

(From: The Collected Papers of B. Russell, v.10)

Lewis Carroll: Alice in Wonderland [1942]

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VAN DOREN: Miss Porter, you may wonder why you were asked to come this morning to discuss Alice in Wonderland. One reason I might give you is this: I was curious to know whether you, like other women of my acquaintance, were horrified by this book rather than made happy by it when you were a little girl.

PORTER: I was. It was a horror-story to me; it frightened me so much, and I didn't know then whether it was the pictures or the text. Rereading it, I should think it was the text.

VAN DOREN: Even without Tenniel's drawings you would have been scared?

PORTER: Oh, yes. It was a terrible mixture of suffering and cruelty and rudeness and false logic and traps for the innocent--in fact, awful.

VAN DOREN: This must have been partly because you believed the story.

PORTER: I believed it entirely. The difference between it, I think, and the other fairy stories (because we had an appetite for the most grim and grisly horrors; nearly all stories written for children in the old times were horrible and we loved them, because we knew they weren't true; they couldn't happen, they were mere stories) is, that all this takes place in a setting of everyday life. The little glass table with the key on it, and the furniture and the gardens and the flowers, the clock--they were all things we knew, you see, familiar things dreadfully out of place, and they frightened me.

VAN DOREN: Well, Mr. Russell, you also might wonder why you are here, and the reason might be another reason altogether. But I'm tempted to ask you whether anything like this was your experience.

RUSSELL: No, I never had any feeling of horror about it. I have heard other women say the same thing, that they felt a horror about it. The reason I didn't was that after all it was a girl who had all these troubles, and boys don't mind the troubles of girls.

PORTER: I'm afraid that's true.

VAN DOREN: You mean that boys don't mind if girls are treated rudely?

RUSSELL: They don't mind a bit. No, they think it's what they deserve.

VAN DOREN: I wonder if that is because boys themselves are in the habit of being treated rudely by girls with no ability to strike back. Did you read the book at an early age?

RUSSELL: Oh, yes. I was brought up on the two books, both Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass. Through the Looking-Glass was published the year I was born, and they were still comparatively recent books when I was young. I was brought up on the first editions, which I had in the nursery. It didn't occur to anybody that they had any value

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and I just had them to wear out. I knew them by heart from an early age.

VAN DOREN: That was true of other children in your generation, I dare

say.

RUSSELL: Yes, they all knew them by heart. And I don't think that I can remember any of them being horrified. I'm a little surprised by what Miss Porter said. I don't remember any of them thinking of the stories as possibly true.

VAN DOREN: I was talking recently to an acquaintance of mine--a Man--who said that he now feels a horror in reading the book which he did not feel as a boy. You remember the occasion when Alice is growing in the little house and she has grown so large that she has to have one arm out of the window and one leg up the chimney. Well, little Bill, you know, who comes down the chimney to see if he can do something about it, is suddenly kicked by her so that he flies out and is badly hurt, and she hears everyone outside say: "There goes Bill." Now this friend of mine, as a boy, roared with laughter over that. He and his brothers thought it was the funniest thing in the world. But now it doesn't seem funny to him that Bill was hurt. So apparently conversions can take place.

RUSSELL: That is true. I think people are more merciful than they used to be, and I think old fun often strikes us now as rather brutal; anyway, it didn't in those days.

PORTER: It is curious about cruelty, because Bill didn't seem to worry me much. A thing I accepted, which I know now is extremely unkind) was putting the dormouse in a teapot headfirst. But I remember reasoning to myself even then that the dormouse was asleep anyhow and didn't care.

VAN DOREN: No. And the dormouse seems on the whole to want to be some place where it is warm and wet.

RUSSELL: It never occurred to me that the dormouse minded. The only thing that occurred to me was that the teapot was too small.

VAN DOREN: The dormouse when he was pinched and squealed didn't hurt you) then, vicariously? Does all this mean that the book for you was a perfectly satisfactory children's book? And that it perhaps is still?

RUSSELL: It was then. I don't regard it now as a perfectly satisfactory children's book. I've been rereading it with a view to this broadcast, and I think there are many objections to it as a children's book. In fact, I should like to label it "For Adults Only". I don't think it's a suitable book for the young.

