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'Twas Brillig: Two Children and *Alice*

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This paper is a case study of two children's responses to Lewis Carroll's and John Tenniel's *Alice* books. Their encounters with the stories were recorded for a period of eleven years. The thoughts and concerns inspired by the books demonstrate the children's interpretive abilities as they sometimes raise serious philosophical issues. Based on the collected data it is argued that the children's understanding and philosophical ability can be revealed in their response to literature. The findings support the notion that children's capacity for abstract thinking should not be underestimated.

Keywords: children and philosophy, *Alice* books, Lewis Carroll, John Tenniel, children's humour, children's fear.

Research into children's reception of complex, sophisticated narratives shows that children have no difficulty in reading and understanding them (cf. for example Arizpe & Styles 2003; Sipe & Pantaleo 2008). Both Gareth B. Matthews (1998) and Thomas E. Wartenberg (2014) claim and show children are natural-born philosophers. Today, researchers opt for teaching thinking at school and enquiry based on children's books as part of regular classes (Haynes 2008, Haynes & Murriss 2012). However, while studying librarianship, I was stunned by the way the critics and educators of the time underestimated children's ability to comprehend stories and themes in children's books (cf. Lowe 1994: 55). This was already contradicted by the little girl in *Books Before Five* (White 1954), the one record

which we studied of an actual child's reactions to stories. I determined to keep a similar record when I had children. Ultimately I kept a journal of my daughter and son (Rebecca is the elder, Nicholas three years her junior), in detail up to about eight then sporadically to late adolescence, recording their interactions with books when hearing or reading them, and in play. It comprises five thousand handwritten pages, indexed by title, author and theme. This was used in my PhD thesis, and for the book, *Stories, Pictures and Reality* (Lowe 2007). It did support my hypothesis that young children can be far more aware than they were generally given credit for. According to Lana Mohr Lone, "For the most part, adults fail to notice the profoundly serious questions that underlie children's remarks" (2012: 3). However, "young children's questions are often profoundly philosophical" (5), and their philosophical explorations are often prompted by the books they read. No more so than in their encounters with Carroll-Tenniel's collaborations, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. My intention in this paper is to present the experiences of two children, who had maximum exposure to children's literature, and their high level of abstract thinking prompted specifically by the *Alice* books.

Early responses

The poem "Jabberwocky" was important in my children's lives, though in different ways. Perhaps most significant was its role in Nicholas's learning to read. He was a slow starter (both were, despite experts saying that much reading aloud to children will make for early accomplishment). When he was seven and one month (7y1m) we discovered "Jabberwocky" in *Delights and Warnings* (Beer & Beer 1979), an anthology of poems. He had heard it already, in the context of listening to *Alice* (by which term I will be referring to the *Alice* books, text and illustrations), six months before, and had twice seen the 1971 surreal Czech animated film *Jabberwocky* (director Jan Švankmajer), which begins with a recitation of the first stanza in English. Also his parents would occasionally recite parts of it.

When we were holidaying with their aunt, uncle and baby cousin, he discovered it in the anthology. I read it twice, then he joined me reading several more times. Afterwards he read it aloud, almost perfectly, to his father, then his aunt. Nicholas continued to play with the words all day. "Come to my arms, my beamish boy", he cried to the baby. And "One, two! One, two! And through and through / The vorpal blade went snicker snack", pushing his cousin gently in the back, with his finger as sword. There was some word play also, and acting out of his favourite scene: "He left it dead, and with its head / He went galumphing back" (Carroll 1992: 118). Meanwhile Rebecca (10y4m) remarked that it was in the film she'd seen

(the Švankmajer six months before). She queried why it was called “Jabberwocky” when the beast was called only “the Jabberwock” (I said it was like calling a place with lots of rabbits “Rabbity”). The poetry anthology was full of “delights” and a little later we explored Blake’s “The Poison Tree”. Here Nicholas queried “foe”, though he hadn’t queried it in “Jabberwocky”, probably because it is difficult to distinguish Carroll’s invented words from real ones (several of which have moved into mainstream language). Nicholas continued to love the poem. Despite the nonsense words, it is the classic quest narrative, and, as such, it may even have influenced his passion for “Dungeons and Dragons”, a game which occupied much of his childhood. He continued to enjoy and recite “Jabberwocky” into adulthood.

