

# Los Angeles Times

BOOKS

## 'The Looking Glass Wars' takes Alice, er Alyss, to the dark side



Of course the plant life is otherworldly too. Consider a visit to "Valley of Mushrooms" by artist Brian Flora.

---

**Hollywood producer Frank Beddor reimagines Lewis Carroll and creates a Wonderland all his own -- on the page.**

By Scott Timberg, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

*November 18, 2007*

Frank Beddor -- a successful Hollywood producer with an oddball book idea he was burning to write -- thought he knew how this game was played.

"I was really excited because my agent said, 'I can put you *intheroom*,'" Beddor



PHOTO GALLERY  
**The Looking Glass**

recalled from a room of his own, papered with whimsical graphics, in his Wilshire Boulevard production office. "And I took the Hollywood approach: I would get into the room and pitch them. I thought it was gonna be great. You know how in Hollywood you want to go to the studio head, go over all those layers?"

Beddor, 48, has the energy and zealous confidence you'd expect in a former actor, world-champion freestyle skier and stuntman, as well as the kind of bland, blue-eyed handsomeness that Greg Kinnear has spent much of his career undercutting. He managed to sell the idea for "There's Something About Mary," which he produced, in a Sundance ski lift.

But his charms weren't, in the end, enough: New York publishers listened politely and handed his projects to their editors, who were resentful at being passed over. "An editor wants to *discover* someone. Not only that, I was from Hollywood -- *and* I was a producer! I mean, I couldn't have had more strikes against me. They decided it was garbage, I'm sure, before they even read it."

It's all guesswork, of course, why he was rejected. But whatever the reason, he ended up getting shut down more than a dozen times. Undaunted, he did what Robert Frost and Jimi Hendrix before him did after struggling for attention in the States: He went to England, where the book found a publisher and became a critical and popular sensation.

That battle won, seven years later, Beddor is about halfway into the design of a fantasy-fiction empire called "The Looking Glass Wars." The series, which extends and inverts the work of Lewis Carroll, includes the eponymous initial volume, published in the U.K. in 2004 and in the States, where it became a bestseller, in 2006; a second novel in a projected trilogy called "Seeing Redd"; the graphic novel "Hatter M."; and a scrapbook called "Princess Alyss of Wonderland." (The scrapbook, in pink, looks as girl-targeted as the ultraviolet, dark-shades-of-blue graphic novel is testosterone-drenched.)

These last two offer alternate ways to get into the series, as will an online game called the "Card Soldier Wars," which came out this month, and a CD soundtrack.

Amazingly, given all this Hollywood-style spinning off, which might suggest a cynical franchise, "The Looking Glass Wars" books are intelligently and briskly

written, and don't read like they were written by a movie producer trying to cash in.

What's most impressive about them is that the novels seems to be recounting a universe fully imagined ahead of time. Beddor admires what he calls "the epic world creators" such as J.R.R. Tolkien, "Dune's" Frank Herbert and Philip Pullman of "His Dark Materials." Beddor's books seem tailor-made for kids who've completed the "Harry Potter" series and are looking up, a bit dazed from the experience, eager for somewhere else to go.

Like "Potter," it's made of conventional elements: The reluctant hero, tussles over royal succession, a magic with a good and evil side. "Basically I flipped all these conventions on their ear, to make them relevant and darker, for a contemporary audience. And by the way," he said, still stung from a battle of his own, "this is what the public domain is made to do."

### **An Alice in exile**

THE conceit of "The Looking Glass Wars" is that Carroll's Alice books were a sanitized, watered-down version of the "real" story: the truly harrowing tale of a princess who flees Wonderland when her parents are killed in a palace coup by her evil aunt. Escaping through a looking glass, Alyss -- even her name was scrambled in Carroll's telling -- ends up an orphan on the dirty streets of London, pining to return to Wonderland's armies of cards and chess pieces and the family's ace bodyguard, Hatter Madigan. If she returns, she and the "Alyssian" rebels must fight the bloodthirsty Queen Redd.

"This ingenious reworking," wrote the Times of London, "is powerful, eventful and dark. Which is entirely legitimate, given the surreality of the original."

Beddor, who'd disliked the Alice books when he was forced to read them as an outdoorsy, "Treasure Island"-loving kid in Minnesota, was introduced to a new way of seeing them on a trip to London for the premiere of "Mary." After catching a display of playing cards at the British Museum, he met an antiquarian dealer who showed him a set of Alice-themed cards from the 19th century.

"He said the cards had been handed down to him over generations," recalled Beddor, "and that this story was handed down with them -- a different interpretation of where Lewis Carroll was coming from. That someone had created these cards to tell a deeper, darker story. It was like Grimm's fairy tales, oral storytelling."

