



Book Club Set #58

Alice I Have Been

By Melanie Benjamin

About the Author

Melanie Benjamin is the pen name of American writer, Melanie Hauser (nee Miller). Born in Indianapolis, Indiana, Melanie is one of three children. Her brother Michael Miller is a published non-fiction author and musician. Melanie attended Indiana University—Purdue University at Indianapolis then married Dennis Hauser in 1988; they presently reside in the Chicago, Illinois area with their two sons.

As Melanie Hauser, she published short stories in the In Posse Review and The Adirondack Review. Her short story "Prodigy on Ice" won the 2001 "Now Hear This" short story competition that was part of a WBEZ (Chicago Public Radio) program called Stories on Stage, where short stories were performed and broadcast.

When Melanie sold her first of two contemporary novels, she had to add Lynne to her name (Melanie Lynne Hauser) to distinguish her from the published sports journalist Melanie Hauser.

The first of Melanie's contemporary novels, Confessions of Super Mom was published in 2005; the sequel Super Mom Saves the World came out in 2007. In addition to her two contemporary novels, Melanie also contributed an essay to the anthology IT'S A BOY and maintained a popular mom blog called The Refrigerator Door.

Under the pen name Melanie Benjamin (a combination of her first name and her son's first name), she shifted genres to historical fiction. Her third novel, Alice I Have Been, was inspired by Alice Liddell Hargreaves's life (the real-life Alice of Alice in Wonderland). Published in 2010, Alice I Have Been was a national bestseller and reached the extended list of The New York Times Best Seller list.

In 2011, Benjamin fictionalized another historical female. Her novel The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb focuses on the life of Lavinia Warren Bump, a proportionate dwarf featured in P.T. Barnum's shows.

Her third fictionalized biography, The Aviator's Wife, was released in 2013 and centers on Anne Morrow Lindbergh, wife of famed aviator, Charles Lindberg.

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About the Book

Part love story, part literary mystery, Melanie Benjamin's spellbinding historical novel leads readers on an unforgettable journey down the rabbit hole, to tell the story of a woman whose own life became the stuff of legend.

Her name is Alice Liddell Hargreaves, but to the world she'll always be known simply as "Alice," the girl who followed the White Rabbit into a wonderland of Mad Hatters, Queens of Hearts, and Cheshire Cats. Now, nearing her eighty-first birthday, she looks back on a life of intense passion, great privilege, and greater tragedy. First as a young woman, then as a wife, mother, and widow, she'll experience adventures the likes of which not even her fictional counterpart could have imagined.

Yet from glittering balls and royal romances to a world plunged into war, she'll always be the same determined, undaunted Alice who, at ten years old, urged a shy, stuttering Oxford professor to write down one of his fanciful stories, thus changing her life forever.

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Discussion Questions

1. What social forces motivate each of the characters to deny Dodgson's inappropriate attention to Alice?
2. Alice became famous through no fault of her own. Can you come up with a modern day version of Alice? How do their lives compare?
3. Alice refuses to read *Alice in Wonderland* until she is well into her eighties. Why do you think she avoids reading the story she inspired?
4. The relationships between Alice and her sisters Ina and Edith range from rivalry to a life-long bond. What effects do these have on Alice, and what are the consequences?
5. What part of the book speaks to you and your experiences in life?
6. How does Benjamin take both the reader and Alice from ignorance and denial to the self-realization of her complicity in the ruptured friendship with Rev. Dodgson? Is this believable?
7. While Alice's sister lies dying, Mama asks Alice "Why couldn't it be you? You've never brought me anything but pain, while she has brought me nothing but joy." What kind of effect do you think this has on Alice for the rest of her life? Did it affect the way Alice thought of her own children?
8. The photos Lewis Carroll (or the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) took of Alice Liddell capture a look that can be described as wise beyond her years—what do you think is behind that look?
9. How much did the Victorian setting play a role in this book?
10. Before reading Benjamin's novel, had you already read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*? If so, does it make you want to read it again? Why or why not?
11. What do you think of an author writing a biographical novel using only notes and references and filling in the gaps with intelligent supposition?

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Author Interview

Melanie Benjamin explains the back-story to her first novel, *Alice I Have Been*.

Several years ago, while wandering the halls of the Art Institute of Chicago, I stumbled upon an interesting exhibition: Dreaming in Pictures: The Photography of Lewis Carroll. I knew Lewis Carroll only by his classic story Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. I suppose I had always pictured him as some benign, fatherly figure - if I pictured him at all.

Imagine my surprise, then, to discover that the photography of Lewis Carroll (or the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, his real name) consisted primarily of images of - young girls. Rather provocatively posed young girls.

Even for the Victorians, this collection of images seemed a little unsettling. And even among these fascinating images, one photograph in particular stood out. It was a picture of a child clad in scanty rags, showing just enough skin to make me uncomfortable. But it was the eyes that haunted me; dark, glittering, they were wise, worldly, almost defiant. They were the eyes of a woman.

The caption said she was actually seven-year-old Alice Liddell, the privileged daughter of Dean Liddell of Christ Church, Oxford, where Dodgson taught mathematics; she was also the little girl who inspired the classic Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. I wondered what happened to her, after she grew up. I wondered what happened between the two of them to result in such a startling photograph. I thought it might make an interesting story. Then I went home and promptly forgot about it. Four years later, my friend Nic was visiting me from Australia, and I took her to the Art Institute. As we sat having coffee, I told her about that earlier exhibit, remembering how I'd thought it might make a good story.

