

Reviews

GILLIAN BEER, *Alice in Space: The Sideways Victorian World of Lewis Carroll*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. x + 296. \$35.

Of the enigmatic mind at the center of *Alice in Space: The Sideways Victorian World of Lewis Carroll*, Gillian Beer asks: “But where did Alice get in? And how did Charles Dodgson become Lewis Carroll?” (p. 7). Both questions have been asked before—many times. In “Was the Snark a Boojum?” Carolyn Sigler reviewed four recently published monographs about Carroll’s life and rightly called him “one of the most biographed Victorian authors” (Sigler, “Was the Snark a Boojum?: One Hundred Years of Lewis Carroll Biographies,” *Children’s Literature*, 29 [2001], 229). Since then at least seven more book-length biographies of Carroll have appeared, in addition to numerous interpretations of the *Alice* books and histories of their cultural impact. Despite its airy title, then, Beer’s *Alice in Space* jostles for elbowroom in a crowded field of study. Masterfully, however, Beer manages to offer a fresh take on *Alice*—not merely because she provides new contexts for appreciating both the author and his books, but also because she pulls off a remarkable sleight of hand. Recognizing that, in the *Alice* books, Carroll warped the conventions of children’s literature, Beer rewrites the rules of scholarly discourse and recovers, for her audience of *Alice* fans and literary critics, parallel pleasures to those that Carroll invented for his first child readers.

Though establishing Carroll’s “world,” *Alice in Space* is not a biography. Beer’s readers will learn little about Carroll’s childhood in the Daresbury parsonage, his despondency at boarding school, his cryptic feelings for Alice Liddell, or the unknown contents of those missing diary pages. These are stories, as Beer knows, that we have already heard. Instead, *Alice in Space* aims to revive Carroll’s “habits of mind” by examining the books and magazines that he owned, read, enjoyed, saved, scrapbooked, and talked about with friends and colleagues (p. 2). Beer’s exploration of Carroll’s reading draws, in part, on Charlie Lovett’s instructive bibliographic catalog, *Lewis Carroll Among His*

Books: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Private Library of Charles L. Dodgson (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005), which augmented and corrected Jeffrey Stern's earlier *Lewis Carroll, Bibliophile* (Luton: White Stone, 1997). But Beer rejects Lovett's and Stern's limited interest in only the books that Carroll privately owned and expands her scope to encompass the holdings of the Christ Church Library and the periodicals to which the Senior Common Room subscribed—though she is always careful to highlight those texts that Carroll confirmed having read. Herself immersed in the full range of Carroll's literary, scientific, religious, and diversionary reading, Beer plays the part of an ideal guide as she lures us back down the rabbit hole for a fascinating behind-the-scenes tour of both the singular mind and the manifold cultural contexts that composed *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found* (1872).

In each chapter, Beer presents a suggestive series of relations between episodes in the *Alice* books and passages from Carroll's reading. The irreconcilability of a rabbit with a watch, which begins Alice's adventures, is placed alongside Edward Bulwer Lytton's mockery of his contemporaries' obsession with minute temporality in *Pelham* (1828); Alice's slow fall down the White Rabbit's hole is associated with John Stuart Mill's comic take on Copernicus's discussion of falling rocks in *System of Logic* (1843); her impromptu occupation of the pawn's position on *Looking-Glass's* chessboard is likened to Thomas Henry Huxley's use of chess as a metaphor for natural selection in "A Liberal Education and Where to Find It" (1868); the taxonomic chatter of Carroll's flowers is coupled with Alfred Tennyson's adoption of floral emblems in *Maud* (1855); and the dream logic of *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* finds counterparts among Lord Byron's, Emily Brontë's, and George Henry Lewes's meditations on the same psychic phenomenon. *Alice in Space* demonstrably reads the *Alice* books "sideways"—opening up Carroll's texts laterally to embrace the breadth of the Victorian intellectual culture in which they participate. If Beer diminishes our myth of Carroll's originality, the price is well paid for realizing in return the richness of his moment.

