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The Looking Glass Wars - Frank Beddor

Egmont Books 2004, 376 pages, £12.99, HB

Bitesize: What *really* went on in Wonderland . . .

Like Philip Pullman's **His Dark Materials** books, **The Looking Glass Wars** opens in Oxford. Unlike **H.D.M.**, this is Oxford in 1863. A college scholar by the name of the Reverend Charles Dodgson sits beside the River Cherwell watching as a yung girl - we'll call her Alice, but that isn't really her name - makes her way through the book she has helped to inspire. **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**. Like any author (like any parent) he watches the young girl's face hoping for the very best. Certainly he isn't expecting what he gets: she screams 'You're the cruellest man I've ever met, Mr Dodgson . . . I never want to see you again! Never, never, never!' And with that, she runs home and we find ourselves free of italics and plunged into the *real* story.

Which goes something likes this:

There is a kingdom (or rather: a Queendom) known as Wonderland. Following a period of 'unbridled bloodshed', the land is enjoying 'a tentative peace'. 'After twelve years, the daily life of Wonderland had returned to what might be called 'normal'.' Princess Alyss Heart (a girl for whom the word 'scamp' was MADE) is celebrating her birthday (albeit halfheartedly, because her father has yet to arrive back from a trip to the borderlands). There is to be a party and all manner of shenanigans presided over by Alyss' mother, the beautiful warrior Queen, Genevieve. But Alyss Heart's father will not make it back alive, and what party there is will end in the greatest blooshed Wonderland has ever known. Genevieve's sister Redd has returned to claim the throne, and with her cat assassin (the Cheshire Cat has nothing on this guy), and an endless supply of deadly card warriors, she isn't prepared to let anybody stand in her way. Off with everyone's heads! Quite frankly! Alyss flees the carnage and - via a crafty bit of magic known as the pool of tears - finds herself in Blighty - where, of course, nobody believes her story. She is forced to swallow and deny her life, becoming a girl with an overactive imagination, much like any other English girl of the time. She grows up and forgets as best she can where she came from. But back in Wonderland, things are going from bad to worse: Redd is a tyrant, and her court is a bloody one. A resistance springs up but without Alyss as a figurehead it flails somewhat.

Written with the Pullman-esque intelligence that flatters its younger audience, **The Looking Glass Wars** (whilst being very good indeed, and a real page turner) falls short of **His Dark Material**-ness thanks to a reliance on **Artemis Fowl** style chopsocky. **Artemis Fowl** is all well and good, but it isn't **His Dark Materials**, and there is a sense that - if Beddor reigned himself in somewhat (and put thoughts of the inevitable movie adaptation to one side) - he could pull something really rather surprising out of the bag.

Any Cop?: Witty, action-packed and erudite, **The Looking Glass Wars** is the perfect read for that precocious teenager who thinks **Alice in Wonderland** needs a bit of amping up . . .