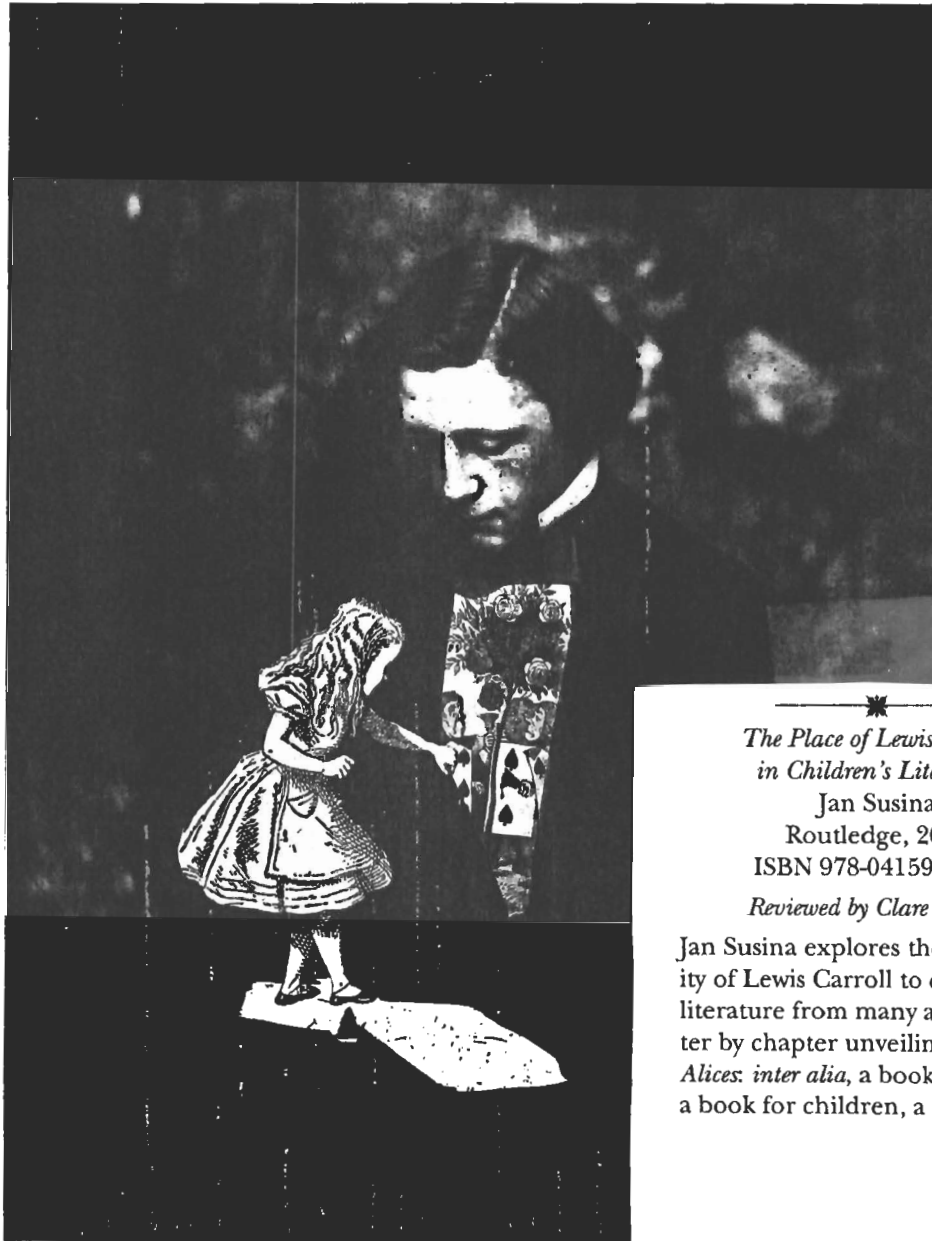

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KNIGHT LETTER

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The Lewis Carroll Society of North America



*The Place of Lewis Carroll
in Children's Literature*

Jan Susina

Routledge, 2010

ISBN 978-0415936293

Reviewed by Clare Imholtz

Jan Susina explores the centrality of Lewis Carroll to children's literature from many angles, chapter by chapter unveiling multiple *Alices*. *inter alia*, a book for adults, a book for children, a book for

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upper-middle-class children, and a book that has found its way (with Carroll's blessing during his lifetime) into every niche market, from biscuit tins to multimedia games. He also examines Carroll's letters, photography, and late novel, *Sylvie and Bruno*.

Susina, a professor of literature at Illinois State University, has read widely and deeply on Lewis Carroll, children's literature in general, and Victorian mores. He guides us like a sensible, though never stodgy, uncle through the pitfalls of *Alice* scholarship, but also presents lively new insights and throws welcome light into the corners, all in lucid and accessible prose. He makes no bones about one issue: Some recent scholarship is "surprisingly ugly." Susina defends Carroll as "a proper Victorian," and the victim of a double standard when compared to certain of his contemporaries (e.g., Hawarden and Cameron) whose photos of children are every bit as open to sexual interpretation. He also addresses other common misperceptions. For example, he does not totally accept the theory, now a truism, that Carroll revolutionized children's literature, though he grants that *Wonderland* did move the genre away from didacticism and toward entertainment.

