


The Importance of Alice

Professor Jan Susina at ISU's Department of English explores the pervading influence of children's literature such as *Alice in Wonderland*.

by Eric Jome
photograph courtesy of
Media Relations at ISU

Illinois State University
Professor Jan Susina in his
office surrounded by various
versions of Alice stories.



A young girl and the strange characters she encounters in her adventures are the subject of several original books, which have spawned stage productions and numerous film adaptations. She's been the inspiration for an entire world of collectibles and kitsch, and more recently the subject of computer games and rock music videos. She is such a part of our culture that people readily understand references to a Mad Hatter's tea party and disappearing down a rabbit hole.

Her story has stood the test of time and continues to entertain and delight people nearly 150 years after its first telling. Maybe you know her from the animated Disney classic, or the more recent Tim Burton feature film. Perhaps you read about her adventures when you were a child or read the stories to your own children. No matter which form is most familiar to us, we all seem to know something about Alice.

Jan Susina, a professor in Illinois State University's Department of English, knows quite a bit about Alice, her adventures, and her creator, Lewis Carroll. In addition to teaching *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* in his courses on children's

literature, he's devoted years to researching Carroll's life and works. He recently authored the book, *The Place of Lewis Carroll in Children's Literature*, which examines how Carroll's writing has influenced not only children's literature, but popular culture as a whole.

"Carroll wrote some really wonderful stories and he also started an entire Alice industry," Susina said. "He was a marketing genius who created different versions of the stories for audiences of different ages. He even licensed Alice-themed collectible items, such as umbrella handles and biscuit tins. He ended up making quite a bit of money from the success of his books and was eventually able to retire from teaching at Oxford and even help out his brothers and sisters with his income as a children's writer."

Lewis Carroll was the pseudonym of Charles Dodgson, a 19th century English author and University of Oxford mathematics lecturer. His now-famous Alice stories began in 1862 as a fanciful tale inspired by and told to young Alice Liddell, the daughter of an Oxford colleague. Alice loved it so much that she asked for a written copy. After some delay, Carroll presented her with a handwritten version of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* in 1864, complete with his own illustrations. From that

small story, a literary classic was born.

With the encouragement of friends, Carroll worked with the MacMillan publishing company to produce the first commercial copies of the book, renamed *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in 1865. The illustrations for the book were provided by John Tenniel, who was well known for his political cartoons and caricatures in Punch magazine. The book became an instant commercial success and made Carroll famous throughout England and across the globe. The sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass*, was published in 1871. At that point, Carroll also began to show his skills as an entrepreneur.

"He was interested in continuing the success of his stories and in 1886 the musical, *Alice in Wonderland*, was staged in London," Susina said. "That same year, he published a facsimile edition of his original handwritten and illustrated book. He also wanted to make the Alice story accessible to small children, so he produced a picture book version called *The Nursery Alice*. By having a good formula for a story and taking it in many directions, he helped blaze a trail for people like Walt Disney, who created his own industry for telling and marketing famous stories."

In fact, Walt Disney saw the Alice stories as a

great launching point for a number of film projects from the 1920s to the 1950s. Disney began by making a series of short "Alice Comedies" that combined a live actress with animated characters. Another animated short starred Mickey Mouse entering a fantasy world after reading *Through the Looking-Glass*.

"Of course, the version that many of us know best is his animated *Alice in Wonderland* from 1951," Susina said. "That film combined stories from *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* and featured some really great voice talents from that time. The recent *Alice in Wonderland* film starring Johnny Depp is a collaboration between director Tim Burton and the Disney Corporation. It's a very entertaining, but decidedly darker version of the story Burton used the original storyline as a backdrop, but changed a lot of the details and action to make the story his own. The Alice stories have been used as the basis of a number of films by other directors over the years, each one with a different interpretation of Carroll's books."

The fact that Carroll's characters have remained consistently popular over the past century and a half may have a lot to do with the fact that his style of storytelling was ahead of its time.

"Carroll did a lot to revolutionize the field of children's literature," Susina noted. "In the 19th century, most stories for kids were very moralistic or instructive. Carroll's Alice tales were pure fantasy, fun, and entertainment. Children and adults alike loved the stories, and their popularity and commercial success helped to legitimize children's literature as an important and marketable genre."

Jump forward to the 21st century where the Harry Potter series and other books for children and adolescents are all the rage. Thanks to pioneers like Lewis Carroll, children's literature is now a mainstay for many publishing companies. Many children's authors are quick to admit that they have been influenced directly by Carroll's books, or at least indirectly by the style of fanciful stories he popularized. Children's literature has also become a major field of study for scholars like Susina. Illinois State's Department of English boasts one of the most extensive children's literature programs of any university in the nation, with courses on that subject at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Susina and other faculty colleagues including Karen Coats and Roberta S. Trites regularly teach courses that cover works by authors such as Lewis Carroll, Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, Maurice Sendak, C.S. Lewis, Beatrix Potter, Dr. Seuss, and others.

