



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

Colin Manlove

In this often highly detailed book Professor Susina considers Lewis Carroll's work from a variety of standpoints – his juvenilia, his place in the Victorian literary fairy-tale tradition, the role of letters in the *Alice* books, his creation of an *Alice* books industry, his many illustrators, his photography, his class prejudice, the many imitations of *Alice*, boundary-crossing in *Sylvie and Bruno*, the marketing of *Alice* in recent times, *Alice* as a possible hyper-text and Jon Scieszka's *Walt Disney's Alice in Wonderland* (2008).

Susina well conveys just how much the *Alice* books are a unique synthesis of Carroll and Tenniel, of text and illustrations and how the one cannot exist without the other. In particular he shows how Carroll, as a devotee of children's pantomime, created the *Alice* books as a series of highly visualised tableaux that stimulated Tenniel to his own inspired recreations. Susina also shows how Carroll was one of the first authors to attend continuously to the marketing of his books, continually adapting *Alice* to different modes, whether nursery book or magic lantern slide shows or even pursuing literary spin-offs, such as Savile Clarke's *Alice in Wonderland: A Musical Dream play* (1886); and bringing about, with *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), the first use of a dust jacket which could give laudatory blurbs and mentions of his other books.

In his examination of *Sylvie and Bruno*, and his consideration of *Alice's* continued popularity as a hyper-text, Susina is undoubtedly original. With *Sylvie and Bruno* his remarks on the limited application of the Fortunatus' purse image in the book are well made, and his idea that the explosion of the Professor's confused chemical bottles is a figure of Carroll's own intuition that the book did not hold together is convincing. When he quotes Mein Herr saying of the purse that makes a moebius strip, "Whatever is *inside* that purse is *outside* it; and whatever is *outside* it, is *inside* it", the application may be as much to the reflection of the imagination and the world, or dreaming and reality, as described by Novalis, 'Was außer mir ist, ist gerade in mir; ist mein; und umgekehrt' (*Die Fragmente*; Carroll may well have been led to Novalis by his friend George MacDonald, who was much influenced by this writer.) This would give point to the use of a 'Mein Herr' here, and also to the relation between dreaming and reality in *Sylvie and Bruno* as a whole.

Professor Susina's knowledge of the modern computerised use of hyper-texts, or interactive books on disc, in children's literature is compendious; and his analysis of why *Alice in Wonderland*, despite the many hyper-texts created out of it, is not done full justice by this medium is convincing. For all its episodic character, which lends itself to hyper-textual form, the story in *Alice* still remains linear and resistant to being shuffled about. Further, hyper-texts lose Carroll's controlling authorial voice which is an essential part of the experience of the book. And so far they have been poor at integrating the text and Tenniel's drawings, which are either out of place or not even present. Susina finds more successful a hyper-text that acts as a re-creation rather than a translation of *Alice* – Cyan, Inc.'s *Manhole* (1992). But he has to conclude that the hyper-text versions of *Alice* to date 'reveal limitations of creating a new version that is as compelling or well-designed as Carroll's original book'.

Susina is perhaps less penetrating in his account of the place of *Alice* in the Victorian literary fairy-tale tradition, where writers from Harvey Darton onwards have put Carroll alongside Elizabeth Sinclair, F.E. Paget, Ruskin, Thackeray and Kingsley. And though Susina claims that Carroll was indebted to all these writers, and highly so to Kingsley, he somehow never proves this; when he comes to Kingsley, he points out only how *Alice* differs from *The Water-Babies*. Generally Susina's book does not provide enough in the way of literary analysis.

We are told in the Acknowledgements that 'Many of these essays first began as conference papers', and it does show. The relevance to the broad topic of Carroll's place in children's literature is often tenuous, and one has the impression that many topics are pursued for their own sake. There is repetition of points, showing both the absence of a continuously argued central theme, and the lack of a thorough re-reading and reworking before publication of the separate papers that make up the book. However, there is a broad topic behind all the chapters, which is the issue of the continuing survival and relevance of Carroll's work both in its time and down to our own day. Susina, it must be said, is not overly optimistic about the future of Carroll's work. In an engaging Afterword he describes his worry about introducing *Alice in Wonderland* to his son, and shows how he managed to do so only by indirection, when one day the two of them had been laughing over puns and he could lead on to those in *Alice*.

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Routledge (New York and London, 2010), 232pp

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