

(Un)Surprisingly Natural: A Response to Angelika Zirker*

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Surprise is an integral part of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, and Angelika Zirker's analysis of "what is surprising to [Alice] and what is not" (19) is an insightful one. After all, even the title of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* contains a popular synonym for surprise: wonder. Alice constantly wonders at the strange worlds she encounters and then wonders at her own wonder, or lack thereof. As Zirker points out, she is curious about her surroundings, but also about herself; she wants to understand her own reactions as well as the occasions that prompt them (21-22). Critics have long noticed Alice's interest in rational observation and self-observation, and also in the tension Carroll sets up between this trait and the fantastic (and endlessly surprising) worlds of *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass Country*. In 1935, William Empson characterized Alice as "the most reasonable and responsible person in the book," while remarking on Carroll's ambivalence about those perhaps-too-eminently-respectable traits (362). Alice's attempts to discover logical, rational reasons for her behavior and surroundings—and the ways in which *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass Country* often frustrate these attempts—have intrigued a variety of Carroll scholars from many different ideological backgrounds, including Donald Rackin, Kathleen Blake, Daniel Bivona, and Ann Lawson Lucas.

In this context, Zirker's concept of "surprising unsurprise," which "add[s] a note of unexpectedness to the expected" and vice versa, is very useful because it seems to be the conceptual balance that Alice

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prefers and that Carroll endorses for his implied readers (29; 21). Alice delights in surprising or unexpected things; her first reaction to seeing a talking rabbit with a waistcoat and watch is to follow it. She finds the White Rabbit much more intriguing than her sister's book, and the alacrity with which Carroll allows her to escape into Wonderland suggests that he agrees. At the same time, however, Alice has "an abiding interest in rules" of reason and behavior, and in their application to the new worlds she is exploring (Blake 109). She may become frustrated and unhappy when her curiosity is not satisfied, but she often becomes openly angry if she believes other characters are being unreasonable or behaving incorrectly, particularly if their behavior puts her at a disadvantage. Her moments of most intense anger are reserved for the Queen of Hearts and the Red Queen, who completely disregard what Alice considers the proper rules of justice and dinner parties. Alice is much more comfortable in situations that combine surprise with familiarity and disorder with order. She thus accepts the White Knight rather easily. He is surprising, to be sure—a knight who cannot ride a horse, carries a mouse-trap on his saddle, and once invented a blotting-paper pudding—but in a larger sense he still behaves as Alice expects a knight would, fighting off challengers, treating her courteously, and escorting her through the forest. This mixture of qualities, along with his kindness, inspire her to like him. Indeed, he is the character that she apparently remembers most vividly from her adventures in Looking-Glass Country. Although he is "strange-looking" and highly eccentric, Alice's later memories place the Knight in a dazzlingly-lit tableaux similar to those in the Pre-Raphaelite paintings that Carroll so admired, incorporating his fantastic nonsense into an established artistic style (*Alice* 181).

The novels' tendency to place potentially nonsensical, surprising incidents within familiar conceptual frameworks also includes their framing devices. The frames soften the adventures' surprises by employing images and poetic conventions that would have been familiar to Carroll's nineteenth-century readers. The prefatory and closing poems rely on "conventional diction, metrics, and syntax of the main

English poetic tradition" practiced by Wordsworth and Tennyson (Madden 362), while the prose descriptions of Alice's above-ground surroundings evoke the pastoral and domestic settings generally associated with proper middle-class Victorian girls. These frames guide readers "into and back out of" the nonsense worlds, allowing them to move from the relatively familiar to the unfamiliar and back again (Madden 365). Thus, while Alice's apparent familiarity with talking-beast tales lessens her surprise at the White Rabbit, *Wonderland's* prefatory poem performs this function for Carroll's implied readers. It relates the origin of the Wonderland tale and places the forthcoming nonsense within a familiar context, that of an indulgent adult telling stories to enthusiastic children. Although the poem is tantalizingly vague about the "wonders wild and new" that Alice will encounter, it does specify that they will include "friendly chat[s] with bird or beast" (3). Like Alice, Carroll's implied readers have already been introduced to the concept of talking animals by the time they encounter the White Rabbit—though the silence of the prefatory poem on the subject of watches and waistcoats ensures that readers will be as surprised as she is when the White Rabbit actually appears.