"In addition to teaching the classics of children's literature, we're also looking at more recent works, like Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books, and books aimed at teens and young adults, such as Stephanie Meyers' *Twilight* series," Susina said. "Our students are reading these types of books critically to identify and understand the elements that separate good literature from mediocre fluff. A lot of the students in our children's literature classes are preparing to become elementary or secondary teachers, so it gives them a solid grounding in the literature that

continued on p31

THE Alamo II

BOOKS-SCHOOL SUPPLIES-GIFTS

319 North Street
Normal, Illinois 61761

**We Carry
Textbooks for
Illinois State
University**

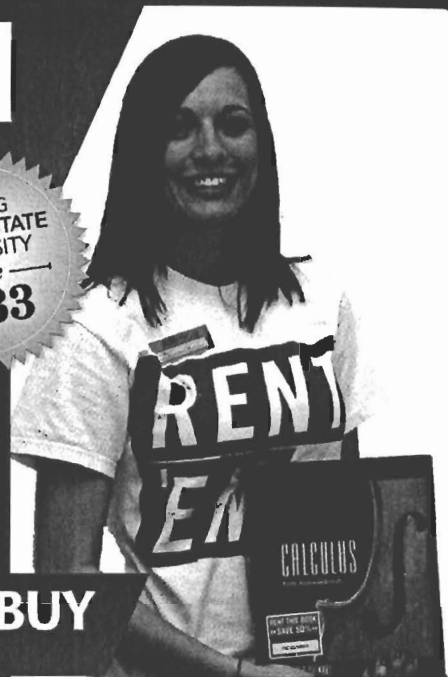
*We have the most
used textbooks on
the ISU campus!*

RENT, RESERVE or BUY
It's your choice!

Official Redbird Bookstore

We have the largest selection of ISU
merchandise in Normal-Bloomington!

*See store for details.
Select rental titles will be available July 19, 2010.



RENT, RESERVE or BUY
your textbooks at:

www.thealamoii.com

(309)-452-7400

STATE

IllinoisState.edu



**ILLINOIS STATE
UNIVERSITY**

Illinois' first public university

for businesses, residents, and visitors to our community. **p5**

Eastland Suites Hotel and Conference Ctr
Features boutique-style décor and top notch amenities: WiFi access, deluxe continental breakfast, indoor pool, fitness center, and complimentary cocktail hour M-F. Extended Stay Rates available. Specializes in wedding receptions. Meeting facilities for 10 – 300 people; 309-662-0000; www.eastlandsuites.com **p14**

Fox & Hounds Hair Studio & Day Spa
Specializing in men's and women's hair, skin, and nail care, and massage therapy, Fox & Hounds Hair Studio and Day Spa stands on a 40-year tradition of providing superior services and client experience. Open Monday through Saturday for day and evening appointments. Gift certificates available. **p29**

Heartland Community College | Founded in 1990, the college provides all access education to residents of District 540. Heartland offers credit classes, community education classes, and corporate training. **p34**

Main Gallery 404 | is a fine-art gallery offering works of 38 local artists for sale. Showcasing paintings, sculptures, photography, glass, ceramics, woodworking, mixed media, and jewelry. For more information call 309-828-9500. **p21**

McLean County Museum of History | is a nationally accredited award winning local history museum located in the heart of downtown Bloomington's historic district. The Museum features four permanent galleries and three rotating exhibit galleries showcasing the history of McLean County. **p29**

Parke Hotel and Conference Center | Luxurious accommodations, top-quality amenities, and personalized, friendly, and superior service make your stay at Parke Hotel a pleasure. Privately owned, Parke Hotel has your comfort in mind. **p15**

Uptown Normal | Located next to the Illinois State University campus, Uptown Normal is the destination for unique restaurants, one-of-a-kind stores, and exciting entertainment venues. There's something for everyone Uptown! Uptown Normal—Changing the Definition. **p30**

WGTL | is the NPR affiliate licensed to Illinois State University broadcasting "News, Blues, and all that Jazz" to the world at wglt.org and serving Central Illinois with 3 HD radio stations at 89.1 FM. **p28**

ISU ACADEMICS continued from p7

will be important to their future students."

As a children's literature scholar, Susina is often asked his expert opinion on what contemporary works of fiction will stand the test of time.

"Will Harry Potter still be a household name 100 years from now? Maybe," he said. "What I can say for certain is that the popularity of Lewis Carroll's Alice won't be fading anytime soon. She and her adventures keep getting reinterpreted by new generations. That's the mark of a good story; one that's imaginative and can be taken in many directions."

You can learn more about Susina's research, teaching, and writing on children's literature by visiting his Web site ghostofthetalkingcricket.squarespace.com. ■

(AFFORDABLE) LUXURY

RATES AS LOW AS \$22

Golf Digest



RATED 4½ STARS

DEN HOLE #5

the *Den* 

at FOX CREEK

An Arnold Palmer Signature Golf Course



for information & tee times
please call:

309.434.2300

3002 FOX CREEK ROAD · BLOOMINGTON, IL 61704
www.thedengc.com

SUBSCRIBE!



~~\$3.95~~
an issue
~~\$2.00~~
an issue

...and we'll mail it to you!

Please send me 4 issues (1 full year) for just \$8.00
so I won't miss an issue—my check is enclosed!

Name (please print)

Address

City/State/Zip

Mail today (with check for \$8.00) to:
American Concierge Magazine
1717 W. Kirby Ave. #236
Champaign, IL 61821

