



## Alice's Academy

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### The Aryan Alice & Other International Misunderstandings

Jeffrey Garrett

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*The following article is adapted from a talk presented by editorial board member Jeffrey Garrett at the Toronto launch of The Looking Glass on April 2, 1997. We can't share the slides with you, but think you'll enjoy the non-pictorial part of the lecture. As former Head of the English Language Section of the International Youth Library in Munich, and past editor of Bookbird: World of Children's Books, Jeffrey brings a sharp eye and a surprising thesis to the subject of children's book translation. - Ed.*

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Like any good 90s person, I surf the net from time to time, just for the heck of it. A while back, I found a website called, intriguingly, "[The Jabberwocky Variations](#)." It seems to have vanished in the last several months -- where the site used to be there's now only a hyperlink which connects to nothing -- but at least until late last year it was in Singapore. As the name suggests, "Jabberwocky Variations" collected parodies, Jabberwocky miscellany, but above all translations of Lewis Carroll's famous poem from *Through the Looking Glass*. There were renderings in Finnish, Hungarian, Esperanto, French, even Choctaw. There were also a number of translations into German, and I'd like to present two of them -- you can decide which one you think is better. I'm aware of a certain irony here, since a poem written with German nonsense words will seem even more nonsensical to a Canadian audience... but please bear with me.

To begin with -- and to refresh your memory -- here are the first few verses of the poem in the original:

#### Jabberwocky

`Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

`Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch!

The first translation is by Robert Scott, a colleague of Alice's father, Dean Liddell, at Oxford:

#### Der Jammerwoch

Es brillig war. Die schlichten Toven  
Wirrten und wimmelten in Waben;  
Und aller-mümsige Burggoven  
Die mohmen Räth' ausgraben.

"Bewahre doch vor Jammerwoch!  
Die Zähne knirschen, Krallen kratzen!  
Bewahr' vor Jubjub-Vogel, vor  
Frumiösen Banderschnätzchen!"



The second translation is that of Christian Enzensberger, a contemporary of ours who teaches English literature at the University of Munich. I think you'll notice the differences right away:

### Der Zipferlake

Verdaustig war's, und glaÙe Wieben  
rotterten gorkicht im Gemank.  
Gar elump war der Pluckerwank,  
und die gabben Schweisel frieben.

"Hab acht vorm Zipferlak, mein Kind!  
Sein Maul ist beiÙ, sein Griff ist bohr.  
Vorm Fliegelflagel sieh dich vor,  
dem mampfen Schnatterrind."

Do you prefer Scott's translation or Enzensberger's? I should tell you that the redoubtable Martin Gardner describes Scott's translation as "brilliant". I suppose one might respond to that: How should he know? But what strikes me most about the Scott translation is that it is more of a transcription of Carroll's poem with a little bit of German syntax and morphology thrown in, along with German pronunciation. I much prefer Enzensberger's translation (and German children are with me on this) in which you will not recognize a single syllable from the Carrollian original. And why should you? Across the spectrum of translations, I suggest that those that succeed do so by not slavishly imitating the original, but instead by somehow capturing a spirit, something ineffable, and recreating that something, that spirit, in words and sounds appropriate in their own language.

What I intend to show you are successful and unsuccessful translations of Alice into pictures in various cultures of the world. My thesis will be that the most interesting and even most authentic pictorial interpretations are those that have been the most courageous in emancipating themselves from the iconographic conventions of the original, that the translations which seemingly are the most irreverent are often those which show the deepest grasp of and the greatest affection for Lewis Carroll's masterpiece, and succeed best in translating something very English into something, say, very Swedish, very Brazilian, or very Russian, which children in these cultures can relate to. And isn't that what translation is all about? I will take the semiotician's position which regards illustration as a manner of translation and paraphrase fully equivalent to text translation, i.e. that what we see is often structurally identical to what we read. Only the medium is different.

