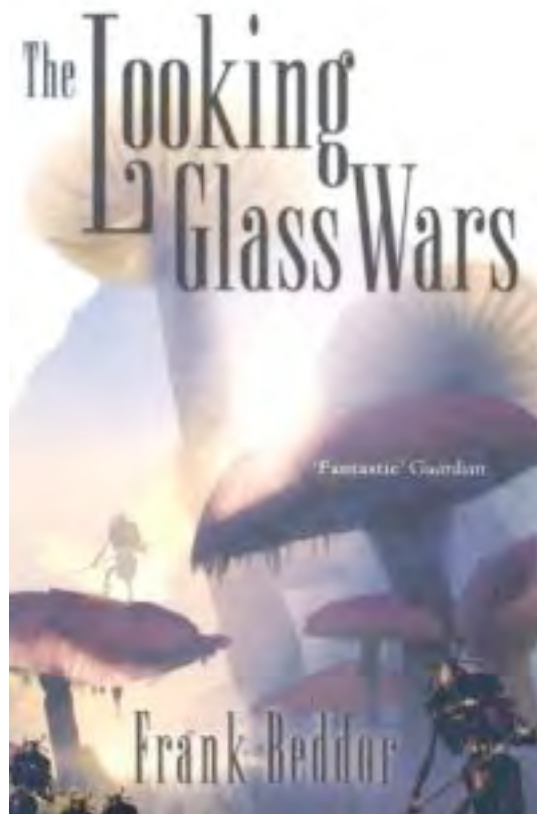


"Looking Glass Wars, The" Book Review

By Howard Price

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Author	Genre	Publisher	Price
Frank Beddor	Fantasy	Egmont Books Ltd	£5.99 UK



I have a special fondness for all things Alice-related, and have amassed a small collection of esoteric items pertaining either to the character or her creator, no matter how tenuous the connection.

So it was with nervous anticipation and an awareness of the potential for disappointment that I began Frank Beddor's *The Looking Glass Wars*. At its core, I realized going in that this had been done twice before, once in the cult computer game, *American McGee's Alice* and once in a comic book miniseries (I told you my collection was esoteric), *The Oz-Wonderland War*. However, within a matter of a few pages, Beddor distinguishes his story from either of its forerunners.

The prologue finds the good Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson presenting to his child-friend a copy of his book, *Alice's Adventures Under-Ground*. We are to presume that Alice -- or Alyss, as Beddor would have it in this adventure -- is a refugee from Wonderland, a princess in exile, who is desperate for someone to believe her tale. She hopes that in Dodgson she has found a believer who has written down her story so that others may know. Of course, she is appalled to learn that not only did he not believe her, but that he had turned the entire thing into a children's fairy tale of nonsense, converting characters to less threatening forms. This initial moment is also, probably, the greatest disappointment to a

reader moderately versed in Alice, as Alyss makes mention that the author of *Under-Ground* has converted the bifurcating General Doppelganger into two fat boys in beanies -- only jarring to those who know that Tweedledee and Tweedledum did not appear in *Wonderland* at all, but came much later, in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

However, once beyond Beddor's attempt at anchoring his tale to reality-based events, we embark on a fantastic voyage into a realm which is a mixture of childhood innocence and all-too-grownup carnage. Like a candyland laced with strychnine, Wonderland is a feudal matriarchy ruled by Queen Genevieve Heart. The other houses -- Diamond, Club, and Spade -- all have their eye on the throne, but it's Queen Genevieve's expelled sister, Redd, who steals the power from the good queen, beheading chess and card soldiers alike (and the queen!) while Alyss makes good her escape under the watchful security of her mother's trusted bodyguard, Hatter Madigan, whose mastery of bladed weapons is unparalleled.

Leaving behind the capital city of Wondertropolis (a name which I personally have no qualms with, having believed Kryptonopolis to be a functioning capital city for much of my formative years), Alyss and Hatter get away from Redd's assassin, the shapeshifting and nine-lived Cat, by diving into the Pool of Tears -- a pool from which no one has ever returned once having fallen in. As they dive, they get separated, emerging from different puddles on Earth -- Alyss alone in London, Hatter in Paris.

Bereft of his deadly chapeau, Hatter nonetheless begins a desperate search for the lost princess. Alyss, meanwhile, is arrested for trying to steal food and taken to an orphanage where she is later adopted by the Liddells. Laughed at by the other children and chided by adults for her insistence in the childish nonsense of a place called Wonderland, she grows up questioning whether her memories were indeed some elaborate illusion. And when the final blow comes in the form of Dodgson's nonsense book, she enters her room, tears down all her drawings of crystal passageways and palace stairways, and emerges as the saddest thing she could ever become -- a normal child firmly grounded in reality.

It is when the character of Alyss and the personage of Alice Liddell intertwine most closely that the Carrollian scholars must forcibly suspend their disbelief, for those of that inclination cannot help but ask many questions tied to history that begin with "But what about...?" However, once such a reader has made it well into the second part of this book, it becomes abundantly clear that the reality of Alice Liddell and the reality of the Alice Liddell who is truly Alyss Heart occur in parallel worlds -- realities that suddenly diverge from the trivial to the wildly variant when the royal wedding of Alice and Prince Leopold is quite publicly crashed by the treacherous Cat and a cadre of card soldiers intent on doing Alyss in. Thus this bit of violence puts the reader at ease that even the nonfiction-sounding bits are but cleverly disguised bits of fiction themselves.

Once it is established that there are clear differences between Alice Liddell and Alyss and the meta-Alice, the story falls much more cleanly into place and is, in every right, completely enjoyable. Alyss is, of course, finally discovered by her bodyguard, Hatter Madigan, and rescued back to the fascistically darkened Wonderland. But her return may kindle more hope in



Hatter Madigan removed his top hat. Holding it by the brim, he flicked his wrist hard and fast; the hat flattened and divided into a series of S-shaped rotary blades held together at the centre. He winged the weapon across the room, the blades spinning and slicing through the enemy before embedding itself in the mortar of the far wall.

--- Image from "Hatter M" with art by Ben Templesmith

the Alyssians (as the rebels against Queen Redd call themselves) than is merited. For the time spent in the dimension of Earth has robbed Alyss of her unique ability to use her imagination to make things happen in reality. Bereft of this gift, she stands no chance against the Black Imagination practiced by Queen Redd and her followers.

Beddor's plans for *The Looking Glass Wars* reach far beyond the book. Although there are no plans for a movie (at this time), Beddor is working on a rock-opera, "Seeing Redd", and a graphic novel with art by Ben Templesmith called "Hatter M" which expands upon Hatter Madigan's journeys around the world in search of Princess Alyss Heart of Wonderland. Further details of each are available at Beddor's website.

Not for the faint of heart nor the young of age, *The Looking Glass Wars* is, however, quite recommended for the young of heart and the faint of age. If you like your fairy tales with a healthy dose of blood, carnage, and hopelessness, then please do follow along with those of us as we become engrossed in Alyss's new adventures.