Quite different was the influence of “Jabberwocky” on Rebecca at 6y2m. At school, her arithmetic was excellent, but she wrote some of the numbers the wrong way round, so didn’t get stamps for correctness and neatness. She was told to practise at home, but objected strenuously. In the end I left her and she ultimately produced a whole page of 2s, all reversed. When I returned I laughed and said “you’ve done them all right – if you look in the mirror” and we went to the mirror and checked them. After this she did a page of 2s and another of 3s, all correct. But the next week it was 6 and 7 – all her sums correct, but again no star because of reversals. This time she happily did pages of them – all decorated, and all the correct way round. She remarked:

Rebecca: Do you remember when I did that whole page of 2s back to front? But they were the right way round in the mirror? You know when Alice went through the looking-glass? Well when she held up a book to the mirror, it was the right way round!

This was “Jabberwocky” of course which is printed in reverse (and with some technical difficulty in Victorian times, Wong 2009: 140) and she’d remembered it from hearing *Alice* read the month before. I hadn’t mentioned the book, or the term “mirror writing”, on the actual homework occasion.

Playing with the ideas in *Alice* demonstrates that the children did not consider the language or the concepts too complicated or obscure when it was read to them. Nicholas had had sections read aloud, attended a pantomime performance, and known the Tenniel chess pieces well (they were on display in our front room), so the book itself was familiar to him. Our copy of *The Annotated Alice* (Gardner 1965) was falling to pieces with his searching for pictures of the chessmen, so we gave him a hardback (both books of *Alice* and *The Hunting of the Snark*) for Christmas when he was 2y9m. Rebecca enjoyed looking through this as well as Nicholas, and comparing it with the chess pieces. She also saw another performance, with puppets, very clever, sticking much more accurately to the book than the pantomime had, but considered too scary for Nicholas, who did not accompany us this time. The

day after Christmas, when I was showing him some of the pictures (specifically he came upon, recognised and sang “Humpty Dumpty”, Carroll 1992: 161) Rebecca said “I like that story”. The next week I was putting plastic covers on the Christmas books and both children came by. I found Humpty Dumpty again, then the lion and the unicorn (172) – one of Nicholas’s favourite nursery rhymes, and I read three or four pages. Rebecca was anxious to try out one of her own Christmas books on the art of print making, so I didn’t think she was listening hard, but some time later she asked “Can we have *Alice in Wonderland* for our next chapter book?”. This pleased me, because she had not been particularly interested in books for several months, and we started reading it when we came back from the Christmas holiday, several weeks later – with the pantomime and the puppet performance in between.

Nicholas was 6y7m before he heard *Alice* read straight through, however. Rebecca had heard it through at 6y1m. Nicholas at this time was 2y10m (we were reading his new Christmas copy) and would have listened to some, though usually he was having his own bedtime story read as the other parent read *Alice*. Similarly Rebecca heard us reading it to Nicholas, and by 9y9m she was able to do the reading herself, on occasion. She was reading it alone at 11y5m, and may have picked it up at any time in between as well.

Rebecca first encountered it at 3y8m. To the B picture in an alphabet book, a butterfly sitting on a block of butter, she remarked “That’s a bread-and-butterfly”. I asked who told her that, she said Sarah had it in a book, and yes, it was *Alice in Wonderland*. Her friend had the Disney Little Golden Book version, and the pun had amused her. She was 5y0m when the Tenniel-based chess pieces entered the family (a Christmas present to her father) and *The Annotated Alice* was always within reach from then on.

When the children were young it was the physical actions which they copied most often, after Tenniel’s illustrations. Rebecca would smile, telling us “I’m grinning like the Cheshire Cat!” adding one time (6y1m): “I’ve seen Socks [our cat] smile” in reply to the book’s “I didn’t know that Cheshire Cats always grinned; in fact, I didn’t know that cats *could* grin” (Carroll 1992: 48). Meier (2009) notes that the fading cat is like negatives in the darkroom although in reverse, which process the young Alice Liddell was sometimes allowed to watch. Crouching down under the kitchen table, Rebecca told me “I’m like Alice” (When she’s little, under the table?) “No, when she’s big, in the hall” (Carroll 1992: 15). Putting on rubber boots back to front was always “I’m being a castle” from the chess pieces (picture, Carroll 1992: 113) – even when one was on all fours and had backward boots on the hands as well (this inspired great laughter – either child could begin it). Another favourite game with both was croquet. Here Rebecca became a card doing a back

flip to make the hoop, and Nicholas became the ball (or hedgehog) and tried to crawl under. Or sometimes it was our little dog, whom they persuaded to dash through as the hedgehog (Carroll 1992: 66). Tweedledum and Tweedledee's battle (146) was also acted out, inspired by the pantomime as well as the book (although the nursery rhyme was familiar too). Here they are performing it. Rebecca is 6y1m, Nicholas 2y10m:

Rebecca: I spoiled my nice new rattle.

