

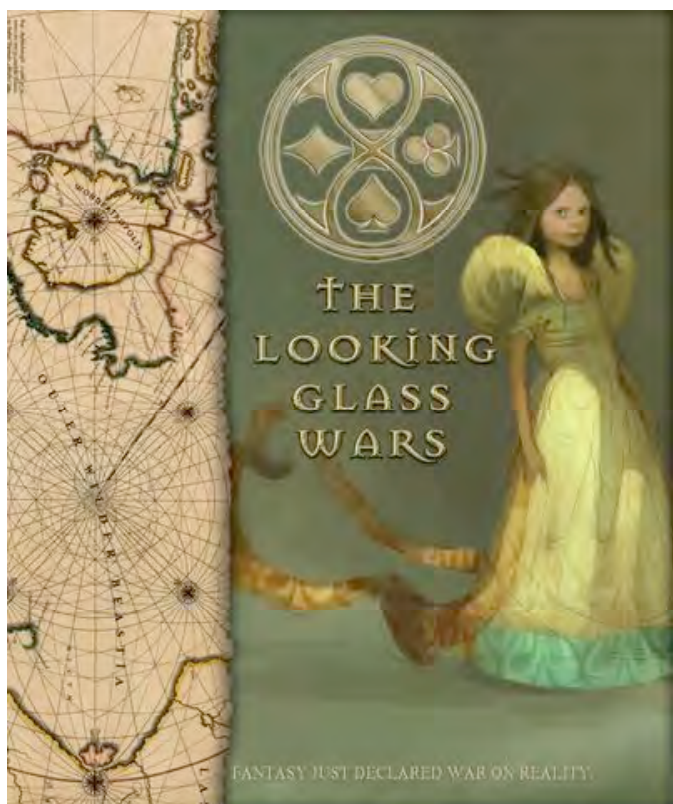
Los Angeles Times

Hero Complex

For your inner fanboy

'Looking Glass Wars' takes Alice to a very different Wonderland

November 4, 2009 | 5:43 am



The rabbit hole is getting crowded again.

It's been 144 years since Lewis Carroll introduced the world to an inquisitive girl named Alice, but her surreal adventures still resonate – Tim Burton's "Alice in Wonderland" arrives in theaters in March and next month on SyFy it's "Alice," a modern-day reworking of the familiar mythology with a cast led by Kathy Bates and Tim Curry.

And then there's "The Looking Glass Wars," the series of bestselling novels by Frank Beddor that takes the classic 19th century children's tale off into a truly unexpected literary territory – the battlefields of epic fantasy. The series began in 2006 and Beddor's third "Looking Glass Wars" novel, "ArchEnemy," just hit stores in October,

as did a tie-in graphic novel called "Hatter M: Mad with Wonder."

Beddor said it's intriguing to see other creators at play in the same literary playground. "It's amazing how many directions it's been taken in," Beddor said of Carroll's enduring creations. "There's something so rich and magical and whimsical about the original story and the characters and then there's all those dark under-themes. Artists get inspired and they keep redefining it for a contemporary audience."

Indeed, creative minds as diverse as Walt Disney, the Jefferson Airplane, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Tom Petty, the Wachowski Brothers, Tom Waits and American McGee have adapted Carroll's tale or borrowed memorably from its imagery. Few, though, have

been as audacious in their reworking as Beddor, whose massive re-imagining of Wonderland has prompted some Carroll-admiring purists to call for his head. It hasn't helped that he has admitted publicly that he was no fan of the original works as a youngster when his grandmother essentially force-fed him "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland."

"I didn't like them, it's true," Beddor said, "but his imagery became an amazing inspiration for me and this world creation. The idea was to create a bigger world so more characters and environments and quests and conflict and obstacles can confront the lead character."



Beddor's basic premise: Carroll's books weren't fantasy, they were a betrayal of a refugee in need – the author created a misleading cartoon that distracted everyone from the "true" story about a real girl (an exiled princess named Alyss, not Alice) and a real place (a Wonderland that exists in a different dimension but is linked to our world). After a bloody coup, the "real" Alyss fled Wonderland with her bodyguard, Hatter Madigan, but they were separated before arrival on Earth. And so begins their adventure...

The fantasy-based intrigue and dimension-hopping may remind some readers of another little-girl trilogy, "His Dark Materials," but there's also a sci-fi layer over the tale that, for Beddor, syncs up with the "The Matrix," a different story with key touches of Carroll imagery.



The books have been bestsellers and the tie-in “Hatter M” comics (with fan-favorite artist Ben Templesmith collaborating on the early releases) have earned better reviews than the prose books. Beddor has immersed himself in the universe he’s created and invited fans to jump in with him; there’s a MMORPG; a soundtrack (or “aural novel”) with songs inspired by the books; a collection of videos including trailers;

and a new tie-in strategy card game. For fans who prefer a tactile experience, there’s a lavish coffee-table book, “Princess Alyss of Wonderland.”

Beddor may be the model for the contemporary, middle-tier commercial novelist; in this age of niche media and non-stop digital self-promotion he has found a dozen ways to repurpose his epic and each one is an exercise in cross-promotion. It's no surprise, of course, that his foremost aspiration is a film franchise. The rights have been snatched up by Charles Roven, producer of “The Dark Knight” and the upcoming Sam Raimi film “Warcraft.”

All of it has added up to a surprising odyssey for Beddor, who has one of the stranger resumes in Los Angeles, which is impressive considering the Mad Hatter nature of career paths in this town.

A former world-class skiing champ, the Minnesota native came west to pursue an on-camera career and he made it (sort of) as John Cusack’s skiing double in “Better Off Dead” and traded lines with Carrie Fisher in “Amazon Women on the Moon.” Despite the acting studies with Stella Adler, Beddor decided that it was writing that suited him better.

In a Shakespearean lit class at UCLA he met two screenwriters with an unwanted idea for a raunchy comedy; he liked it, bought it, championed the idea and then struck gold with it in 1998. “There's Something About Mary” grossed (in every sense of the word) close to \$370 million in worldwide box-office and Beddor was in the Hollywood game in a big way.

For all that success, Beddor still felt that “Mary” belonged to the writers and filmmakers and he wanted a creation that he could likewise call his own. It was during a visit to



England for the London premiere of “Mary” that Beddor visited The British Museum and found his future in the past: He was mesmerized by a set of Napoleonic playing cards and their images, which were studies in palace culture and its mix of the stately and the sinister.

Beddor melded those images with his tortured memory of listening to Carroll’s book read to him by his grandmother (whose name, by the way, was Alice) and was on his way. Research led to a complex plan and, he hoped, a movie and/or book deal.

Beddor created characters that boys would find appealing – among them an action-hero version of the Mad Hatter in Hatter Madigan, the master swordsman whose hat converts into a whirling weapon that Bruce Wayne would envy – and a shape-shifting assassin called the Cat, based on the Cheshire Cat. Even with the boys and toys,

the author said he was careful to emphasize the matriarchal foundations of Wonderland and the savvy courage of his young female protagonist. An intriguing layer to the story is the idea that Wonderland is a fount for a very special sort of energy.

“The concept behind my book is the power of imagination and the idea that it comes from this place called Wonderland that inspires our world,” Beddor said. “So it’s this parallel world and this imagination — which is something tangible, something you can conjure — is gifted to us here and is communicated to artists, inventors and even children, who have the most powerful imagination.”

-- Geoff Boucher