Struck by this scenario in which Alice was a princess from another world, Beddor immediately thought it would make a great movie. But while sketching it out, he became obsessed.

"It took me a couple of years, simply working on the logic, the rules, the back story, to create the world so I could work on the narrative. And then I thought, 'I want to live in my world: I want my own private Wonderland. And I don't want to share it with anyone else.' " And he wanted the depth a movie wouldn't provide.

He wasn't sure where it would lead, so he took a smaller load of film jobs and worked on this a few hours a day. His previous writing experience was limited to penning back stories, for the sake of motivation, for the Pinter and Stoppard plays he was acting in.

"I'm his best friend, I play golf with him all the time," said Ed Decter, a "Mary" co-writer. "And I think there was probably two years where he didn't even mention it. He was probably nervous whether he could pull this off." But, he added: "I think anyone who can go down a hill on fiberglass and flip around in the air three times has some kind of entrepreneurial spirit."

Said Beddor: "I wanted it to be under the radar, so I wouldn't feel the pressure or expectations. And in Hollywood, a book's kind of considered a step down."

### **On a well-worn path**

THE technique of taking a classic literary text and inverting or rethinking it -- which predates Shakespeare -- has become almost familiar over the last few years, including reimaginings of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and "Gone With the Wind."

In the "Wizard of Oz" world alone, a *manga* retelling is due shortly, and the Sci Fi Channel has a new show called "Tin Man," which appears while the musical "Wicked" is still packing 'em in. Alice has been riffed on by Jefferson Airplane, Vladimir Nabokov and "Donnie Darko." Esquire magazine once called the '80s "The 'Re' Decade," but the process has only picked up speed since.

But when Beddor arrived in England for his book tour, he found some Carroll enthusiasts weren't exactly on the bandwagon.

"Off with Beddor's head!" said the signs hoisted by four members of the Lewis Carroll Society who met the author at Heathrow Airport in 2004. At first, Beddor

thought they were joking, and approached them, laughing. They weren't.

"You know the Brits, they're very nonconfrontational. It was a pretty brief interaction, but they wanted me to know that it wasn't cool. That my books wouldn't make it, that they sucked. There are four Lewis Carroll societies and that's their job, to protect the integrity of Lewis Carroll's work. But remember: *Everybody* has adapted Lewis Carroll. I am so at the end of the line."

Beddor also ran the gauntlet on several radio programs, and got caught in some controversy in the British press.

"This reporter said, 'This *American* is taking on *our* classic, and he's *rewriting* it.' He calls up the children's laureate, and Jacqueline Wilson, the biggest children's author in England . . . Jacqueline said, 'That is outrageous, can't he come up with his own story?' And the children's laureate was quoted as saying it was a terrible idea."

The controversy burned hot but not long.

Britain's then-children's laureate, Michael Morpurgo, came around when he saw the finished novel; it now includes a blurb from him calling the book imaginative and well-researched. "What Frank has done is he's interwoven the history . . . of Alice and then told his own extraordinary, and believably visual and fast-moving tale."

And the current chairman of the Lewis Carroll Society, Mark Richards, said the flames have died down. "I have a copy myself, but I must confess, I have never got around to reading it. Well, there are a lot of adaptations, it's hard to read them all."

The irony is that Beddor, despite sharing characters and a taste for bad puns with Wonderland's Victorian creator, is mostly addressing a different version.

"I'm trying to break the preconceived notions from Walt Disney," he said. "Everyone knows the mythology from Disney, not from Lewis Carroll. To start fresh, to pull them into the story, I wanted to break the preconceptions any way I could, to have a better chance for the suspension of disbelief."

### **Persistence pays off**

AFTER trouble with the gatekeepers of the publishing world, and a tangle with

the Carroll purists, Beddor, who now lives in Bronson Canyon with his pregnant wife and 2-year-old son, has reached his audience in a big way.

He often goes into schools, where he gives a high-spirited, barnstorming presentation -- acting out characters, asking the kids to help cast the movie with him -- that is in part responsible for his sales.

"This is a book for boys, it turns out," he said of his school appearances. "But it's all about women. Women have power, they're forceful, they rule. But boys are the main audience. I was a little surprised because I thought it was a slam-dunk for the girls -- I thought it was a girl empowerment story."

He's already spoken to thousands of kids in far-flung places -- Edinburgh, Scotland; Atlanta; Pasadena -- in the last two months alone, doing as many as four middle schools a day, often five days a week, averaging more than 200 kids for each visit.

Beddor has so far kept the quality up for each element of the "Looking Glass Wars" franchise: The first graphic novel, for instance, which chronicles Hatter's very violent lost years wandering the globe searching for Alyss, was illustrated by Ben Templesmith, a well-regarded comics artist, and would appeal to anyone who enjoys the form.