The closing paragraphs of *Wonderland* replicate this process, repositioning Alice's chaotic adventures within familiar contexts. The narrator reveals that Alice has been dreaming, then concludes with her sister's dream that a grown Alice will delight her own children by retelling her adventures. The peaceful rural setting, the sister's solicitude, the tempting offer of tea (which Alice never managed to get at the Mad Tea-Party) and the final vision of an adult Alice at the center of her own happy family all work to familiarize the fantastic events and reduce the reader's surprise. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, the framing poems and the scenes of Alice in the drawing room with her kittens have a more elegiac tone than their *Wonderland* counterparts, but in spite of the winter setting and references to vanished past pleasures, they also place Alice's adventures within familiar contexts. The scenes of Alice in the drawing room establish a safe, cozy point of departure for her adventures, while the opening and closing poems

promise a story, connect it with readers' presumed memories of *Wonderland*, and express the hope that this tale will be remembered and appreciated in its turn.

At the same time, these framing devices also inject a bit of surprise into the familiar. Alice's waking world may seem ordinary, but Carroll suggests that extraordinary creatures and places can appear on its lawns or in its mirrors, visible to anyone who is willing to imagine them. Although both novels conclude by revealing that Alice has dreamed her adventures, they take dreams seriously and suggest that dreaming and imagination are important to everyday life. In fact, *Through the Looking-Glass* deliberately undermines sharp distinctions between dreaming and waking. At the end of the novel, Alice is still uncertain "'who it was that dreamed it all'" (208); was the Red King in her dream, or was she in his? Carroll's narrator playfully refuses to resolve the question, turning instead to his implied readers and asking, "Which do *you* think it was?" (208). The poem that follows raises another possible answer to Alice's question: life itself might be a dream that confounds easy distinctions between past and present, real and imaginary, sense and nonsense. *Wonderland's* conclusion does not go quite so far, but even it allows Alice's sister to escape into a dream that, though only "half believed," transforms "dull reality" into exciting fantasy (98). Carroll's framing devices, like Alice's adventures, encourage readers to familiarize unfamiliar things, defamiliarize ordinary ones, and enjoy the process.

As Zirker suggests, this mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar ultimately invites us to question the nature of surprise itself. The *Alice* books implicitly ask not only why Alice is surprised, but what it means for one to be surprised in the first place (Zirker 21). Given the characteristics of nonsense as a genre, such philosophical questioning is unsurprising. Nonsense does not abandon familiar structures or situations; instead, it inverts, alters, and plays with them (Stewart 51; 4). It manipulates the categories and conventions normally associated with common sense, "juxtapos[ing] [...] perfectly ordinary but incongruous ideas or objects," literalizing figurative language, "taking

ideas or situations to absurd lengths [...] and using logic as a base for illogical events” (Anderson and Apseloff 5). As a cognitive activity, nonsense allows children to place familiar concepts and idioms into a play world where they can be rearranged and reframed. It encourages audiences to think about what constitutes seemingly commonsensical concepts, such as surprise, to explore how they work in practice (and in absurd situations where common sense breaks down), and to investigate the boundaries between familiar and unfamiliar uses of these concepts (Stewart 200-06; Anderson and Apseloff 61-79). At its most philosophical, nonsense also invites speculation “about the nature of reality and knowing and communication,” inviting audiences to consider how they perceive, construct, and discuss the worlds in which they live (Anderson and Apseloff 82).

Given these characteristics of nonsense, it follows that surprise is not the only concept whose “very notion [...] becomes [...] rather doubtful” in the *Alice* books (Zirker 21). One of these notions strikes me as especially pertinent in light of Zirker’s argument: the question of what is natural. Zirker argues convincingly that Alice’s degree of surprise often depends on whether she thinks the situation is “natural” or not (19). Alice appears to define the natural in terms of the familiar; she “is mostly surprised at herself when she does not recall things or when something does not seem natural, i.e. when something occurs that is not part of the world she is accustomed to, including the world of fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and beast fables” (Zirker 31). Zirker further suggests that Alice’s tendency to conflate the world of fairy tales, rhymes, and fables with the so-called real world is an innately—that is, naturally—childlike tendency (28-31). These two points rely on rather different definitions of nature, however. Alice’s working definition of the natural as something that is “part of the world she is accustomed to” ties it to her cultural and social experience as an upper-middle-class Victorian girl. For her, a natural situation is one that conforms to some aspect of this experience. On the other hand, Zirker also argues—and Carroll himself almost certainly believed—that Alice is able to accept the fantastic because she is a