Nicholas: Me too.

Rebecca: Nick, come on – we'll have a battle. On your marks, get set, go! We'll have a battle! Nick, let's have one more battle. Sharpen our battle sticks.

Nicholas: Ready set go. I'll battle you.

Rebecca: Just on the tummy – not the face.

Nicholas: You spoil my nice new rattle.

Rebecca: Yes, you spoil your nice new rattle while we were having a battle. Come on, Nick, come on. I'm winning!

(It continued in this vein for quite some time)

Rebecca to J (Father): Daddy, I won the battle!

“Servants” were very popular with Rebecca, who said that she was my servant, whenever she helped with the housework (first at 3y1m), and she often ascribed the role of her servant to Nicholas. Servants appear several times in *Alice*, for instance p.199 (Carroll 1992). She had encountered them in other stories, though, so she was well aware of the role and meaning when she first heard *Alice*.

Carroll's words inspired the children as well as Tenniel's drawings, as with “Jabberwocky”. It may be worth explaining here that our method of reading aloud was slightly unconventional, in that we read the author's actual words, and didn't explain any unless the child queried them. So it was with “whiting” (Carroll 1992: 79). The name obviously appealed to Rebecca: she'd mentioned it previously, but at 6y1m she brought me a blank piece of white paper.

Rebecca: That's a whiting.

V (Mother): Is it? Why?

Rebecca: Because it's white and long. Have you ever tasted whiting?

V: Yes. You have too. That's what we usually get when we have fish and chips.

This was clearly just a game, but food presented some problems as well. In a nursery rhyme book we came upon “The Queen of Hearts she made some tarts”. Nicholas recognised it from the pantomime and Tenniel's pictures, so he knew it was in *Alice*, but to my surprise he asked (2y11m) “Can you eat them?” so I described them, and vowed to make some one day (I'm not sure I ever did). He also queried “frumenty” which the “Snap-dragon-fly” lives on (Carroll 1992: 134). Then there is “mock-turtle soup”, but more of that below.

Philosophy

Several scholars have explained the philosophical potential of various stories written for children and how they can be related to different philosophical approaches and concepts (Costello 2012), while they pose no difficulty to child readers. Piaget famously maintains that the child before seven lives in a pre-rational world (Piaget 1954), but his understanding of the child's philosophical conceptions has been overturned by theorists (for instance Donaldson 1984, Matthews 1998, Wartenberg 2014). Matthews does not consider the *Alice* books as teaching tools for philosophy in elementary schools, but North (2006) does. She makes a strong case for using them, noting: "Often philosophy classes for children skirt issues of symbolic logic and reasoning as they are believed to be beyond the grasp of the very young" and going on to demonstrate how various moments in *Looking-Glass* can be used (2006: 16).

Rebecca was hearing *Through the Looking-Glass* at about the same time as her interest in philosophy developed. She had shown a philosophical bent previously, having a very decided interest in which part of a story is real, which not: "Animals don't talk" she objected, with great laughter to *Miffy at the Zoo* (Bruna 1965) at 3y7m, though she had in the past, and still did, accept characters' anthropomorphism in other books. She was picking "blueberries" (clover) to bottle for next winter (as in *Blueberries for Sal*, McClosky 1967). I, nursing Nicholas, joked "I'm bottling Nicks for next winter". She retorted: "Nick's a little boy. You can't eat boys!" Then pauses for thought. "Nick's a *name* – you can't bottle names" (4y9m). At 3y0m she had announced "Brownie is pretend" but next day when she wanted to blame her imaginary companion for spilling her milk: "he's getting realer and realer". She often asked "Is this a real story?" (by which she meant could it really have happened, is it possible?).