At times, Susina may be too accepting of time-honored views of Carroll. He mentions, but does not challenge, Carroll's dissembling claim in the Preface to *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* that he did not read reviews, despite the ample evidence in his letters that Carroll—like virtually every other author in history—was very interested in reviews of his books. Susina also repeats the chestnut that Carroll was painfully shy, the *Alice* books being a way to transform himself from Dodgson to Carroll.

The first, wonderful chapter discusses Carroll's often overlooked juvenilia and highlights some little known aspects of it, relating the author's youthful writing practices to his adult work. Readers will enjoy the samples Susina provides. Chapter Two demonstrates that *Wonderland* was a part of the already flourishing tradition of the literary fairy tale. Here Susina examines and responds to the arguments of critics such as Ruth Berman and John Goldthwaite. Chapter Three considers Carroll's obsession with letters, arguing that it is in letters that the two seemingly distinctive personalities of Carroll and Dodgson are truly joined. Susina presents his own solution to the raven and writing-desk riddle, a solution based on Carroll's letter writing. He also suggests, incorrectly I believe (given what we know about the 1863 break with the Liddells, which he never mentions in this very nonbiographical tome), that the handwritten manuscript of *Under Ground* can be viewed as a "love letter" to Alice Liddell.

Chapter Four covers the "Alice industry" and the rise of children's consumer culture, which are, in fact, major themes of this book. Carroll's interest in *Alice* repackagings was notable, but is perhaps slightly overstated here. For example, I don't believe that Carroll was actively involved with, beyond giving permission for, E. Stanley Leathes's *Alice in Wonderland Birthday Book* (1884). Nor should he be credited or blamed for the Looking-Glass Biscuit Tin nor those ivory-carved *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* figure parasol handles.

Chapter Five presents an incisive analysis of Carroll's interest in his imitators, and his own anxiety lest he himself be accused of having imitated other authors. Susina also notes that in some cases imitations of Carroll appear to have influenced his own later work. A long analysis of Carroll's attacks

on Edward Salmon establishes indubitably that Carroll cared very much about his public image.

Chapter Six, a detailed look at *The Nursery Alice*, is particularly rewarding, and is a good example of Susina's ability throughout this book to thoroughly examine and synthesize not only the critical evidence but the textual and paratextual evidence, and to see fresh connections between different facets of Carroll's writing. Chapter Seven examines the photograph of Alice Liddell as *The Beggar-Maid*, setting it firmly within both the social context of the period and the development of art photography, such as O. G. Rejlander's work, which Carroll much admired. Chapter Eight focuses on class issues, contrasting Carroll's lack of novelistic concern about poor children with other popular writers of the time, such as Charles Kingsley and the now virtually unknown Hesba Stretton, whose *Jessica's First Prayer* sold vastly more copies in its day than did *Wonderland*.

Chapter Nine discusses *Sylvie and Bruno* both as a self-revelatory text and an example of Carroll's desire to write for both children and adults. In Chapter Ten we are back to marketing, and in particular the role of book jackets and other paratextual materials. Susina deconstructs the design of fourteen *Alice* paperback covers and dust jackets, but unfortunately, illustrations of them are not included. (The handsome, restrained cover of Susina's own book, we can note here, authoritatively conveys that this is a serious book about a fun and imaginative topic.) Continuing the same theme, Chapter Eleven moves us along to explore how *Wonderland* has been transformed by technology. It is one of the most translated texts into hypertext (perhaps because it jumps from place to place itself).

In the final chapter, Jon Scieszka's "well-intentioned" but "wrong-headed" and "exceedingly strange" book—*Walt Disney's Alice in Wonderland* (Disney Press, 2008)—comes in for heavy criticism because, Susina says, it is based on the wrong pictures (Mary Blair's rather than Tenniel's) and omits the conversations.

Because the chapters of Susina's book originally appeared separately ("have accumulated over time"), they are sometimes repetitive; the book would have benefited from more editing. This, as well as the inadequate index—which has huge gaps and does not follow standard practices—may reflect publishing economics (as does the sky-high price of this volume, enough to pick up a couple of nice *Alices*). The meager index is a true shame in a book so rich in detail and broad in thought. There also are a few small errors of fact. For example, Blackburn and White used Wilfred Dodgson's abridgment of *Sylvie*, not one of their own devising, in *Logical Nonsense*, and *Wonderland* went out of copyright in 1907, not 1911. But these are of minor concern in this most informative, enlightening, and highly recommended book, an important addition to the literature for general Carrollian readers as well as academics.