child, with a “child’s perception of the world” (31).¹ This argument rests on a conception of nature that is far more essentialist than Alice’s working definition; it assumes that children have an affinity for the fantastic that is independent of social and cultural variations. Technically speaking, this is a contradiction in Zirker’s argument, but it reflects the books’ own shifting definitions of what is natural. Like many common terms, “natural” may mean several things, and ordinary usage tends to overlook the differences between them. In everyday conversation, something natural may be something to which one is accustomed, something innate, something that depends on a biological process, such as growth or hunger, or something found in the plant or animal world. Carroll’s nonsense, like nonsense more generally, manipulates these definitions and plays them off against each other in ways that “make apparent [the] paradoxes that common sense smoothes over in everyday life” (Stewart 200). By placing Alice and her expectations in nonsense worlds where her definitions of the natural do not apply or are shown to be logically inconsistent, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* question the nature of nature and of natural behavior. Alice’s adventures reveal limitations that are inherent in her definition of the natural-as-expected but usually remain unacknowledged in ordinary discourse.

Soon after she enters Wonderland, Alice begins to discover that the expectations upon which she bases her idea of the natural are less stable than she supposes. She is not surprised when the bottle marked “DRINK ME” appears in the underground hall; her reading of fairy tales apparently has familiarized her with helpful objects that materialize when needed (Zirker 20). Because the bottle satisfies her predictive notion of expected behavior—what she thinks will happen based on her understanding of events—she remains unsurprised and is willing to drink from it. She does not do so immediately, however, because her experience also includes warnings about the dangers of drinking poisonous liquids. Alice checks the bottle against another common definition of expected behavior, the prescriptive notion of behavior that one is expected to do: she inspects the label to ensure

that it is “*not* marked ‘poison’” (11). Then, after satisfying herself that the bottle meets both these conditions of expected behavior, she accepts it as drinkable and implicitly as part of the natural order of things in Wonderland.

At this point, Alice retains a relatively uncomplicated faith in her expectations and experience; she assumes that they are predictable and universally applicable, even in Wonderland. She is startled when the contents of the bottle cause her to shrink and dismayed when she realizes that she cannot reach the key to the little door, but she is happy to try again by eating the cakes. Her reading of fairy tales has taught her that objects appear for the purpose of helping the protagonist, and her experience with the little bottle has suggested that Wonderland foods cause size changes, so she believes that eating the cakes will help her attain the correct size to get through the little door. Unfortunately for Alice, these assumptions are incorrect. It does not logically follow that one can get through a closed door merely because one is the proper size; furthermore, her expectation that the cakes and bottle will help her attain this goal is based on above-ground experiences that do not hold in Wonderland. As it turns out, the cakes and bottle look like the helpful objects found in fairy tales but do not function like them; they cause changes in size but are completely irrelevant to the door’s operation.

After she eats the cakes, Alice also discovers to her dismay that expectations drawn from experience are context-specific and do not necessarily hold true in different contexts. Carroll exposes the logical flaws in Alice’s thinking by delaying the cakes’ effects; for a few moments, she does not change size at all. The narrator dryly notes that “this is what generally happens when one eats cake,” but Alice, who has gotten “into the way of expecting nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen,” is surprised and disappointed (12). Although she often behaves as if her expectations will remain universal, she actually changes them according to circumstances, and in this case her new-found expectations of what will happen when she eats cake in Wonderland flatly contradict the ones she formed above ground. Carroll

then reveals how quickly experience can alter expectations; just as Alice and readers are lulled into thinking that the cakes will have no effect after all, she starts “opening out like the largest telescope that ever was” (13). After this second sudden size-change, Alice begins to doubt her own identity, wondering “who in the world am I?” (15). Her question indicates a larger problem in her definition of the natural. She would like to assume that her own nature and identity are predictable and constant, but this assumption is logically incompatible with her broader tendency to define the natural in terms of the expected; if expectations change as experiences and contexts do, it follows that the natural, including her own identity, will change as well. This possibility frightens and frustrates Alice. Although she enjoys discovering that familiar worlds might include unfamiliar and exciting things, she is deeply unsettled to discover that supposedly familiar and reliable concepts might be less familiar and more unreliable than she presumes.

