

Clarion Review

Alice in Verse: The Lost Rhymes of Wonderland

J. T. Holden

Andrew Johnson, illustrator

Candleshoe

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Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and J.T. Holden’s *Alice in Verse* both begin with an ending: “And now the tale is done.” Penned over a century ago, these words were never true and perhaps never will be: perhaps the tale of Wonderland will continue to grow. *Alice in Verse* is one more contribution to its growth.

This retelling is notable. Holden writes in tribute to Carroll’s sonic and imaginative sensibilities and imitates well his predecessor’s style. Holden sometimes blends Carroll’s lines with his own, and the two writers become nearly indistinguishable. *Alice in Verse* is pitched as the “Lost Rhymes of Wonderland”—the fabled lost poems of Lewis Carroll—and it lives up to this claim: The verses seem as though they could have been written by Carroll, and they offer a new view of Wonderland. For instance, the plot departs from the original’s, and Andrew Johnson’s illustrations revise conceptions of such iconic figures as Dee and Dum.

Holden and Johnson accomplish much in relatively few pages. The poems are concise. Relying on Wonderland’s prominent place in America’s cultural literacy, the poems are more allusory than detailed. “The Bottle & the Biscuit Box” is a case in point:

Beneath the soaring table now:
A tiny biscuit box—
And there within, a little sin:
A tasty paradox.
A little bite, perhaps it might
Reverse—to some degree—
The ill-effect and redirect
Up to the mocking key.

As these lines exemplify, the book is rich in dramatic irony—this device is among this collection’s many pleasures. The poems’ rhythms offer additional enjoyment. Holden obeys the Caterpillar who instructs, “[Poetry] should travel with ease from your tongue to your mouth.”

The book employs regular rhyme schemes, making it easy on the ear.

The text's sound is likely its most appealing feature for a younger audience. Johnson's 36 illustrations will also excite; after all, as young Alice remarks in Carroll's version, "what is the use of a book without pictures?" Alice in Verse is marked appropriate for ages seven and up, but a seven-year-old may have difficulty navigating it alone, due to its advanced lexicon.

Both sophisticated and amusing, Alice in Verse will be re-read like the classic it follows. Holden's introduction portrays him as a long-time Carroll enthusiast, one who knows the ins and outs of Carroll's life and corpus. The book belongs in the hands of all fans like him.

Janelle Adsit