Because her articulation of solipsism occurred during the time we were first reading *Alice*, I had put it down to Carroll's influence, but as an adult (with an exceptional memory) she feels that, at the most, Carroll just gave her the words to express this very common childhood thought – that there is no proof that anyone except oneself exists. I have been unable to verify how common the feeling is in childhood – it didn't occur to me until I was in my thirties, or to her father until his teens, but others I have asked have seen it in their children or grandchildren.

The question of how we can tell if we are part of a dream does seem to be quite common in childhood. Matthews' Tim asked it at six. He continues "Such spontaneous excursions into philosophy are not at all unusual for children between the ages of three and seven" (Matthews 1998: 5).

“Wouldn’t it be funny if we were all just in a dream?” Rebecca commented the day after we had first read Chapter 4. “Like Alice being in the Red King’s dream?” I asked, and she agreed that was what she had in mind (Carroll 1992: 145):

“He’s dreaming now,” said Tweedledee: “and what do you think he’s dreaming about?” Alice said “Nobody can guess that.”

“Why, about you!” Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. “And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you’d be?”

“Where I am now, of course,” said Alice.

“Not you!” Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. “You’d be nowhere. Why, you’re only a sort of thing in his dream!”

“If that there King was to wake,” added Tweedledum, “you’d go out – bang! – just like a candle!”

[...]

“Well, it’s no use *your* talking about waking him,” said Tweedledum, “when you’re only one of the things in his dream. You know very well you’re not real.”

“I *am* real!” said Alice, and began to cry.

Two days later Rebecca told her friend, with a laugh, “Sarah, I don’t believe in you!” Sarah, clearly puzzled, laughed too (cf. Carroll 1992: 175, emphasis in the original):

“Well, now that we *have* seen each other,” said the Unicorn [to Alice], “if you’ll believe in me, I’ll believe in you. Is that a bargain?”

She went on to share more philosophy from *Alice*: “Sarah, wouldn’t it be funny if we were all in a dream – just in somebody’s dream?” Three days later she told me that she had had a dream “about me dreaming and that dream was about me dreaming” with the implication that this was an infinite regression, rather like Alice’s sister dreaming about Alice’s dream at the end of *Wonderland*.

We finished *Looking-Glass* the next day. Having played with the concept, Rebecca was amused by the title of Chapter 12: “Which Dreamed It?”. She wanted to know who I thought had dreamed it, refusing to commit herself first. When I suggested Alice, she agreed. I didn’t at that time make the suggestion, which is clearly a further step, that it might have been Carroll’s, or even Dodgson’s, dream. I felt she had enough to cope with, with the dream idea within the story. We didn’t consciously notice or comment on the way the eight words in Chapter 11 are there, on a blank page, to cover the shaking of the Red Queen and transpose it into the kitten (Wong 2009: 146).

There followed a long discussion two weeks later about “what is God?”. Rebecca had had no religious instruction before what was given in her school, but that was puzzling her. She proposed that God was a giant standing on the horizon – so big that we can’t see Him – helping people. Then she went on “What if we were all part of God’s dream?”. I answered that many people believe something very like

that. “What would happen if we were part of God’s dream?” she wanted to know. I opined that you would never be able to know for sure, and that was the end of the discussion for that day. A few days later she told me “I don’t believe in God” but there was no time to discuss it then.

She was also still thinking about solipsism. One morning at 6y4m, getting ready for school, she announced:

Rebecca: I don’t believe in people.

V: Don’t you darling? Does it worry you?

Rebecca: Yes. (Then, looking at her adored little sibling) I do believe in Nicky, and you – and Daddy. I believe in my family. (Pauses, thinking about it.) No. I don’t believe in anybody.

I remarked that that idea occurred to most people at some time or other, but I was surprised that she’d thought of it so young. I had to agree that it is hard to prove that other people exist. Her encounter with solipsism at this age concerned me, and I thought I should try to reassure her. That night I invited her to sleep with me – an occasional treat – and picked up the conversation again, commenting that she would find that she wouldn’t have this feeling all the time, only occasionally. “No, I have it all the time.” (Do you?) “Well, not all the time, but especially at playtime” (When you’re lonely?) “Yes,” adding something to the effect that it feels as if all the other children are not real or not there. I suggested that if she did feel this and it worried her, she could think loving and happy thoughts – about how sweet Nicky is when he’s being funny, for instance. This seemed to help, as she snuggled down saying she liked talking to me.