"Write it," she said.

"But I'm working on something else."

"No. This is what you should write. Write it."

"Well, maybe."

The next morning at breakfast, Nic was a little wild-eyed; she had stayed up all night researching Charles Dodgson and Alice Liddell, and proceeded to tell me the tale:

In 1862, Charles Dodgson told ten-year-old Alice and her two sisters the story of a little girl who fell down a rabbit hole. Unusually - for he had told the three little girls many stories - Alice begged him to write this one down.

Dodgson told the girls these stories because he had rather an odd, intense friendship with them; he lived next door to the Deanery, their home as the family of the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford. In 1863, after years of this friendship, something happened that resulted in a terminal break in their relations; at the time Alice was eleven and he thirty-one. Soon after this, her mother burned all correspondence between the two. After his death, his relatives apparently cut out the pages of his diary that would have covered this period. Neither Alice nor her family ever talked publicly about Dodgson again, except late in her life after she was forced to sell her original handwritten copy of Alice in order to save her beloved home. It was only then that she seemed able to embrace her role in the creation of this timeless classic.

My friend was correct. This was the story I had to write. I'm no historian, no scholar of Lewis Carroll; there are plenty of those, and this is not his story. I'm a novelist, and this is Alice's story. As I dug for further details, I discovered that Alice Liddell's childhood had been somewhat documented (with the exception of all that missing correspondence), and even fictionalized. There had been a novel, in 2001, by Katie Roiphe called *Still She Haunts Me*, about the years leading up to the break between Dodgson and Alice; also a 1985 film, *Dreamchild*, that dealt, somewhat fantastically, with the same period of time. Also two slim biographies, one a children's book, the other long out of print. But no one told the story entirely from Alice's point of view, and her later years were always glossed over or omitted entirely.

Yet these were the years that most intrigued me; as I continued my research, I found out she may have had a broken romance with Prince Leopold of England but ended up marrying another man (while wearing a diamond brooch from the Prince on her wedding dress); as a mother, she suffered heartbreak during World War I; widowed, she almost descended into anonymous, genteel poverty; finally, she enjoyed triumph and fame just before she died.

Dodgson, meanwhile, went on to publish the Alice books - and, of course, photograph many little girls - but it was as if he was always searching for a replacement for his original "child friend." He was heartbreakingly unable to reconcile the adult Alice with the child he had loved when they met, once more, near the end of his life.

This was the story, then, that I had to write: Alice's adventures after she left Wonderland. And it appeared to me that it all came down to what happened between man and child one seemingly lovely summer afternoon, before this mysterious break. It must always be remembered that this is a work of fiction, not biography. I did not alter known facts about Alice's life, with the exception of the last photograph, when she was a young woman, taken by Dodgson; in reality, this occurred when Alice was eighteen,

prior to Prince Leopold's time at Oxford. Still, I strove to capture what I felt must have been the emotional impact of that moment, whether it occurred when she was eighteen or twenty-three. I sometimes leaned on the side of documented gossip and speculation - for example, there are some who believe Prince Leopold was actually interested in Alice's sister Edith. I couldn't ignore the fact, however, that Alice really did wear the brooch he gave her on her wedding dress. And that the Prince named his first daughter Alice, while she named her second son Leopold.

Alice did, indeed, marry a man named Reginald Hargreaves, and lived the rest of her life on a country estate called Cuffnells, which, sadly, has since been torn down. Near the end of her life she did travel to Columbia University in New York, where she received an honorary doctorate and met another figure from children's literature, Peter Llewelyn-Davies, who was immortalized as Peter Pan, but who later in life committed suicide. The greatest liberty I have taken is in depicting Alice Liddell's relationship with John Ruskin, the eminent art and social critic of the Victorian age. While Ruskin's circumstances are historically accurate - his scandalous marriage, his tragic relationship with a young girl, Rose La Touche - I deliberately made him a more important figure in Alice's life than he probably was. Again, there is some fact on which to base this. It's obvious he and Alice knew each other socially during his years as the Slade Professor of Art at Oxford. He gave her and her sisters art lessons. And he himself described more than one occasion when he was bewitched by the young Alice in his autobiography, *Praeterita*.

Ah, but what about that break? What really happened that summer afternoon to lead to such a permanent fracture between Dodgson and Alice?

This was my greatest gift, as a novelist. Because no one - not Alice, not Dodgson, not her mother, not her sisters - ever publicly spoke of it, except for a tantalizingly vague reference in a letter to Alice from her sister Ina, near the end of their lives. There were rumors, of course, for Oxford was a great place for gossip. But that is one major event in her life - perhaps the most important event - that remains, even today, pure speculation. However, the most important fact that endures is a piece of fiction. A slim volume, a classic of literature still today - *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. That is what remains; that is, I think, what Alice herself would have hoped remained.

Melanie Benjamin, 2011

Retrieved from:

https://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/1801/melanie-benjamin

Other Links and Resources

Quotes from Alice in Wonderland: <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2933712-alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland>

The World of Alice (about the Alice books, Lewis Carroll, The Victorian Era, and The Great War): <https://melaniebenjamin.com/world-of-alice.php#auction>

Alice in Wonderland classic trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PA-h3-0wheo>

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DATE: _____

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BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: