



# THE LION AND THE UNICORN

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**Susina, Jan. *The Place of Lewis Carroll in Children's Literature*. New York and London: Routledge, 2010.**

As I was traveling cross-country in early 2010, the seventeen-year-old sitting next to me in our overbooked coach section leaned over to see what I was reading. I noted that it was a book about Lewis Carroll by the scholar Jan Susina, and shared that I had just learned that Carroll had written 98,721 letters, probably two thousand a year. She gasped and almost pulled the book from my hands in a sincere desire to learn more. The opportunity to learn more—to be startled by facts and surprising pieces of information and perception—is exactly what Susina provides us in this capacious, remarkable book that has broad appeal to nonacademics, scholars, and Carroll specialists. It is a text that generates delight, enthusiasm, and wonder.

A contribution to Routledge's respected Children's Literature and Culture series, *The Place of Lewis Carroll in Children's Literature* situates Carroll in literary and cultural history in a manner and method characterized by Susina's quoting of Umberto Eco: "Books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has been told." Susina not only locates Carroll in the books, events, and literary figures that shaped or influenced him during the nineteenth century, but also grounds his discussion in more recent scholarship. In an organic, interconnecting process, Susina links Carroll's life and work to other artists and scholars and provides an internal bibliography, creating a tapestry of ideas and references. Susina self-consciously structures this study as a "series of interlinking chapters that focuses on Carroll's adventures as a children's writer" (2) and "a hypertext, like the *Alice* books themselves, in that the reader does not need to read it in a linear fashion, but can choose their own adventure by reading the chapters in a sequence of their own inventions" (3). This ethos of invention and playfulness informs Susina's study. With a nod to his keen awareness of the plethora of Carroll criticism, Susina begins his study with the wish "to find a bit of room and add to the lively discussion of Carroll. Like Alice, I suggest, 'Come, we shall have some fun now!'" (11).

*The Place of Lewis Carroll in Children's Literature* consists of twelve pithy chapters that begin with Carroll's juvenilia and end with a critical examina-

tion of contemporary multimedia adaptations. Intervening chapters provide a diverse array of Carrollian issues, including his photography of children, his extraordinary letter writing, class and gender issues, the tradition of the literary fairy tale, and his role as entrepreneur/businessman/marketer and contributor to the publishing industry. These subject areas—some familiarly controversial, some startlingly new—are re-presented through a rich analysis that integrates a prodigious understanding of Carrollian scholarship and cultural history. A core of key ideas presented in the Introduction weaves its way through the majority of these multifarious chapters. These ideas resituate Carroll's place in children's literature and present new "places" in which Carroll has been surprisingly influential. Right off (and throughout the essays), Susina takes strong issue with P. J. Harvey Darnton's pronouncement in *Children's Books in England* (1932) that Carroll's *Alice* books "changed the whole cast of children's literature" (3). The effect, notes Susina, was to mark *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as the great divide so that prior to its 1865 publication, all children's books were primarily instructional and afterward primarily "to entertain and delight." Susina argues that such distinctions are too neat, noting as evidence the publications of Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* in 1839 (a copy of which Carroll gave to Alice Liddell) and Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* in 1845. With this correction to the record, however, Susina also asserts that the *Alice* books themselves include "modest social lessons" as well as more explicitly didactic ones. As evidence, he cites paratextual materials included in later editions of the *Alice* books as well as in the *Sylvie and Bruno* publications. In subsequent chapters, he develops the significance of these paratextual materials (which he relates to Carroll's compulsive letter writing), and also argues that they as well as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* reflect the values and attitudes of the British upper-middle class during the Victorian period.