She announced at 6y3m, “I’ll tell you three things I don’t believe in – Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny,” going on to assure us that her teacher did believe in the Easter Bunny. This statement led conveniently into my homily about not spoiling it for people who did believe in them.

Her brother played with the reality concept also. There was a jigsaw with each letter having a relevant animal. T was for tortoise. At 3y1m Nicholas, as he put the tortoise in its place said:

Nicholas: That tortoise is looking sad.

V: Is he? Why?

Nicholas: Because he wants to be a *real* tortoise. Don’t cry tortoise, I’ll make you real with my magic.

Six weeks before I had explained that this was what had happened in *Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse* (Lionni 1969), when a toy mouse was made a real one with magic – but surely it had overtones of the Mock Turtle too, especially in the “looking sad” remark. He had not heard *Alice* read through yet, but because he had been given it for Christmas three months before, he had asked for parts to be read

about the Tenniel pictures which interested him. There is no record of him hearing the part about the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle, but it has a picture that would have arrested him – he was always very interested in emotions, and the Mock Turtle is shown weeping (Carroll 1992: 75), so I would have read: “‘Once,’ said the Mock Turtle at last, with a deep sigh, ‘I was a real Turtle.’” The “mock”, meaning ersatz, however, I probably never glossed. There is no record of Nicholas querying the reality of other people, though he often explained that animals cannot do human actions, for instance “Dogs can’t drive” to his much loved “Scarry” (1964) (2y5m).

Like his sister, he had a great interest in reality and non-reality (partly tutored by her talking about the concept so often). He was very aware that things in books were not real. To Seuss’s “A fish in a tree? How can that be?” in *Hop on Pop* (1964) he replied with scorn, at 2y6m “It’s just a word!”. His articulation of animals not talking came much younger than his sister’s, and was inspired by a singing of his favourite song on the radio, “A frog he would a-woing go”. He remarked at 3y3m “It must be pretend a’couse it’s really people. They can’t talk, can they? Animals can’t talk”, and the same week he explained to his grandmother, of a book she was reading him, “Dogs can’t really talk, or open doors”. At 4y5m to *The Quinkins* (Tresize and Roughsey 1978) “Are they alive, Mummy?” (Probably inspired by the indigenes painting them in rock art at the beginning of the story). From then on, his expression for imaginary or unlikely characters was “but is it alive in the story?” which he asked first about the Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum 1965) the day after a school play he had attended, and he used the expression frequently thereafter. He heard his first of Jansson’s Moomintroll stories at 4y2m (*Moominland Midwinter*, 1971). He was young for the series, but they were enormously popular with Rebecca. He asked if the Groke was always awake. I suggested that, like any other creature, she would be asleep sometimes and awake others, and he went off chanting to himself “We don’t know and we don’t know, ’cos we’ve never seen one, and there’s nothing real about them”.

Nicholas was fascinated by the whole idea of Looking-Glass Land, where everything is reversed. He commented on it in several places in the reading at 6y7m. For instance (Carroll 1992: 121): “That’s wrong! Rocks are hard ground so they wouldn’t have talking flowers growing”. Then he queried Alice having to go in the opposite direction to meet the queen (123), and I explained it was Looking-Glass Land, so anything could happen. In the Lion and the Unicorn chapter, he noted: “It’s Looking-Glass Land so the unicorn will win – because it’s the other way round, see?” (cf. Carroll 1992: 174). Then at the knight continually falling off his horse, despite his amount of practice (184): “Plenty of practice, plenty of practice – because it’s Looking-Glass Land!”

Humour

This leads to the question of humour in *Alice*. Carroll played with words all the time – in puns and neologisms. “Mock turtle soup” was of course a foreign food to them – and I guess to all children of today. Rebecca and Nicholas did not find that section funny. On Rebecca’s first hearing *Alice* (6y1m) she did not laugh even at the jokes she had laughed at in other stories. For instance she had found “‘Answer the door!’ ‘Why? It didn’t ask anything!’” hilarious in *Five Dolls in a House* (Clare 1964) over a year before (cf. Carroll 1992: 199).

“To answer the door?” he said. “What’s it been asking of?” He was so hoarse that Alice could scarcely hear him.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said.

