



Two Children Tell: The Unicorn, the Red King and Rebecca

Article Author:

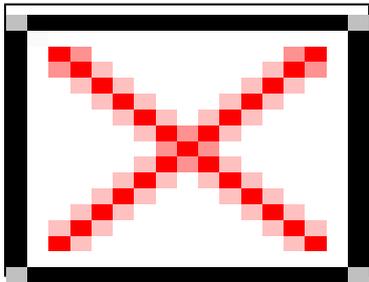
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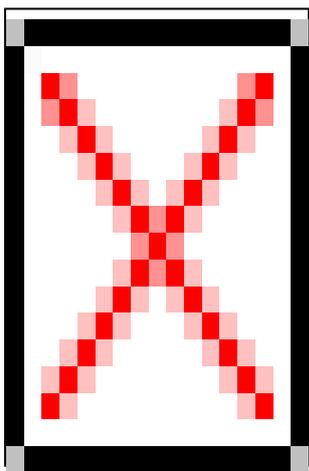
Byline:

Virginia Lowe observes her daughter's relationship with Alice

In the latest of her regular series describing children's early responses to stories and language, Virginia Lowe observes her daughter's relationship with Alice.



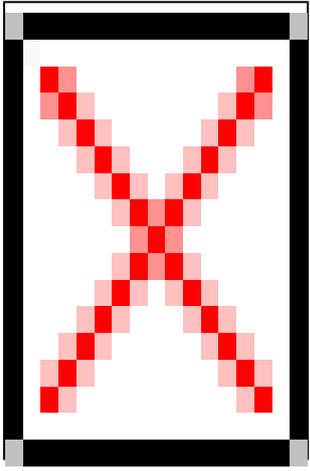
"Sarah, I don't believe in you" declared Rebecca at six years one month (6y1m). Her friend laughed, and Rebecca tried out another philosophical idea from Carroll: "Sarah, wouldn't it be funny if we were all in a dream? just in somebody's dream?" Sarah, rather wisely, declined to speculate. That week we were reading **Through the Looking Glass**, with the Unicorn telling Alice "If you believe in me, I'll believe in you" and Tweedledee declaring Alice is just part of the Red King's dream.



It is often said that children will find the Alice stories boring or even frightening, with their illogical nonsense and with so much which does not relate to their own lives. On the other hand, **Alice** is one of the characters that today's children are sure to meet in some genre? cartoon, film, graphic version, app. She is part of our culture. And the philosophical concepts in the books are still as relevant as they were to Victorian children.

Rebecca first met **Alice** in a Disney Little Golden Book version. I knew nothing of this until at 3y9m she came upon the picture of a butterfly sitting on some butter in an alphabet book. "It's a bread-and-butterfly!" she exclaimed, and told me that Sarah had a book of it. And yes, it was **Alice in Wonderland**.

We began reading the two **Alice** books as a serial when Rebecca was 6y0m, having attended both a pantomime



and a puppet performance, and pored over Tenniel's pictures in preparation. She made very little comment, even to the wordplay that had amused her in other contexts. But towards the end (6y1m), she began to play with the philosophy. 'Wouldn't it be funny if we were all just in a dream?' she commented. 'Like Alice being in the Red King's dream?' I asked, and she agreed it was what she had in mind. Later the same week she tried the idea on Sarah, and 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.

We finished the book the next day. The dream concept was interacting with religious instruction from school (she not having encountered religion before). It led to a long and complex discussion at 6y2m, which she began with 'What is God?'. We talked about various definitions, including her idea that God stood on the horizon but was so big, and the horizon so far away, that we couldn't see him. Then she had another idea, a logical progression from her previous steps: 'Perhaps we're just in God's dream!' I told her that lots of people do believe this, more or less. 'What would happen if we were part of God's dream?' she wanted to know, and I explained that there would be no way you could tell if you were or not.

Just after Easter (6y3m) she announced, 'I'll tell you three things I don't believe in - Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny'. This led conveniently into my homily about not spoiling it for people who did believe. On another day she declared, 'I don't believe in God,' but there was no time to follow that statement up.

She was 6y4m before her philosophical explorations continued, in the kitchen, getting ready for school.

R: I don't believe in people.

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

R: 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.

Surprised and a little disturbed, I remarked that this idea - solipsism - occurred to everyone at some time. That night I invited her to sleep with me - an occasional treat - and continued the conversation, suggesting that if it worried her she could think loving and happy thoughts, about how sweet Nicky was when he was being funny, for instance. This seemed to help, as she snuggled down saying she liked talking to me.

Rebecca reread **Alice** at 11y5m and dipped into it at other times as well. When she moved to a flat at nineteen, she declared that there were four books no home should be without - a dictionary, a thesaurus, **Pooh** (Milne), and **Alice** and ransacked second-hand bookshops for good copies. Carroll's dream was an essential part of her life.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of **Create a Kids' Book**, a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. See www.createakidsbook.com.au [3] for further details. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978

0 415 39724 7, £29.99 pbk).

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: Macmillan Classics Edition, Lewis Carroll, Macmillan, 978-1447273080, £10.99 hbk

Through the Looking Glass: Macmillan Classics Edition, Lewis Carroll, Macmillan, 978-1447273097, £10.99 hbk

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