According to Susina, Carroll is "very much a proper Victorian" (4). This Victorian propriety and social position provide the cultural context for Susina's refutation of stubborn misperceptions of Carroll, his relationship with Alice Liddell most certainly being foremost. Such concerns were recently discussed on the Child\_Lit Listserv after the publication of a new novel about Alice, Melanie Benjamin's *Alice I Have Been*. Was Carroll or wasn't Carroll a pedophile? What do we do with *those* pictures? Susina teaches us about Carroll's photography, about Victorian photography in general, and about Carroll's likely influences. Through his engaging scholarly process, he repudiates concerns of Carroll's having had an unhealthy interest in young girls by encouraging us to see these photographs through Victorian lenses rather than contemporary ones. Chapter 7, "*The Beggar-Maid: Alice Liddell as Street Arab*" places Carroll's photography within a Victorian context. Susina cites

a double standard at work, since Julia Margaret Cameron took similar photographs of children; he also believes many Carroll photographs, including *The Beggar Maid* (1858), were influenced by the allegorical photo-montage *The Two Ways of Life* (1857), by distinguished Victorian photographer and Carroll mentor O. G. Rejlander. Susina claims that along with Cameron, Carroll was “one of the most accomplished amateur photographers of the period” (10). And, Susina asserts, that “thing” about Carroll not wanting Alice to grow up is simply not true. He points to the final paragraph in *Wonderland* in which Alice matures, several photographs of Alice that track an Alice growing up, and finally the *Sylvie and Bruno* works, which he argues are Carroll’s attempts to compose an adult romance. The plethora of information and assessment woven elegantly into these discussions is a delight, an intellectual feast that should finally bring to rest some persistent, disturbing questions.

Susina corrects those who “climb the wrong fairy tree when they situate *Wonderland* within the context of folk tales.” This key idea informs all Susina’s essays and is the focus of chapter 2, “Lewis Carroll and the Literary Fairy Tale” (26). After a careful review of the scholarship of “the wrong fairy tree,” Susina posits the importance of understanding that “placing texts within a literary and cultural context, as well as suggesting the way in which the book was received by its initial audience, enhances an understanding of its place within children’s literature. *Wonderland* should be read as a Victorian literary fairy tale for children” (26). In fact, Carroll referred to both *Wonderland* and *Underground* in several diary entries as fairy tales. Susina uses this “placing” of Carroll’s work as literary fairy tale to evidence his stance against Darton. Carroll’s *Wonderland* belongs with Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* and George MacDonald’s *Dealing with the Fairies* as well as the work of Hans Christian Andersen, and although “*Wonderland* does not provide the same sort of moralizing and conventional piety that appears in Kingsley’s . . . [and] MacDonald’s [works], it does contain a number of social lessons for younger readers” (27). Susina weaves issues of religion and social class into this discussion, claiming that despite Carroll’s satirizing of moral tales, he “still clearly endorses and promotes certain codes of behavior” (40). The effect is to mainstream Carroll, so we see that *Wonderland* supports rather than challenges Victorian values and addresses the upper-middle class. While Carroll shifted the literary fairy tale away from religion to social lessons, it did not, argues Susina, signal the rupture in children’s literature that Darton claims divides education from entertainment.

Susina not only wants us to see Carroll’s works in a new light, but Carroll too. Susina posits that “[w]hile *Wonderland* is a pivotal text in the history of children’s literature, it is also an important book in the history of publishing” (9), crafted by Carroll himself. We learn that Carroll (somewhat like John

Newbery) was a remarkable entrepreneur *and* savvy businessman, involved in all aspects of the creation of his texts—the quality of the paper, the book size, the binding, the size and style of typeface, and the price. Like his own White Knight, Susina shows us how Carroll was a relentless tinkerer and reviser of texts, developing multiple versions of *Wonderland* for multiple audiences, and how he was a forerunner of publishing-industry marketing. In chapter 4, “Multiple *Wonderlands*: Lewis Carroll and the Creation of the *Alice* Industry,” Susina claims that Carroll changed the way books were sold: Carroll understood focus groups and test marketed his stories with thirty families; grasped the appeal of book binding and carefully chose bright red to attract children to *Wonderland*; and devised the book jacket for *The Hunting of the Snark* for marketing purposes. Carroll made sure to advertise his other books on later editions of both *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*. Carroll understood what Marsha Kinder calls a “children’s entertainment super system” (Kinder 122) and created what Susina labels the “*Alice* Industry.” Not only are there multiple versions of *Alice*, but spinoffs: Carroll located translators for French, German, and Italian editions; authorized an operetta in 1886 by Henry Savile Clark; published *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground* the same week of the operetta as a kind of “prequel”; created a picture book for young readers; and produced the Looking-Glass Biscuit Tin, a date book, the *Wonderland* Postage-Stamp Case, a table cloth, parasol handles in the shape of characters, and more. It is no wonder that Alice has morphed into multimedia—from video games, comic books, games, dolls, fan websites, novels, amusement park rides, and films—the most recent being Spring 2010’s release of Tim Burton’s film *Alice in Wonderland*.

