The FIVE OWLS

$8.00

Volume XIV, Number 3

Jan./Feb. 2000

A publication for readers personally and professionally involved in children's literature

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
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With an Introduction and Notes by
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Clarkson N. Potter, Inc./Publisher NEW YORK

Conversation

Martin Gardner

The Annotator of Wonderland

By Jan Susina

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.*

Martin Gardner

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 Gardener: 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.

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 readers 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 offered 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 explicated 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 did 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 than its reflection. Carroll has Alice wonder if Looking-Glass milk is drinkable and would it hurt you? It's now known that reflected milk would 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 out very nicely 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 carton 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 Penn and Teller magic team. He's a big *Alice* fan. Teller pointed out that at the time Carroll was writing the *Alice in Wonderland*, there was a fad in London where people accosted strangers and said, "Who are you?". Everybody was going around to strangers, saying, "Who are

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 Abelardo Morell, 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.

Morell's use of photographs to illustrate Wonderland seems especially apropos since Carroll was an ardent and proficient amateur photographer. Using cutouts of Tenniel's illustrations, Morell refigures 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 them 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.

Illustration by Lisbeth Zwerger for Alice in Wonderland *(North-South Books, 1999)*

Zwerger's muted 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 serious and pale. For Zwerger, 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 inserts to full-page images. Her colorful creatures hint at both the humor and horror that lurks within Wonderland.

To denote a good day Carroll would note in his diary, "I mark this day with a white stone." These two new editions of *Alice in Wonderland* are certainly worthy of that "white stone" endorsement. —*Jan Susina*

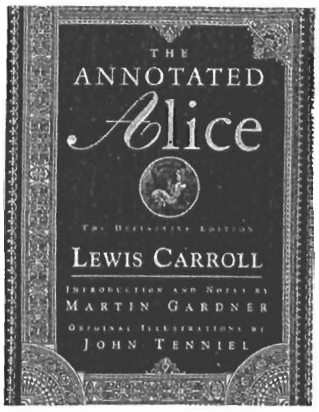
you?" with the emphasis on *who* and *you*. There is a very strong possibility that this is why Carroll has the caterpillar take the hookah out of his mouth and say, "Who are you?".

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 annotating the *Alice* books, my process was just 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 Annotated Alice* is almost entirely from letters I got from people who wrote, "How come you missed this?"



Cover design by Debra Morton Hoyt for the Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition *(Norton, 1999)*

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 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.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 marshaling of evidence that Carroll had probably proposed to Alice in some informal 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 she 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.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 page. 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 *Visitors 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, beginning with Homer's *Odyssey*; Dante's *Divine Comedy*; Shakespeare's *Midsummer's 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 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 when I did *Annotated Alice* that when 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 slyly implying that the perch 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 you 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.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 depths of the humor of the book and the word play in both *Alice* 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 last poem in *Through the Looking-Glass* is an excellent poem, one of his best. I also think "Phantasamogria" is a very funny poem, and very well done. It had a lot of subtleties 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 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, but 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 fascinated by it and try to figure him out.

Jan Susina is an associate professor of English at Illinois State University where he teaches courses in children's literature. He is the editor of Logic and Tea: The Letters of Charles Dodgson to Members of G.J.Rowell Family *(1984).*