“I speaks English, doesn’t I?” the Frog went on. “Or are you deaf? What did it ask you?”

“Nothing!” Alice said impatiently. “I’ve been knocking at it!”

I thought that so many of the words were foreign to her, the syntax confusing, as well as the dialect (and Carroll’s self-referential joke inherent in the variety of English the Frog speaks), that she was concentrating too hard on the meaning to get the jokes.

When she heard it again, as we were reading it to Nicholas, she was 9y9m (he 6y7m) and she found much more to laugh at this time round. Either it was because it was basically familiar to her by now, or because there was someone else to share the humour with. So both laughed at “‘Oh, it’s too bad!’ she cried. ‘I never saw such a house for getting in the way! Never!’” (Carroll 1992: 120) and at the “bough-wough” joke of the tree in the garden barking at danger (122). Also at “‘It’s *my* opinion that you never think *at all*,’ the Rose said in a rather severe tone” (122, emphasis in the original). This is ridiculous, but also the sort of thing that anyone might say to the children – and, as here, be quite wrong. Both were amused by Alice having to go the other way to meet the Red Queen (123, emphasis in the original):

“I think I’ll go and meet her,” said Alice, for, though the flowers were interesting enough, she felt that it would be far grander to have a talk with a real Queen.

“You can’t possibly do that,” said the Rose: “*I* should advise you to walk the other way.”

This sounded nonsense to Alice, so she said nothing, but set off at once towards the Red Queen. To her surprise, she lost sight of her in a moment, and found herself walking in at the front-door again.

A little provoked, she drew back, and after looking everywhere for the Queen (whom she spied out at last, a long way off), she thought she would try the plan, this time, of walking in the opposite direction.

It succeeded beautifully. She had not been walking a minute before she found herself face to face with the Red Queen, and full in sight of the hill she had been so long aiming at.

They both laughed at the Caterpillar’s contradicting Alice’s every utterance (they were 9y10m and 6y8m, at this stage). At this reading they had heard the two *Alice* books in reverse order. Rebecca was most amused – she was delighted by (Carroll 1992: 140):

You could not see a cloud, because
No cloud was in the sky.

She laughed and laughed, saying “you could not see a cloud because there weren’t any in the sky!” This is in “The Walrus and the Carpenter”. At the beginning she remarked “I hate long poems” and was amused when I told her “so did Alice”.

The Walrus’s trick of holding a handkerchief in front of his mouth, so the Carpenter could not count how many oysters he had eaten, amused Nick (Carroll 1992: 144). It must be admitted that he could be greedy, and rather tricky himself, on occasions. This was a trick after his own heart.

Several things amused because of their familiarity – Alice’s not caring for jam, like Rebecca. And insects: “‘What sort of insects do you rejoice in, where *you* come from?’ the Gnat inquired. ‘I don’t *rejoice* in insects at all,’ Alice explained, ‘because I’m rather afraid of them—at least the large kinds’” (Carroll 1992: 132, emphasis in the original). This amused Rebecca because she was fascinated by all animals, especially by insects – she was amused to think of “rejoicing” in them, though.

She was amused by the Hatter being in jail for something he hadn’t done yet (though living backwards didn’t lead to the discussion I expected it might have), and by the pink daisy turning white. Humpty Dumpty amused both; especially when I read his “Wrong!” in the same tone I sometimes use myself (in fun). They also laughed at the idea of the verbs and adjectives coming around him on a Saturday night (understanding that they were words, but without me explaining about them waiting to be paid). Both were also amused by the “fiddles and fiddle sticks” (Carroll 1992: 139) the Tweedles danced to, because both children were learning the violin.

Nicholas was listening alone at 7y6m when he laughed at the bread-and-butterfly and the rocking-horse-fly and at “‘I wish Queens never asked questions,’ Alice thought to herself.” And to: “‘There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I’ll write one—but I’m grown up now,’ she added in a sorrowful tone; ‘at least there’s no room to grow up any more *here*’” (Carroll 1992: 29, emphasis in the original). It was the contrast between being “grown up” and having grown big that amused him, but perhaps also the irony of actually reading the book she was talking about.