VAN DOREN: I wonder if the young these days actually do like it as much as children used to like it.

RUSSELL: My experience with them is they don't, and I think this is because there are so many more children's books now and because, when I

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was young, it was the only children's book that hadn't got a moral. We all got very tired of the morals in books.

VAN DOREN: This very book makes fun of books that have morals, doesn't it? Remember, the Queen is always going about saying: "The moral of this is--" and then some preposterous statement comes out such as "Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves."

PORTER: But don't you think, too, that it is because children really seem to be much more realistic; that is, they do like a graphic, factual kind of story? Even the fantasies written for children now are nearly always something grotesque and not deep, something that doesn't touch their emotions.

Like the comic papers, you know. And then their stories all seem to be about quite ordinary living children. Rather extraordinary but not fabulous adventures occur, which might very well occur to any child.

VAN DOREN: To me that is highly unfortunate. I am aware of the truth of what you say, that children prefer these days, or at any rate are assumed to prefer, matter-of-fact stories. But every now and then a story which is not matter-of-fact has a great success among children, such as the books about Mary Poppins. Have you read those?

PORTER: Yes. Well I would never know whether the children really like that sort of thing or not. Perhaps like grown-ups, they take what is given them because they aren't given anything better.

VAN DOREN: Do we really mean that Alice in Wonderland has declined as a children's book because of its cruelty?

RUSSELL: Partly, I think, but partly also from competition with other books. Grown-ups always tend to think of children with a certain contempt as dear little things, and when a child feels that element in a book he resents it. If he can get a book that doesn't regard him as a dear little thing he's very pleased. But grown-ups will always buy that sort of book and give it to children unless the children educate them.

VAN DOREN: Are you implying, Mr. Russell, that Alice in Wonderland assumes children to be dear little things? Alice is pretty well kicked around, isn't she? And she's rudely treated, she's interrupted, she's rebuffed .

RUSSELL: Yes, but she's always treated rather as a figure of fun, and nobody quite likes to be treated that way.

VAN DOREN: Yes, she is assumed to be absurd because she has a little habit of talking to herself, reasoning with herself, holding conversations with herself, because she remembers her homework and tries to bring that into this new world she finds herself in. Remember when she meets the mouse. She doesn't know how to address the mouse except by saying "O Mouse", because she had learned the vocative case in Latin.

RUSSELL: All that, I think, is a little absurd, because as a matter of fact

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she's an extremely Victorian child and very different from most modern children that I know, and certainly no modern child would think of saying "O Mouse" It wouldn't occur to it. All the lessons that she has had at home are different lessons from those the children have now.

VAN DOREN: That is true. And I'm admitting that occasionally, perhaps regularly, she is treated like a little prig, a little girl who has no ability whatever to imagine other experiences than those she has had. But I suppose the interest of the book to lie very largely there, either for children or for adults. It is a rebuke to those who cannot imagine as possible other experience than that which they have had.

PORTER: You've spoken of the children being fed so much realism today; never being given any experience beyond something that might

possibly happen to them.

VAN DOREN: Yes. Now, for instance, to me a very salutary answer to the proverbial question of a child's "Why?" is the answer once given to Alice: "Why not?"--without any explanation at all. It seems to me one learns a great deal by that.

RUSSELL: May I come back to what I said a moment ago, that this book ought to be labeled "For Adults Only"? What you're recommending is a very suitable education for adults, but much too difficult for children. The whole book is much too difficult for the young. It raises metaphysical points, very interesting logical points, that are good for the older ponderer, but for the young produce only confusion.

VAN DOREN: Of course Alice was always confused. But you imply, Mr. Russell, that adults, these days or perhaps any day, stand in need of metaphysical instruction and logical sanitation.

RUSSELL: I'm professionally bound to think so.

VAN DOREN: I agree with you heartily, as a matter of fact. Does the book still seem to you of interest on that level?

RUSSELL: It provides, of course, the sort of things a philosophical lecturer can bring in when he wants to seem light. It is very useful to a philosophical lecturer who wants to liven up his stuff; it is full of philosophical jokes which are quite good for philosophical students. But I think you oughtn't to read the book before you're fifteen.

