



Lewis Carroll: A Biography

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Under the pen name Lewis Carroll, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson became a legend for his children's books, which broke the constraints of Victorian moralism. Thirty years in the writing and drawn from a voluminous fund of letters and diaries, this exemplary biography conveys both the imaginative fancy and human complexity of the creator of Alice in Wonderland. Photos.

Lewis Carroll: A Biography Details

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Amy says

I'm basically a Lewis Carroll freak (wrote my MA thesis on the guy) and so is Morton N. Cohen, which makes for a dedicated and relatively interesting biography. Cohen is devoted to his subject and doesn't go off the rails into too much speculation as to what Carroll "must have thought" about this or that - namely, the little girls he photographed and spent so much time with. This biography is very thorough and contains some photographs and drawings by Carroll, which is a nice touch.

Molly says

just "ok"

Twig says

3,5 Stars

Lizzie says

An excellent, fascinating biography of Lewis Carroll, aka Charles Dodgson. He was the eldest son of a large family, spent a lot of time entertaining his young siblings, and grew up to write Alice in Wonderland based on stories he told to Alice Liddell and her sisters, daughters of the Dean of the Oxford college where he was a don. He preferred the company of children, especially girls, his whole life. Let's cut to the question you're wondering about: yes, he was probably a pedophile; at least the author of this book thinks so. But he was a highly moral and proper person and there is no record of him doing anything even remotely improper with any of the many girls and young women he spent time with over the years. He simply delighted in children. His diaries record struggles with unspecified temptations, and the author shows that the greatest time of this was during the years he was involved with the Liddells, so he may be referring to sexual fantasies. But we shall never know.

He was keen on photography during its early days and photographed girls nude, but only with the parents' permission and only if the girls seemed totally comfortable with it. He kept copies only for a while, and wrote the parents about how they should destroy theirs so as not to embarrass the girls. Although there are letters that show he took a fair number of them, only something like six of his nudes survive.

It was a different time. People thought nude children were just a symbol of innocence and it wasn't a big deal for them to be represented in ads and so forth. Certainly a few people got turned on by ads for Pear's Soap, but most people had no idea.

He was a serious mathematician and inventor (when he learned that Babbage was working on a computing machine, he wrote to him, and the two met to discuss it - I got a huge kick out of this.) He had an off-kilter way of looking at things, as is clear from Alice, and he sounds like someone I would like to have known.

Sarah Crawford says

Hardback, 580 pages. All I can really say about this book is that it is really, really good. The author writes it in a way that keeps the reader's interest. There are various pictures, an appendix and notes. Even though it is really long I kept wanting to read more of it. Thoroughly enjoyable.

Lightsey says

Done. In spite of my basic boredom, I was sad when Carroll died on page 526. Not surprised, but sad. On another note, does anyone's life really bear this kind of inquiry? I wonder how biographers can stand it. They must be more forgiving than other people.

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For my Lewis Carroll class. A decent biography, though rather soppy in places. But I can't recommend it, unless you happen to also be teaching a class on Carroll. This is not a life that bears inquiry. Mostly, Carroll's life was dull, except when it wasn't ("The Pursuit of Innocents" is one chapter title). --Not that the man seems to have done anything. Still, if you don't have to know, you don't need to find out. Not that he isn't teachable. . . or interesting. . . everything is interesting. . . but I wouldn't be reading it if I didn't have to.

Madly Jane says

I've been rereading this biography, along with several others over the last six months. This is probably one of the best biographies about Lewis Carroll, a Victorian mathematician who wrote Alice in Wonderland and other stories. The author does not shy away from suggestions about Carroll's relationship with children. I've studied Carroll off and on for most of my life and I don't believe, for a moment, that he was a pedophile. His interest in children was not sexual, but I do think he had conflicts of a sexual kind outside that nature. Like many Victorians, Carroll was deeply rooted in his time period.

I think a lot of Carroll's personality can be explained in his love of mathematics. People may shake their heads at this, but just look at the psychology of it. Carroll was highly conservative in all things and math was a way he ordered the strange and changing world he lived in. He sometimes stammered, was shy, and Alice in Wonderland is full of math and irony. He was a control freak and morally very strict with himself. I really find him charming in many ways. The fact that he and George MacDonald were friends speaks to his love of fantasy and adventure and the possibility of telling stories for children as a way of talking about the world.