This questioning of the-natural-as-the-expected continues during Alice’s encounters with the inhabitants of Wonderland and Looking-Glass Country. The creatures also tend to understand the natural in terms of the expected—but they do so according to their own expectations and experiences, which are not at all the same as Alice’s. They therefore have very different ideas about natural identities and behaviors than she does. The Pigeon is convinced that Alice is a serpent, because all of the long-necked, sinuous creatures it has experienced apparently have been serpents. The talking flowers criticize Alice’s “awkward shape” and her hair, which they call petals; her appearance is as odd to them as their ability to speak is to her (123). Perhaps the clearest illustration of the ways in which different experiences can generate different conceptions of the natural occurs when Alice meets the Unicorn. To the Unicorn, a living, talking child is as fantastic a creature as a living, talking unicorn is to Alice. The Unicorn exclaims that he “always thought [children] were fabulous monsters,” to which Alice responds, “I always thought Unicorns were fabulous

monsters, too!’” (175). Finally, they agree to believe in each other, leaving their respective realities firmly unresolved.

The Unicorn offers a mirror image of Alice’s view of nature, an alternate perspective in which unicorns are perfectly ordinary and children are fabulous monsters. Alice is curious but does not feel threatened in this case, because the Unicorn’s perspective reverses her conceptual framework rather than challenging its basic premises. Her encounters with some of the other creatures do question these premises, however, and thus are more unsettling to her. The Pigeon accuses Alice of being a type of fabulous monster—a serpent that has “‘come wriggling down from the sky’” to eat her eggs—but this encounter challenges Alice’s sense of the natural to a greater extent than her conversation with the Unicorn does (43). Alice is first surprised and then stymied by the Pigeon’s accusation. She knows that she is a little girl and not a serpent, but the Pigeon exploits the internal contradictions in her definition of the natural in ways that make it very difficult for Alice to defend herself. Because Alice defines the natural in terms of what she expects or has experienced, she automatically includes herself as part of that category. The unnatural, on the other hand, is reserved for that which she has not expected or experienced: implicitly, things that are *not* Alice. The fact that her neck is now long enough to become tangled in trees causes this categorization to begin to break down. Although Alice still believes that she should remain in the natural category, her unexpected shape-shifting threatens to place her in the unnatural one and thus to undermine her own sense of identity. Once again, Carroll shows the natural—and Alice’s place in it—to be less stable than she would like to admit.

Alice’s predicament with the Pigeon also reveals some of the tensions between sociocultural and biological understandings of nature. Alice seems to view herself as harmless and tries to engage in a polite conversation with the Pigeon, as she might with an agitated adult in her ordinary world above ground. Still, the Pigeon has some right to be protective of her eggs; Alice is an omnivore who eats eggs. Alice is surprised at the Pigeon’s accusations because she tends to define the

natural in terms of social and cultural expectations rather than biological ones. A talking White Rabbit does not surprise her because she expects him to act like a character in a fairy tale rather than a biological rabbit. As the narrator points out, the idea of a talking rabbit initially “seem[s] quite natural to Alice” (7). It does later “occu[r] to her that she ought to have wondered at this” large departure from biological rabbit behavior, but her default assumption is not to wonder (7). Alice generally considers biological nature only as an afterthought; what she views as natural is constituted by her social world, with its pets, servants, chess games, and fantastic tales. Thus, when the Rabbit mistakes her for his housemaid and orders her to find his gloves, Alice automatically obeys him, as if he were the Victorian gentleman that his waistcoat and watch indicate. Only after she has entered his house does she think “[h]ow queer it seems [...] to be going messages for a rabbit” (27). Still, the appearance of the Rabbit’s house, which is not a rabbit hole but “a neat little house” with two storeys and a brass plate on the door, reassures her that her initial assumption was correct (27). For the moment, Alice’s desire to see herself and her surroundings in social terms rather than biological ones remains unchallenged.

As the episode with the Pigeon suggests, however, Alice has a closer affinity with biological nature—particularly with its competitive, predatory, Darwinian aspects—than she is prepared to admit. What Tennyson famously called “nature, red in tooth and claw” pervades the nonsense worlds of Wonderland and Looking-Glass Country; their creatures are continually eating, being eaten, and competing with each other and with Alice for status and prizes.² She does attain a briefly harmonious rapport with the Fawn in the wood where things have no names, but this is an exception to the normal order in these worlds. Once she and the Fawn emerge from the wood, it becomes alarmed and bounds away, fearing her. It has some reason to do so; as Nina Auerbach has argued, Alice’s persistent interest in food, her frequent references to her pet cats, and her tendency to transform moralistic poems such as Isaac Watts’s into vignettes about crocodiles

and panthers suggests that she is fundamentally a predator (35-38). She does not see herself as such, of course; she criticizes the Walrus and the Carpenter for tricking and eating the Oysters, and she seems dismayed when the Gnat points out that the Bread-and-butter-fly “always” dies if it cannot find its preferred food (134). Still, even her politeness carries predatory overtones. She offends the mice and birds in the Pool of Tears by talking about her cat Dinah and has to correct herself quickly when the Mock Turtle asks her where she has seen whiting; Dinah’s hunting prowess and breaded fish at dinner are harmless topics in Alice’s above-ground world, but become more ominous when her conversational partners are a mouse and a Mock Turtle. To the creatures, with their very different expectations and experiences of the natural, Alice’s attempts at polite conversation are frankly threatening.