Sometimes it was the physical words themselves. Rebecca was fascinated by the concrete poem that is the mouse’s tail/tale (Carroll 1992: 25): “It gets smaller and smaller till you can hardly read it” she said at 6y1m and both laughed at it in

the reading when they were 9y9m and 6y7m. At this reading she was also most interested in chapters 10 and 11. "That only had eight words in it!". When we were reading *Comet in Moominland* (Jansson 1967) four months later she remarked at its short chapter "We've seen a shorter one than that, haven't we, Mum?" (The one in *Alice*?) "Yes".

I noted some of the things which the children queried. One or the other asked about whiting, slates and slate pencils, foe, binoculars, opera glass, frumenty, gnat, microscope (which is like a sort of "looking-glass"), committing a crime, hatter, and sal volatile among others. Some of the things queried are very much part of the nineteenth century, some I would have expected the children to know, but probably the words were puzzling out of context. One of the songs at the pantomime was based on Tweedledum and Tweedledee's "How d'ye do?" and shake hands!" (Carroll 1992: 139), and the children sang it together on the way home (6y1m and 2y10m). At the time Rebecca was interested in "shake", as a word with two meanings (she knew it better in "milk shake").

Life-long influence

It is often suggested that the reading of *Alice* to children will leave them bored, puzzled or even fearful, though this is rarely suggested by literary critics, who tend to be enamoured of the book and its philosophy. But it is not an infrequent remark by laypeople (see the Amazon reviews for instance), especially if the child in question is not used to long stories and complex language, or has seen the Disney version first. It can also be a problem in translation, especially when the receiving culture is not sensitised to cultural and literary conventions of the source text (cf. O'Sullivan, 2005: 83). Tucker points out that the *Alice* books "can sometimes rather frighten as well as amuse or intrigue younger readers" (1981: 98). Even Gardner admits that "[t]he time is past when a child under fifteen, even in England, can read *Alice* with the same delight as gained from, say, *The Wind in the Willows* or *The Wizard of Oz*. Children today are bewildered and sometimes frightened by the nightmarish atmosphere of Alice's dreams" (1965: 5).

Because we have discussed the two children's humour reactions to *Alice*, it seems only right to look at their fears. Rebecca rarely feared a book, though she would occasionally hide one away, but if this was fear she never articulated it – and they were picture books which seemed quite benign to an adult. There was no sign of anxiety with *Alice*, unless one counts not believing in people as originating there, as I did at the time. Nicholas, on the other hand, frequently feared a story. He empathised strongly with the characters, so he often proposed solutions to their problems: "I could get a big ladder and go up and rescue the little half-chick",

for instance, to the fairy tale. He was certainly afraid in the *Alice* pantomime – when the other children called out as requested, and always at adults acting stupidly (here, deliberately of course). So was he afraid in the *Alice* reading? There is only one record of him being anxious – the thing that worried him was Alice forgetting or losing her name or her identity, in the woods. He proposed a solution for her:

Nicholas: You know what I'd do? You know how the [chess] board has a thing like that [its border]? Well I'd just go to there and go to another square and get through.

We explained the problem of the chessmen's prescribed moves, which he'd forgotten about.

North, in her discussion of the *Alice* books as philosophical texts for children, remarks: "As Alice makes her journey across the chessboard she is continuously reminded to keep her own identity at the forefront of her mind" (2006: 20). As the Red Queen admonishes her "Remember who you are!", North continues "Alice comes to the wood 'where things have no name' and encounters a creature who has not only lost its name (as Alice has, as well) but its identity also" (ibid.), which was clearly disturbing to Nicholas.

There's no doubt *Alice* did influence their lives subsequently. There was the recognition of the nursery rhymes being played with – "Humpty Dumpty", "The Queen of Hearts", "The Lion and the Unicorn", etc. There was the recognition of Tenniel's illustrations in other books – the White Rabbit is in Hale's *Orlando: The Frisky Housewife* (1972), for instance, and in a book about postcards that I had from the library. They noted the Dormouse in Milne's (1970) "The Christening" ("What shall I call my dear little dormouse?") and in his "The Dormouse and the Doctor".

There were quotes and references to *Alice* – sometimes begun by one of the parents, but continued by the children. For instance, drying up the dishes when Nicholas was 3y11m (when he'd only heard sections of it read):

V: There's the tea towel over there.

Nicholas (sings): Like a tea towel in the sky. Twinkle twinkle little bat...

