



Alice in Wonderland

Tony Watkins

Mad world

Author: Tony Watkins

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Film title: Alice in Wonderland

Director: Tim Burton

Screenplay: Linda Woolverton, based on the novels by Lewis Carroll

Starring: Mia Wasikowska, Johnny Depp, Anne Hathaway, Helena Bonham Carter

Distributor: Walt Disney Pictures

Cinema Release Date: 5 March 2010

Certificate: PG – Contains moderate fantasy violence

[Image]

Yet another film foray into Wonderland demonstrates the abiding charm of Lewis Carroll's Alice stories. But Tim Burton's surreal fantasy isn't just a retread of the much-loved children's story, however; it picks up Alice's story several years on. Now 19, Alice (played by relatively unknown Australian actress Mia Wasikowska) doesn't know what to do when someone proposes to her. She runs off without answering, then spots a curious rabbit and soon tumbles after it down a hole.

Alice has been this way before, of course, but she has no memory of it. The bottle and cake again play havoc with her size, but soon she finds herself in a fantastical world inhabited by the bizarre characters we know so well.

It's curious that Carroll's mad tales should have become as embedded in our culture to the extent they have. The Cheshire Cat, the Mad Hatter and

the White Queen's statement about believing '*six impossible things before breakfast*' are all very familiar. References to the stories crop up again and again, even in films like *The Matrix*.

Maybe this is just because it is all such cheerful nonsense. Maybe it's thanks to Disney's much-loved animation. Or maybe there's something more going on under the surface. Readers have often wondered whether there really is any point or moral to Carroll's fanciful tales, just as Alice does when talking to the Duchess. But the Duchess assures her that, '*Every thing's got a moral, if only you can find it.*'

Hidden meanings

Lewis Carroll was the pseudonym of Rev Charles Dodgson, an Oxford mathematician, so it's not surprising that if you study the conversations within the books, you discover that there are many hidden meanings. As well as telling stories, Carroll was clearly having fun with ideas from mathematics, logic, languages, history and politics.

Even more importantly, there are ideas from philosophy and theology about such fundamental matters as existence, meaning, knowledge, morality, justice and, perhaps above all, identity. '*Who in the world am I?*' asks Alice. '*Ah, that's the great puzzle!*'

These kinds of question are all very well, but the books themselves are rather disjointed and episodic. So Tim Burton felt he needed to create a film that had a much stronger sense of being a unified story with a greater emotional drive. '*I've never seen a version I've really liked,*' he says. '*It's always been about a passive little girl wandering around a series of adventures with weird characters. There's never any kind of gravity to it.*'

Having forgotten her childhood experiences, Burton's Alice is as unsure of herself and her place in the real world as she is in Wonderland – or Underland, as it's now known. It's a dark, turbulent place, suffering under the harsh rule of the Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter).

It's inevitable that film versions of the Alice stories ignore many of the hidden meanings from the

books. This one is no exception, but it does retain more of the depth than its predecessors. And by telling the story of Alice's return to Wonderland as a young adult, Tim Burton is able to introduce some significant new elements.

A mad world

The most important new dimension is that Alice is no longer passive, merely reacting to everything that happens. Now she has a clearly defined goal: to fight against the Red Queen's oppression. In the process, she grows in self-confidence, discovering who she really is and what she wants in life.

The Mad Hatter (Johnny Depp) tells Alice that Wonderland is *'Like no place on Earth – a land full of wonder, mystery, and danger. Some say to survive it, you need to be as mad as a hatter.'*

But in some respects, Wonderland is just like the world we live in. It is a place of *'wonder, mystery and danger'*, and there are times when it feels completely mad and out-of-kilter. And we find ourselves longing for a world which makes sense, a world of justice and order. Many people don't recognise the yearning in the human heart for what it is, a hunger for home – a home with God in the new heavens and new earth. People often dismiss the idea as impossible. But as Alice realises, that doesn't make it any less real.

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