PORTER: I wonder. Probably that's true. You were talking about the sentimental Victorian attitude toward children as dear little things. I think Lewis Carroll quite definitely made a bow in the direction of the dear-little-creature attitude in his poems of dedication to Alice and the other children. In the story I think he said :what he really believed and what he really meant-and it was pretty grim!

VAN DOREN: Neither one of you would agree with me, perhaps, that the best children's book is always a book that should be labeled "For Adults Only". My own experience with children, my own children

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included, is that they really enjoy most those books which they don't wholly understand, which leave them perhaps only slightly bewildered, but nevertheless bewildered.

RUSSELL: Well, I think the young should read some books that adults think of as for adults only, but that's because the adults are always wrong about it. The books the adults think suitable for the young are certainly not.

VAN DOREN: I'm glad to hear you say that.

PORTER: I've always believed that children should read adult literature, should read far beyond their years, and perhaps not read anything that was cold-bloodedly written for them.

VAN DOREN: Yes, because it has never been clear enough that adults do know what children are like; they're always merely assuming that they know what they're like. I quite agree with you that when they're most sure they're most likely to be wrong. Mr. Russell, I want to come back to that question of the value of the book, if any, on the metaphysical and mathematical level. I was interested in your saying that philosophers

quoted it only when they wanted to introduce a light touch. Now, that after all wouldn't be saying much for the book, would it? Or would it?

RUSSELL: Yes, I think most of the most instructive things are jokes. Quite a number of important things have originated as jokes because if you can put it in that form it isn't so painful. Now, for instance, when they discuss whether they're all parts of the Red King's dream and will cease to exist if the Red King wakes—

VAN DOREN: This is in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

RUSSELL: Yes, it is. Well, that is a very instructive discussion from a philosophical point of view. But if it were not put humorously, we should find it too painful.

VAN DOREN: But you really mean that it is instructive?

RUSSELL: I think it is worth considering, yes.

VAN DOREN: It is more than just an illustration of a point? It contains a point of its own?

RUSSELL: Yes. I think he was very good at inventing puzzles in pure logic. When he was quite an old man, he invented two puzzles which he published in a learned periodical, *Mind*, to which he didn't provide answers. And the providing of answers was a job, at least so I found it.

VAN DOREN: Do you remember either of those puzzles?

RUSSELL: I remember one of them very well. A boy is going with his two uncles, and one of the uncles says he's going to be shaved, and he's going to a shop that is kept by Allen, Brown, and Carr. And he says: "I shall get shaved by Allen." And the other uncle says: "How do you know Allen will be in?" and he says: "Oh I can prove it by logic." "Nonsense" says the man. "How can you do that?" "Well", he says, "you know there

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has to be always one man to mind the shop, so if Allen is out, then, if Brown is out, Carr will be in. But Brown has lately been ill, and so he can't go out alone, and he's quarrelled with Allen, so he only goes out with Carr. So if Brown is out, Carr is out. Now if Allen goes out, if Brown is out, Carr is out, and if Brown is out Carr is in. That's impossible, so Allen can never go out."

VAN DOREN: That sound like a syllogism, doesn't it?

RUSSELL: Of course it's a fallacy, but showing up the fallacy is difficult.

PORTER: A lovely illustration of all this extraordinary, oblique, fallacious logic that was a trap for Alice all the way through two books.

VAN DOREN: There are many outrageous syllogisms here, such as this in skeleton form: "Alice, you like eggs; serpents like eggs, therefore you are a serpent." And there is another form of logical fun which seems to me important here; I think you would call it a conversion, would you not? That is to say, Lewis Carroll was constantly playing with a subject and predicate converted. Alice is asked why she doesn't say what she means. And she says: "Well, at least I always mean what I say." So she converts the terms cats and rats. Do cats eat rats? Perhaps rats eat cats. Which is true? And she finally forgets which is the important question to ask. She says she has often seen a cat without a grin, but never a grin without a cat. I'm not at all sure that that doesn't lead us to a conversion which it is possible to make on the title of the book. The title of the book

is *Alice in Wonderland*. Possibly it should be *Wonderland in Alice*, because Alice is constantly in a state of wonder at something which, in this particular world where she is, she shouldn't wonder at at all. For instance, she eats a piece of cake—after twenty or thirty pages—and she suddenly says to herself: "Isn't it strange that I don't get any bigger from eating this cake?" Lewis Carroll very gravely remarks: "That is what usually happens when you eat cake." She is never able to adjust herself; she is never able to remember the relations which exist in this new life.

