

BARBARA GOLDSMITH

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll)

1865, 1st ed. and 1866, 2nd ed., presentation copy
inscribed from the author to Alice Pleasance Liddell

was ten. What had started as a sore throat had devolved into scarlet fever (immunization and penicillin were not yet in common use). Flushed bright red, armpits burning, isolated save for a nurse and mother, both wearing masks, I hardly knew myself. Instead of my biking-riding, friend-filled life, I sat in bed day after day reading. But the only books I remember now are

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Alice provided an escape into a fantasy world, yet one not dissimilar emotionally to the world into which I felt I had fallen. Like Alice I asked myself, "I wonder if I've been changed in the night?"

I remember putting my hand over the exemplary John Tenniel illustrations so I could picture my own Alice, a gangly girl with dark brown hair, braids, and glasses. In short, me. I remember crying when, upon my recovery, my mother wary of contamination, on the doctor's orders, burned all the books I had read and even the sheets on my bed. That illness, however, left me with a love of reading that led to writing. As Lewis Carroll observed, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there." A.S. Byatt wrote that the Alice books

have, "Attracted logicians, literary critics, psychoanalytic critics, theorists of childhood, experts on children's literature, biographical interpreters, imitators, and a whole host of what in Shakespearean criticism are known as Baconians and Disintegrators."

Personally, as an adult, I have rediscovered my joy in this remarkable work. I still ponder the tongue twisters, riddles, and mathematical queries posed therein by an author who was not only a skilled fabulist but also a maddening mathematician. Like Alice my math was abominable, "Let me see: four times five is twelve, and four times six is thirteen, and four times seven is—oh dear! I shall never get to twenty at that rate!" says Alice. As to my days, there are many when I hear the Red Queen saying, "It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

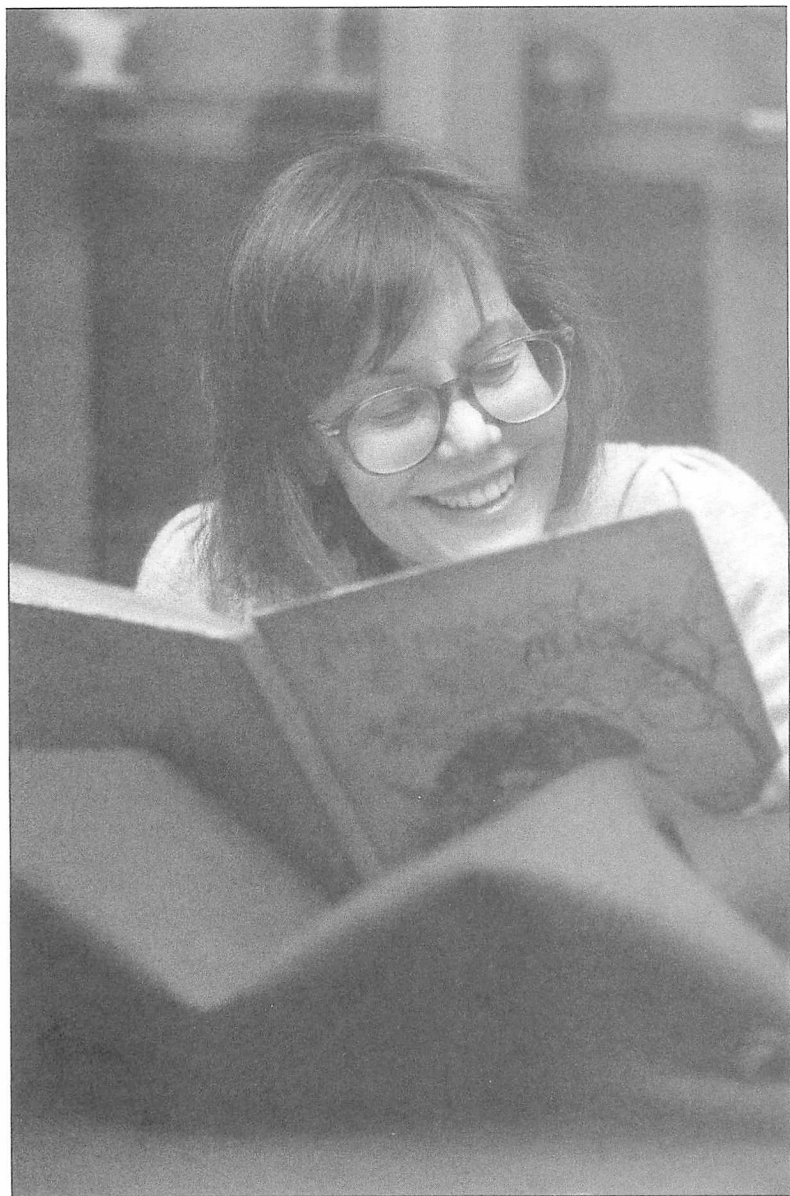
As someone who lives in a world of words, I think often of Alice's exchange with the March Hare when he tells her, "You should say what you mean," and Alice replies, "I do at least—at least I mean what I say—that's the same thing, you know." "Not the same thing a bit!" replies the disgruntled Hare, "Why, you might just as well say that, I see what I eat is the same as I eat what I see . . . You might just as well say that I like what I get is the same thing as I get what I like!"

Imagine my delight in finding that in the unsurpassed Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at The New York Public Library there are first editions (1865 and 1866) of both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* written by the mathematician and photographer Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll. The Berg Collection also possesses the original drawings for the Alice illustrations by the masterful John Tenniel, the ones I had spurned in my youth. There are photographs of Alice Pleasance Liddell, for whom the book was written, as a proper Victorian child but also as a beggar-maid, albeit in a flattering rag costume made of silk. Although she does not have braids or glasses, I noted that Alice does have dark brown hair. The photographs of Alice, her sister, Lorina (three years older than Alice), and their friends are full of life and spunk. My favorite piece of Alice ephemera in the Berg Collection is a miniature of Tweedledum and Tweedledee carved from a single piece of ivory.

The Berg Collection is a treasure chest of 35,000 printed items and a staggering 115,000 manuscripts, ranging from 1480 to the present.

It includes many of my favorite poets and writers—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Mark Twain, Vladimir Nabokov, Paul Auster—Oh gosh, one could go on and on. But why? Go see for yourself.

Holly Golightly, the heroine of Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, says that on those terrible "mean red days," she heads for Tiffany's. "It calms me down right away, the quietness and the proud look of it." But I say, my *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is The New York Public Library.



BARBARA GOLDSMITH, writer and historian