G.: I don't know. Somehow it all got unified in his personality, but he was a complex man—a deeply religious man, not just of the stage. He had unorthodox religious views, a deep love of mathematics, and an affection for little girls. It's so interesting combination. You can see why people are fascinated by it and try to figure him out.

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