RUSSELL: That is quite true, but I still think there is a great deal in his books that is meant to be suitable to the young and isn't. Like when they say "threaten a snark with a railway-share". No child has the vaguest idea of what that means.

VAN DOREN: But again I wonder if children don't like to read books— if they don't today, that's all there is to it, but my own experience as a child, and my experience of children these days, is that they often do— which they don't totally understand. They come to a railway-share. Well, they want to know what it is, and find out; or they develop in their mind some grotesque notion of what it is, which is quite charming. Students in colleges like best on the whole those lectures which, as we say, are a little over their heads.

RUSSELL: That is perfectly true, but then what puzzles them ought to

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be something serious that when they understand it they will see to be serious. It ought not to be a mere joke.

VAN DOREN: But, if, as you say, these jokes are oftentimes cloaks for philosophical, even metaphysical, points, then the book at bottom is serious. I think I've been trying to say that the book is at bottom quite serious and quite edifying. Alice is always learning—her experience is less than it might be—she is always learning that something that she has supposed to be grotesque is not, as a matter of fact, grotesque. She says to the caterpillar once, you remember, on the mushroom: "It's really dreadful always to be changing one's shape." He says: "It isn't dreadful at all." And we immediately remember that the caterpillar changes his shape at least three times in his life.

PORTER: And of course she really changes hers too, not into an entirely different form, not from one thing to another, but she's changing and growing all the time; she's not the same person today that she was yesterday by any means. But she doesn't understand that.

VAN DOREN: As when she is carrying the Duchess' baby. For a while she things the baby is ugly because it has a nose like a pig. Then when she determines that the baby is a pig, she thinks the nose is quite beautiful.

PORTER: The nose is very becoming, and she's glad it's a handsome pig. But I was thinking her confusion was due to the setting aside of all the logic of experience. Because there is a certain sort of progression of experience that I think we can depend upon a little, and this is all removed, you see, from her when she falls into this Wonderland. There isn't anything that she can refer to as a certainty. And then there's another thing that's very important: Alice's state of mind is a fine example

of the terrific sense of uncertainty and insecurity of childhood trying to understand an adult world in which very little provision is made for the young. This was true in those days much more than now. I think now perhaps that the family plans are made a little bit too much around the child.

VAN DOREN: I think so myself.

PORTER: But Alice was at a terrible disadvantage, struggling with an adult, alien, and apparently hostile world, which had set traps for her, or so it appeared, purposely to trip her up.

RUSSELL: Perhaps that is why the book was better liked then than now. That particular kind of bafflement was one to which children were accustomed, and it didn't strike them as it does now. But now, I think, the modern child is simply bewildered by all this and feels: oh, this is horrid! At least some do.

VAN DOREN: I wonder which is the better procedure for the human race—to endeavour to make children understand adults or to endeavour to make adults understand children.

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PORTER: Do you know, I think one of the great troubles is that too many persons are going around painfully trying too hard to understand. I wish we could relax a little.

RUSSELL: I quite agree. If you could take children more naturally and spontaneously and not bother so much about child psychology, it would be very much better I think.

VAN DOREN: Certainly. And likewise children should be relieved of the necessity of understanding adult psychology.

PORTER: Well, I think one of the most sinister things I ever heard was a little boy, a small child about four years old, weeping bitterly by himself. His parents found him and tried to discover what had happened to him. He wept for a while and finally he blurted out: "Oh. I do want to be happy."

VAN DOREN: Mr. Russell, I should like to ask you, because of your own distinction in the field of logic and mathematics, whether Carroll is thought actually to have any importance in that field today.