Ironically, children were safe angels. And he photographed them. It's impossible to judge him by modern standards of any kind. Great book. Everyone should read it.

Kate says

This is a very detailed, very well-researched, very BORING biography. I never knew that the story of a famous author, mathematician, photographer and Oxford professor who lusts after and takes pictures of nude young girls could be this dull.

Amerynth says

Morton Cohen's biography about Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson) is certainly packed with information and provides an interesting look at the famous children's author. However, I disliked the formatting of the book-- each chapter focused on a particular topic -- such as Dodgson's photography, his interest in children, religion-- and covered such a large chunk of Dodgson's life. As such, it was difficult to discern where events fit chronologically in Dodgson's life. I found some of Cohen's conclusions, particularly when it comes to religious matters and Dodgson's relationship with his father to be based more on conjecture by Cohen rather than actual evidence. Nonetheless, I'm walking away from this book with a deeper understanding about Lewis Carroll so it was successful in that way.

Adrianna Barkey says

Everyone who claims to be a fan of Lewis Carroll or who feels a connection to his works must read this book! Cohen researched Carroll's life and works for over 30 years, and I have never read a more detailed analysis. The only reason I could not give the book 5 stars is due to the repetition. There is also a bit of off-topic rambling that has to be skimmed over. Other than that, I learned a great deal about Lewis Carroll the man, and Cohen allowed me to develop my own opinion of him.

Brooke says

This is probably the definitive bio of Carroll. It's an exhaustive and nuanced exploration of a complex person. It's also completely readable and entertaining. It only gets dry around the math sections. (Carroll was a mathematician.) Very well written.

Alice says

Love this biography! Not as well written as the one by Douglas-Fairhurst, but definitely worth reading.

Shane says

This is a first class biography of an amazing and complicated man. If a biographer idolises the subject of his biography then the result can end up being flawed, where the biographer glosses over the subject's negatives or explains them away. But Morton N. Cohen doesn't look to do that. He's clearly a fan but he doesn't look to ignore the controversies of his personality. He explains things and generally leaves it to the reader to decide what to do with the information.

I found the biography to be highly readable, and while subject material is largely linear, it's not purely so. It does, of course start with the start of his life and finish with the end, but interspersed throughout are

occasional chapters that will actually cover his entire life, such as "The man's father" which looks at Charles' relationship with his father throughout his life, and "The man's faith" which looks at Charles' religious beliefs. Other chapters also jump backward and forward through time a bit, but not so much that you lose track of things. I understand why the author did this: he wanted to emphasise things that were important, rather than simply spread them throughout the entire book where vital nuggets of insight might easily become lost. Still, I can see where this approach might bother some. It didn't bother me, though. I enjoyed it from start to finish.

If you're a fan of the "Alice" books (and how could you not be!) then this biography gives a terrific insight into a very complicated, and ultimately, lonely man.

Cindy says

Extremely interesting to read while my book club was reading Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (one of my all time favorites). I admit I was most curious about his unnatural fixation with little girls. He was a genius in mathematical lectures, writing and humor. He took care of his siblings, was a gifted photographer, so multitasked. He took many nude photos of little girls. His diaries are full of heart-wrenching prayers to God to remove his sinfulness.

This author feels Carroll never acted on his unseemly fantasies but spent a life time suppressing his baser thoughts. Too much of a Victorian gentleman to put any sexual thoughts in his diaries, people can only guess what really went on in the darkroom.

I am very much drawn to Charles Dobson. Here's a great quote:

"Talking is a wonderful smoother over of difficulties. When I come upon anything in Logic, or in any other hard subject that entirely puzzles me, I find it a capital plan to talk it over aloud, even when I am alone. One can explain things so clearly, to one's self! And then, you know, one is so patient with one's self: one never gets irritated at one's own stupidity."

And I can sure relate to the following passage:

"His uncharacteristic desuetude continued through the latter half of 1870. He recorded no depressions, sadness, or grief, but his old vigor was absent; he seems rather, to float numbly through the days." p. 381

DeAnna Knippling says

Okay, there are a lot of theories about who CLD really was, what he was like, whether he was a pedophile or did drugs. A lot of people will downgrade books because they don't go along with their pet theories.

Fact is, this is a good biography that gives a lot of insight into the man. Whether it gives the full picture -- well, it can't; there are huge areas that we know we don't know about.

I didn't agree with all of Cohen's theories, but I thought it was well-written and enjoyable to read.