As Beddor spins off more projects, though, the appendages may suffer, much as beloved restaurants that expand too quickly lose their distinctiveness. As he works on the third novel, which he'll turn in next June, he's planning out two more graphic novels and working on scripts for three movies with the young British writer Jamie Mathieson.

The second, more gadget- and science-fiction-heavy novel, "Seeing Redd," has not drawn the reviews the debut did. "While the scientific possibilities are interesting," judged Salt Lake City's Deseret Morning News, "there is no balance between the violence and the daily castle life. The attacks of vengeance and war are vicious and become tedious."

But Beddor's supporters say he's too passionate to let the project slide.

"He didn't create this bloodlessly, out of 'This might sell,' " said Decter. "He cares about it the way he cares about his son."

Beddor's passion may be as much about Hollywood as Wonderland, said Decter,

who's been inspired by him to write his own series of children's books.

"He's like this leader of taking back your intellectual property, because we're all doing franchises for the studios. Every single day it moves forward, which is so rare in Hollywood. Here we are in the middle of the writers strike: Normally as an independent producer, he'd be out of work. But here he is, he's got this industry going."



Hollywood producer Frank Beddor took the showbiz road less traveled — writing books — when he set out to create "The Looking Glass Wars" trilogy, a fantasy-fiction franchise that builds on the work of Lewis Carroll. The series includes the initial volume, published in the U.K. in 2004 and two years later in the United States, where it became a bestseller. The series' second installment is called "Seeing Redd."

(Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)



Alice, er, Alyss is heir to the Heart family throne in Beddor's trilogy, which sends the heroine fleeing Wonderland after a palace coup.

(Andrea Wicklund / Automatic Pictures Inc.)



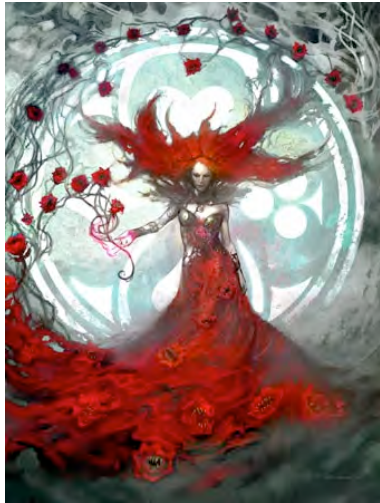
An illustration, by Chris Appelhans, from Beddor's dark-side fantasy world depicts "Alyss on Her 7th Birthday."  
(Chris Appelhans / Automatic Pictures Inc.)



"Warrior Alyss," by artist Vance Kovacs, reveals the princess in a vastly more empowered state.  
(Vance Kovacs / Automatic Pictures Inc.)



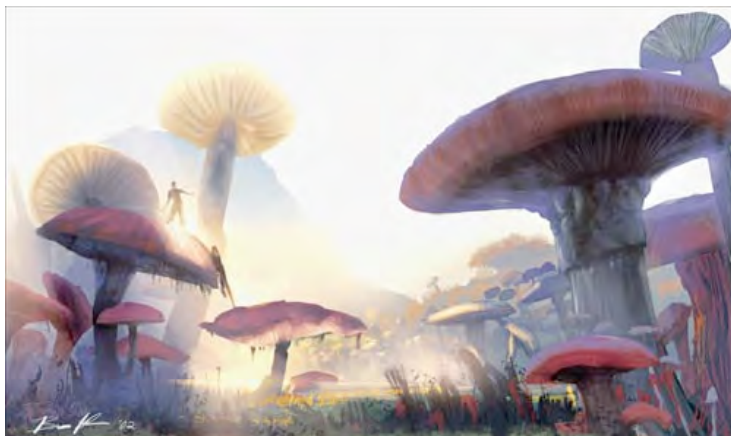
"Card Soldier," by artist Stephen Martinieri, portrays an enemy who's more Darth Vader than Disney's leering-waltzing playing card villains.  
(Stephen Martinieri / Automatic Pictures Inc.)



Ruthless Queen Redd, drawn by Vance Kovacs, is Alyss' rival for her late-parents' throne.  
(Vance Kovacs / Automatic Pictures Inc.)



Even the avian life is fantastical, as seen in "Tuttle-bird" by Jennifer Bricking.  
(Jennifer Bricking / Automatic Pictures Inc.)



Of course the plant life is otherworldly too. Consider a visit to "Valley of Mushrooms" by artist Brian Flora.  
(Brian Flora / Automatic Pictures Inc.)



Frank Beddor says of “The Looking Glass Wars” trilogy: “I want to live in my world: I want my own private Wonderland. And I don’t want to share it with anyone else.” Though, of course, he does share it. The author has taken his fictional kingdom on the road, acting out his stories and creatively engaging students at schools abroad and here at home, including the Mayfield Junior School in Pasadena. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)