RUSSELL: His works were just what you would expect: comparatively good at producing puzzles and very ingenious and rather pleasant, but not important. For instance, he produced a book of formal logic which is much pleasanter than most because, instead of saying things like "all men are mortal", which is very dull, it says, things like "most hungry crocodiles are disagreeable", which is amusing, and that makes the subject more agreeable. Then he wrote a book of geometry which is pleasant in a way, but not important. None of his work was important. The best work he ever did in that line was the two puzzles that I spoke of.

VAN DOREN: And are those better in that line than anything in either *Alice in Wonderland* or *Through the Looking-Glass*—I mean to say, considered as contributions?

RUSSELL: Oh, certainly, because there is nothing in *Alice in Wonderland* or *Through the Looking-Glass* that could conceivably be thought a contribution. They offer only pleasant illustrations for those who don't want to

be thought too heavy.

VAN DOREN: But for children perhaps? I mean, could one seriously say that a child might learn a little bit to be logical from reading these books?

RUSSELL: I shouldn't have thought so.

VAN DOREN: That was a very heavy question, and you should have rebuked me for it. But the famous error that is made (I don't know whether this is a logical error or not) when it is said that butter should not have been used in the works of a watch and the answer is "but it was the best butter"—is that amusing to a child?

PORTER: That was frightfully amusing. That was funny always.

VAN DOREN: Or the demonstration that, since a dog is not mad because when he is happy he wags his tail and when he is unhappy he

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growls with his throat, therefore a cat which when it is happy moves its tail and growls is mad.

PORTER: I think we understood that all very well, don't you?

RUSSELL: How about the treacle well?

PORTER: Yes, I liked the treacle well.

RUSSELL: Do you remember, they drew treacle out of the treacle well?

"But I don't understand", said Alice, "they were in the well." "So they were", said the dormouse, "well in."

PORTER: That was funny, too.

VAN DOREN: They were drawing treacle from the well, and the dormouse explains: "Well, we were just learning to draw; we didn't draw very well." And suddenly they're talking about drawing pictures—drawing pictures of things the names of which begin with the letter M. "Why with the letter M?" "Why not?"

PORTER: But do you remember the lessons they had? Was it the eel, or some underseas creature, who had lessons in drawling and stretching and fainting in coils? You know, we were never told how to translate that and we didn't need to. We thought those tricks were funny in themselves.

VAN DOREN: And the exercises in reeling and writhing.

PORTER: We didn't get on to that for a long time.

RUSSELL: I found the only thing that my boy really liked, my small boy, was the poem about Father William. He looked at me with a grave face and said: "Father William was very clever although he was old."

VAN DOREN: How old is the boy, by the way?

RUSSELL: Four and a half.

VAN DOREN: A shrewd remark. Now we have not referred often enough in our conversation to the presence in this book of some very famous poems which are of course parodies. I think the poem about Father William is the most interesting. Would you agree?

RUSSELL: I agree—yes.

VAN DOREN: Miss Porter, would you like to read that?

PORTER: I'll swing along as we used to when we read it as children.

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"You are old, Father William", the young man said,

"And your hair has become very white;

And yet you incessantly stand on your head—  
Do you think, at your age it is right?"

"In my youth", Father William replied to his son,  
"I feared it might injure the brain;  
But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,  
Why, I do it again and again."

"You are old", said the youth, "as I mentioned before,  
And have grown most uncommonly fat;  
Yet you turned a back somersault in at the door—  
Pray, what is the reason of that?"

"In my youth", said the sage, as he shook his grey locks,  
"I kept all my limbs very supple  
By the use of this ointment— one shilling the box,—  
Allow me to sell you a couple?"

"You are old", said the youth, "and your jaws are too weak  
For anything tougher than suet.  
Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak—  
Pray, how did you manage to do it?"

"In my youth", said his father, "I took to the law,  
And argued each case with my wife;  
And the muscular strength which it gave to my jaw  
Has lasted the rest of my life."

"You are old", said the youth, "one would hardly suppose  
That your eye was as steady as ever;  
Yet you balanced an eel on the end of your nose—  
What made you so awfully clever?"

"I've answered three questions, and that is enough",  
Said his father. "Don't give yourself airs!  
Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?  
Be off, or I'll kick you downstairs!"