Beer's approach recalls Martin Gardner's *The Annotated Alice* (New York: Bramhall House, 1960) and its subsequent expansions, including Mark Burstein's recent *150th Anniversary Deluxe Edition* of Gardner's work (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015). Gardner's irreplaceable resource also glosses episodes like Alice's fall into *Wonderland* with previous debates about the properties of falling bodies and reproduces the originals of the poems that Carroll parodies. Though the *Alice* books disrupt, modern scholarship must preserve so that

twenty-first-century readers can grasp the disruption. Because, according to Beer, “the full raucous delight of Victorian children hearing the proprieties topple and the morals give way in these sanguine parodies” is lost to us (p. 78), we need this contextual recovery in order to get Carroll’s jokes and to appreciate the allusions that we cannot recognize ourselves. But while Gardner’s footnotes prop up *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*, reinforcing their primacy, and thus hierarchize their subjects, Beer’s side-by-side nestling of nineteenth-century texts equalizes. If, as she says, “the enjoyment” of reading the *Alice* books “is in seeing hierarchies upended” (p. 73), then the very form that her scholarship takes skillfully enacts one of Carroll’s pleasure principles. Her reader moves—much like Alice in her dreams—associatively through a series of passages and passageways with no canonical ranking and no strict argumentative telos. The conversations that Beer stages among Carroll, Mill, Huxley, Tennyson, and Byron, among others, capture the spirit of the *Alice* books’ whimsical badinage in an enchanting feat of literary criticism.

Just as exciting is Beer’s rewriting of the origin story that many scholars have taken for granted. In most studies of the author behind the *Alice* books, the creation of *Wonderland* is predestined; all roads out of Dodgson invariably lead to Carroll. Carroll’s celebrated biographer, Morton N. Cohen, sums up this inevitability: “It had to happen. Charles’s stern self-discipline, his determination to control thought and action, his deep commitment to the child, his friendship with the Liddell sisters, his suppressed emotional life, and his fount of endless energy joined forces to produce a creative burst. . . . And out it poured, the story of Alice down the rabbit hole” (Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* [New York: A. A. Knopf, 1995], p. 123). In contrast, Beer’s account frees the *Alice* books from this deterministic plot. Her investigations of the Victorian fascination with watches, gravity, chess, flowers, and dreams show instead that the musings of Carroll and his contemporaries roamed liberally, even haphazardly, and suggest that *Wonderland*’s and *Looking-Glass*’s sampling of particular permutations that these puzzles and problems could take should not be confused for the forms they *had* to take. Beer maintains that the *Alice* books engender “an egalitarian zone in which everything becomes possible and nothing is unlikely because all forms of being have presence and can argue: doors, time, eggs, queens, caterpillars, cats and hatters, oysters, gnats, and little girls—all have their say” (p. 4). *Alice in Space* explores this omnipresence of imaginative experimentation across Victorian culture, offering—as Beer says that Carroll so ingeniously does—“several parallel possibilities” within a shared field of play (p. 77).

In 1939, Virginia Woolf summed up the frustrations of any scholar who took on the task of answering how Charles Dodgson became Lewis Carroll. “We ought to be able to grasp him whole and entire,” Woolf wrote; “But we fail—once more we fail. . . . The book breaks in two in our hands” (Woolf, “Lewis Carroll,” in her *Collected Essays, Volume I* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967], p. 254). For Beer, this fracture is not the mark of failure but the herald of new interpretive prospects. In *Alice in Space, Wonderland and Looking-Glass* break into twos, fours, and sixteens, as Beer leads us down a multitude of alternate yet simultaneously possible rabbit holes. The effect is an exhilarating form of literary scholarship, but one that longtime readers of the *Alice* books will recognize as curiously and delightfully familiar. In its meticulous research, its exquisite interweaving of coincident contexts, and its embrace of the intellectual play that permeated Victorian culture and reached its highest expression in Carroll’s texts, *Alice in Space* offers us an unconventional criticism worthy of its subject. Like its inspiration, Beer’s latest book lets us wander through the many reflective and refractive surfaces of the agile and comprehensive mind behind the *Alice* books.

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DANIEL M. STOUT, *Corporate Romanticism: Liberalism, Justice, and the Novel*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 254. \$115 cloth; \$30 paper.

From John Stuart Mill’s famous claim that “all poetry is the nature of soliloquy,” to Percy Shelley’s celebration of the radical power of Prometheus’s single-handed defiance of the tyrant Jupiter; and from the popularity of brooding, infinitely complex Byronic heroes, to the proliferation of theories of originality and creativity that emphasize the vital power of an artist’s singular imagination in the act of composition, the Romantic period can seem to be obsessed with individuals. By wrapping Romanticism into a broader history of the rise of liberal modernity, it is tempting to see the early nineteenth century as a moment in which older forms of collective life were displaced (however gradually) by a newly modern focus on individuality that is still with us today.

But, as Daniel M. Stout argues in *Corporate Romanticism: Liberalism, Justice, and the Novel*, this view of the history of liberalism is only