But there is more to delight and entertain as well as educate. In chapter 1: “Respicicndo prudens”: Lewis Carroll’s *Juvenilia*,” Susina grounds Carroll’s literary achievement in a series of family magazines, which he began at age thirteen. As with his mature work, the teenage Carroll was not only author, but editor, artist, and designer; these early pieces reflect his love of language, including alliteration, puns, and parody. Chapter 3, “The Play of Letters in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books: Ravens & Writing,” is probably the most specialized essay in the collection, focusing on Carroll’s obsession with letter-writing (98, 721) and the letters of the alphabet themselves. Through an ingenious analysis, Susina offers his own explanation to the Mad Hatter’s riddle to Alice: “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” He also examines Carroll’s paratextual letters to his child readers, which became intrinsic components to later editions of his books, blurring genre boundaries. Chapter 8, “Coffee or Tea: The Two Nations of Victorian Children’s Literature,” situates the *Alice* books in the British upper-middle class, the texts’ cultural place, by using coffee- and tea-drinking as way to “tease out distinctions in social class”

(107). We learn that *Jessica's First Prayer* (1867) by Hesha Stretton, an extremely popular tale about the London poor, reflected its audience by its reference to coffee stalls on the London streets. Coffee, once the drink of the wealthy, had become by the mid-nineteenth century the beverage of the lower classes. Carroll, in contrast, indicates that he is writing for an upper-middle class audience—witness the French lessons, issues of managing servants, and lavish tea parties.

Carroll's literary inventiveness is explored in chapter 9, which focuses on the generally ignored *Sylvie and Bruno* texts as examples of "cross-writing"—for an audience of adults and children—and "boundary-crossing," blending fiction and nonfiction, fantastic stories and contemporary commentary, and autobiography. In the final three chapters, Susina explores contemporary appropriations of Carroll, looking at "Alice in Consumerland: The Marketing of a Children's Classic to Contemporary Readers," "Cyber Alice: *Wonderland* as Hypertext," and "Show Me, Don't (Re)Tell Me: Jon Scieszka Revises *Wonderland*." We are provided with a stunning awareness of how powerfully attractive Carroll's work continues to be, including its presence in new media: Susina cites Voyager's hypertext edition of Martin Gardner's *The Annotated Alice*, edutainment games, websites, a programming tool, and Robert Sabuda's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: A Pop-up Adaptation*. For Susina, however, this seductive appeal has serious limitations, since the digital medium, and its privileging of interactivity, diminishes if not removes the voice of the narrator. In his analysis of Scieszka's "revision" of *Wonderland*, this dismay turns into downright condemnation. Although he praises Scieszka's work in general, Susina asserts that Scieszka has produced nothing more than a plot summary of *Alice*: "He forgets that summarizing a joke isn't the same as telling the joke. He has eliminated most of Carroll's voice and his own voice as well" (172).

In his Afterword, Susina recounts a moment with his son, who at age nine discovers the delights of *Alice* as he reads it aloud in a playful English accent to his parents. For Susina, the original is the best. After assessing various contemporary adaptations, he declares, "you don't need to write an adaptation of *Wonderland* to appeal to contemporary middle school readers—just give them a copy of the original book" (172). There is no doubt Susina knows virtually all there is to know about Carroll and his works and the scholarship directly and indirectly related to them. This knowledge is grounded in and propelled by a passion for the subject matter that is contagious, exciting, invigorating—what drove that seventeen-year-old sitting next to me on the plane to want the book too.

*The Place of Lewis Carroll in Children's Literature* may best be described as stunningly comprehensive. It is so information-packed and perceptive, so

grounded in good scholarship and elegantly written, so playful yet authoritative, that it takes one on a carnival ride into Susina's own land of wonder.

#### Works Cited

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