

## REVIEW

## Crime against Innocence

*After Such Kindness*, Gaynor Arnold, Tindal Street Press, 2012

Alicia Rix\*

'A loaf of bread,' the Walrus said,  
'Is what we chiefly need:  
[...]  
Now if you're ready Oysters dear,  
We can begin to feed.'

'But not on us!' the Oysters cried,  
Turning a little blue,  
'After such kindness, that would be  
A dismal thing to do!'

Gaynor Arnold's fictional interpretation of the relationship between Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and Alice Liddell (the 'real-life' heroine of the *Wonderland* books) takes its title from a cruel piece of *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) whimsy. The Walrus and the Carpenter lure juvenile oysters away from their beds promising a stroll, and, having eaten them all, weep lustily over their empty shells; Alice pronouncing them '*both* very unpleasant characters'. Arnold's own foray into Victorian melodrama likewise concerns a crime against innocence in whose aftermath, like Alice, the reader is obliged to select the most culpable predator from an eccentric and unsympathetic array of creatures.

Carroll is recast as John Jameson, a reclusive academic at Christchurch, Oxford, who encounters the eleven-year-old Daisy Baxter through an acquaintance with her father,

and diligently cultivates a friendship with her through cream teas and strolls on the riverbank. The precise terms of their relationship are never made clear, however, and the friendship breaks off abruptly. Years later, and the adult Daisy's discovery of her childhood diary enables her to comprehend certain disturbing events from her past, hitherto repressed, which transpired 'between the ages of eleven and fifteen'.

Arnold's approach effectively puts Dodgson on trial, expending a clamorous series of narrators to determine the identity of Daisy's corrupter and culminating in a confrontation between Daisy's husband and Jameson over jam tarts in his Oxford study. Dodgson's own notoriously elusive personality is strategically employed to keep the reader guessing, yet his portrayal as both avuncular companion and Humbert Humbert, shivering with delight as he induces his young charge to undress for photographs, still seems at times startlingly inconsistent.

As an exercise in historical fiction, *After Such Kindness* is also beset by difficulty. Arnold's first novel, *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008), successfully lent a voice to Mrs. Dickens. What makes her second attempt more problematic is that mythologised versions of Charles Dodgson and Alice Liddell already exist, eclipsing their historical counterparts. Arnold's effort feels to some extent to have been pre-empted by generations of readers and scholars, as well as by Dodgson himself, who carefully nurtured the Lewis Carroll image during his lifetime. It is due to

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the prevailing dominance of this image that, despite the strong liberties she takes with her subject, Arnold does not fully avail herself of the freedom of not dealing with the real Dodgson. The result is that references to cats and kings and tea parties feel occasionally overwrought, while biographical details seem more specific than they need to be.

A more generous reader might find the novel's winking suppositions of 'who's who?' and 'who-dunnit?' appropriately false-bottomed. In Carroll's own Wonderland identities are likewise shifting and detachable, and the conditional reigns supreme (in the words of Tweedledee: 'if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be, but it isn't, so it aint'). Whereas Carroll's distortions are unerringly precise and satirical, however, the

terms of Arnold's fictional reality feel at once too obvious and too illogical.

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
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