He was deliberately playing with Carroll's words ("towel" instead of "tray") as Carroll had played with Jane Taylor's. There was his comment at 9y5m as he was helping to pack away the hired crockery, after a big party. "More! It's like in *Alice in Wonderland* – running and running and never getting anywhere!". This was almost three years since he'd heard *Alice* read. At dinner their father made some joke, to which I replied:

V: You might as well say that I mean what I say is the same as I say what I mean.

Rebecca: (at once): You might as well say I breathe when I sleep is the same as I sleep when I breathe.

V: It is in your case, Dormouse.

Rebecca: Time to move up! (grinning, pushing her ice cream bowl along)

She had continued at once, remembering and adding to the *Alice* quote (cf. Carroll 1992: 55), and was most amused by it (6y3m, several months since she heard it). When she was leaving home at 19 years, Rebecca announced that *Alice* was one of the three books no home should be without (a dictionary and a thesaurus were the others). She hunted through second hand bookshops until she found one she liked. Thinking about reality and dreams led to Rebecca's university essay in Philosophy on Descartes gaining first class honours. This was no doubt because she had been thinking about the question for so long, whether inspired by *Alice* or not.

Carroll's *Alice* is said to be the third most quoted book in the English language, after the Bible and Shakespeare. However, it is sometimes seen as a dated text, read and enjoyed by adults, but not appreciated by children who are bored or frightened by it, or both. McGillis says "It is my experience that many readers ask this same question [What is the fun?]. For them, and perhaps at times for *Alice*, this dream is a nightmare" (1986: 26). Rackin (1976: 3) is certain that the humour, and the book itself, appeal only to adults, who insist on reading it to their children, who are bored, puzzled or fearful, identifying with *Alice* herself, where the adult reader identifies with the witty narrator. I hope I have demonstrated that this does not apply to children, anyway to those who are used to listening to long stories with complex ideas.

Although this is a study of only two children, there is some advantage in examining the most advantaged children, with, in this case, a maximum exposure to children's literature. The paper supports the thesis that children are often underestimated in their understanding and philosophising.

North in her study of the *Alice* books – especially *Looking-Glass* – and their value as philosophical texts for young children, remarks that (2006: 23):

It is the process of introspection about the nature of the universe, not merely their final deductions, which offer the greatest rewards [...] It is this introspection, which is offered again and again in *Looking-Glass*, be it introspection about logical arguments, language, or deeper examination about the nature of self and the world-at-large.

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Bilo je kuhno: dvoje djece i *Alice*

U radu se istražuju reakcije dvoje djece na knjige o Alici Lewisa Carrolla i Johna Tenniela. Njihovi susreti s tim djelima bilježeni su tijekom jedanaest godina. Misli i bojazni izazvane knjigama pokazuju interpretativne sposobnosti djece, koja ponekad progovaraju o ozbiljnim filozofskim pitanjima. Na temelju prikupljenih podataka u radu se tvrdi da dječje reakcije na književnost upućuju na njihovu razinu razumijevanja sadržaja i njihove filozofske sposobnosti. Zaključci potvrđuju stajalište da ne treba podcjenjivati dječju sposobnost apstraktnoga mišljenja.

Glavne riječi: djeca i filozofija, knjige o Alici, Lewis Carroll, John Tenniel, dječji humor, dječji strah

Es war brillig: zwei Kinder und *Alice*

Im Beitrag werden die Reaktionen zweier Kinder auf die Alice-Bücher von Lewis Carroll und John Tenniel erforscht. Die Begegnungen der Kinder mit dem angeführten Erzählgut wurden in einer Zeitspanne von elf Jahren protokolliert. Die durch das Buch hervorgerufenen Gedanken und Ängste weisen auf Deutungsfähigkeiten der Kinder hin, aus denen manchmal auch ernst zu nehmende philosophische Fragen hervorscheinen. Anhand der protokollierten Daten ist zu behaupten, dass die hier vorgestellten Reaktionen der Kinder auf ihr Verständnis von literarischen Werken sowie auf ihre philosophischen Fähigkeiten hinweisen. Die im Beitrag präsentierten Schlussfolgerungen scheinen die Meinung zu unterstützen, wonach man die Fähigkeit der Kinder, abstrakt zu denken, nicht unterschätzen sollte.

Schlüsselwörter: Kinder und Philosophie, Alice-Bücher, Lewis Carroll, John Tenniel, Kinderhumor, Kinderängste