Alice’s misguided attempts to be polite inadvertently reveal the extent to which “a serene acceptance of predation” pervades her middle-class social world (Kincaid 93). In her experience, it is perfectly natural for a child to eat eggs and whiting and to keep predators such as cats and dogs as pets; indeed, she seems never to have seen a live whiting. Furthermore, Alice accepts and participates wholeheartedly in social orders based on competition, in which larger, higher-status inhabitants dominate smaller, lower-status ones.³ While in Wonderland, Alice tends to be frightened or deferential to creatures who are larger or of higher status than she, to be polite (if perhaps a bit impatient or annoyed) with those she considers the same size or status as herself, and to dominate smaller creatures or those lower in status. Thus, the puppy terrifies her when she is only three inches tall. On the other hand, although she obeys the Rabbit’s initial order to find his gloves, she becomes much less respectful after she grows too large to fit in his house. She is understandably alarmed at being trapped, but her fear manifests itself as aggression rather than deference; she snatches at the Rabbit when he approaches the window and kicks Bill the Lizard up the chimney. Similarly, Alice is far more willing to challenge the Queen of Hearts after she has grown to her full size and begun to

view the Queen as a playing card rather than a royal tyrant. This pattern continues in the opening chapters of *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which a large Alice forcibly guides the White King's pencil and threatens to pick the daisies. Because the later book is based around a game of chess, it also foregrounds the element of competition; Alice is willing to begin the game as a Pawn, but she very much wants to win so that she can become Queen.

Of course, Carroll's nonsense exaggerates these elements of competition, predation, and hierarchy for comic effect, as when impeccably pious and moralistic poems become verses about crocodiles, panthers, and old men threatening to kick younger ones downstairs. Still, these nonsense worlds imply that Alice and the social world she ordinarily inhabits are not so far removed from a Darwinian view of competitive nature as middle-class Victorian ideals of innocent girlhood and middle-class propriety might suggest. The human and the animal frequently merge in these novels. Animals and birds speak, wear human clothes, and have human characteristics, while the Pigeon confuses Alice with a serpent and the Lion asks whether Alice is "animal—or vegetable—or mineral" (176). The distinctions between animate and inanimate objects also break down here, particularly toward the end of her adventures. Playing cards hold court (and courtroom trials) in Wonderland; the dishware stalks across the table during the Looking-Glass feast, while the White Queen begins to dissolve into the soup. The ease with which social rituals such as croquet, court trials, and dinner parties move from the merely awkward to the openly violent suggests that these rituals occupy the same turbulent natural world they purport to defend against. Ironically, Alice ends her dreams and restores the peaceful order of her life above ground through her own acts of violence and domination, shouting at the Queen of Hearts and shaking the Red Queen.

Once Alice wakes up, the books' final scenes return her to a position in which common sense smoothes over these unsettling aspects of the natural. Still, like the question of who dreamed the world through the looking-glass, the questions about what the natural might be, whether

it is a universally applicable concept or not, and what place human beings have in it remain. As nonsense tends to do, Carroll's *Alice* books suggest that the familiar is perhaps more unfamiliar than we might imagine. The natural—whatever that might be—becomes another surprising unsurprise in these novels, something commonplace to which Carroll adds “a note of unexpectedness” (Zirker 21).

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NOTES

¹In an article about Savile Clark's 1887 stage adaptation of the *Alice* books, for instance, Carroll remarked on “the eager enjoyment of Life that comes only in the happy hours of childhood, when all is new and fair, and when Sin and Sorrow are but names” (“‘Alice’ On the Stage” 181).

²Carroll admired Tennyson's work and would have been familiar with this phrase. For more discussion of Darwinism and natural history in Carroll's work, see Knoepfmacher 176 and Lovell-Smith.

³For critical studies that address Alice's competitive or predatory desires, see Auerbach, Blake, Kincaid, and Knoepfmacher.

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