There is also a trendy post-colonial twist to much of this, for many translations of Alice were not really created with the uniqueness of children of other cultures in mind. Indeed, Alice is a classic example of cultural exchange conceived as a one-way street. The fact that the *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* compares the number of Alice translations with those of the Bible should alert us to the possibility that both books may have benefitted from the same missionary zeal of English colonial officials and imperial apologists. In fact, the goal was much the same in both cases: to bring the fruits of English culture to the barbarians of the world, or, put in less benevolent terms, to rub the noses of local elites in their own cultural backwardness. How else can we explain the 1911 translation of Alice into Swahili? Or the many school editions of Alice in the late forties, for example those in India and Hong Kong? The translation of Alice into the Pitjantjatjara language of the Australian aborigines, in 1975, must also be seen in this context. This "aboriginal" Alice is somewhat of a fraud, since it turns out to have been commissioned by the Department of Adult Education at the University of Adelaide, and its strikingly authentic "aboriginal" illustrations were the work of Byron Sewell, an artist from Texas. It was not created in anticipation of any demand from aboriginal children or their parents, but was instead an instrument, one might say at the risk of being unjust to the creators, of cultural hegemonism. Much the same story characterizes many other translations of Alice, rendered lovingly into exotic languages by English missionaries or anglicized colonials. In any event, it would be absurd to use these translations as evidence that *Alice in Wonderland* is a children's favourite in these countries.

Not all translators have been English, of course. There are in fact many translations dating from early postcolonial times, for example those into the languages of India and Pakistan: Oriya (1949); Bengali (1950); Hindi (1956). I think we need to recall that the first generation of leaders, cultural bureaucrats, and probably children's book editors in newly emancipated colonies, in spite of all nationalism, were often



object worshippers of the culture of the former "mother" country. "Development" was often confused with a parody of the recently ejected colonial power, and this imitation is often most expedient through the appropriation of the cultural trappings of the former rulers.

This, as we will see, also extends to copying almost blindly the famous illustrations of John Tenniel, the gifted *Punch* cartoonist whose pictures have become as canonized as Carroll's text. As late as October 19, 1955, an editorial in the English magazine *Junior Bookshelf* was entitled, "Yes, It Must Be Tenniel." It was a review of Mervyn Peake's new illustrations, but this article went beyond damning just them and proceeded to disqualify all other efforts of the preceding 90 years -- and also all those yet to come. This attitude is typical of a repressive cultural dogmatism, ruling out experimentation and flexibility in the face of the needs of other cultures. And so we find Tenniel's blond-haired Alice all over the world -- often helped along by Disney -- as a very superficial guarantor of the authenticity of the translation. When in fact hair color is even less than skin-deep.

Alice has attracted many great artists and fine presses over the years. I found a very rare edition at the Osborne Collection in Toronto, with wood engravings by the Canadian artist George Walker. The American artist Barry Moser created wood engravings, too. Anyone looking at his duchess must realize immediately that she is stark, raving mad. Moser's Alice was the winner of a National Book Award. The original book by Moser's Brandywine Press is rare and unaffordable, but the University of California Press produced a handsome edition for, I recall, a mere \$70 U.S.

The American contribution to the Alice tradition is actually more within the realm of popularizing it. But many scholars have pointed out that *The Wizard of Oz* is in fact nothing other than Alice translated into American... and that Kansas tornado nothing other than a rabbit hole that goes up instead of down.

The other principal Anglo-Saxon figure whose rendition of Alice has made its mark internationally is none other than Walter Elias Disney, born 1901 in Chicago. Disney was obsessed both with the Alice of Lewis Carroll and that of John Tenniel, and laboured eighteen years, from 1933 until the early 50s, to create his own cartoon version. In response to a fan letter from New Jersey, he once wrote that

Almost everyone who has read the book with enthusiasm cannot help but visualize Alice as she was drawn by Tenniel, the illustrator of the book, and regardless how close we come to this image, the result will always be a disappointment.

All of us know the Disney Alice, but are we aware of its international impact? Even if we overlook the huge number of licensed Disney Alices, we must deal with an extraordinary number of closely derivative versions. There are several giveaways, especially Alice's blond hair, but also the white rabbit, which in most of the world is Disney's, not Tenniel's.

And what of the genuinely original international interpretations of Alice? I would like you to consider on the evidence I am presenting to what extent Alice has in fact become at home in different parts of the world, and, if so, in what way, through what processes of alteration and image translation; and in what way it remains somehow foreign to its new host culture and to the children living there.

In some Italian versions, you may notice that Alice's big sister is sitting on a bench instead of on the bank by the river. The original reads, "Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank..." "Bank" has been translated as *banchina*, which in Italian means "bench." The situation is worse, by the way, in German, where the word for bench is *Bank*, as in *Sitzbank*. A good half of German Alice translations have Alice and her sister sitting on a bench.

One of the truly great Alice interpretations is from the early 70s, by the French artist Nicole Claveloux. She works with the collage effects and pop-art tricks characteristic of the period. One might call it Sgt. Pepper-style.

In Eastern Europe, Alice is enormously popular and the object of great veneration, but in a way quite different from the West. Based on the evidence of the illustrations, it seems less the characteristic humour of Alice which appeals (such as the wordplay and puns), and more the philosophical anarchy, the logical and mathematical games, and the phantasmagoric and even nightmare quality of many of the scenes which has attracted Slavic translators, illustrators, and, one would assume, young readers. The Russian artist Gennadi Kalinovski has illustrated Alice twice. Kalinovski's *Wonderland* reaches a kind of nightmarish crescendo in his rendering of the Mad Tea Party, a mixture of Bosch, Brueghel the Younger,



and the Milanese artist Arcimboldo. Also, any book which has as much to do with chess as *Through the Looking-Glass* simply has to be a hit in Eastern Europe.

It is a little-known fact that Vladimir Nabokov translated Alice into Russian while living in Berlin, publishing it under an alias in 1923. This was long before he came to the United States and began writing novels like *Lolita*, another book revealing a weakness for young girls. The illustrator of Nabokov's Alice was Zalshupin.

The Russians are not the only Slavs to embrace Alice. There is also the work of a remarkable Polish illustrator, Olga Siemaszko, who, like Kalinowski, illustrated *Alice in Wonderland* twice. The artist's approach evolved from a very scratchy pen-and-ink style (1957) to a rounded pop-art influenced look (1977). The Slovak artist Dusan Kalláy is another much-celebrated Alice interpreter.

With very few exceptions, I have been quite unable to find anything original from Asia and (what we call) the Third World. But isn't this evidence for the point that I was making earlier on? That Alice has simply not taken root outside of Europe and North America? The one truly exciting exception to this rule comes from Brazil, the 1970 work of an artist named Darcy Penteado. This is great art, brimming with energy and vitality, but I'm afraid rather unique in Latin America, where children's literature is flourishing today -- but sans Alice.

The other best work I can offer is a literary interpretation of Alice which is as appropriate an adaptation of the English original into an Argentine context as *The Wizard of Oz* is into an American one. I am referring to Dailan Kifki, the great nonsense novel of the early 60s by the equally great Argentine writer, Maria Elena Walsh. This book represented a radical departure from the pedantic and moralizing tradition that had dominated children's literature in Argentina until the very moment her work was published.

What, if anything, has this romp through the world of Alice interpretations shown or proven? As I said at the outset, I have wanted to show that translation -- and here I consider illustration to be just another vehicle to move ideas and concepts from one mind to the next, from one culture to the next -- can often serve its end best when it takes its object and adapts it to the cultural and aesthetic world of the target audience. I do not wish to deny that precisely the opposite argument could be made as well: that translation (or illustration) does its job best when it serves as a neutral vessel to carry over the cultural strangeness of the original into the target language. I think in the end this depends on whether we are seeking on the one hand to make comprehensible a different culture, or, on the other, to convey what in Alice is, I would argue, a universal and revolutionary frame of mind, one that embodies respect for play and nonsense, of courage in the face of the absurdities of the adult world, and of belief in the dignity of childhood as a period of grace in all of our lives. Seen in that light, honouring the Englishness of Alice can only be a minor goal. The far greater one is capturing and communicating her universality across all linguistic and cultural boundaries.