

**“But I’m grown up now”:
*Alice in the Twenty-First Century***

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Abstract:

In new interpretations of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books in films, graphic novels, and videogames, the controlled menace of the original is transformed into outright violence, insanity, and sexual threat; Wonderland becomes unsuitable for children. In order to negotiate this hostile terrain, Alice must grow up; she is portrayed as a teenager or a young adult. The removal of the actual child from this children’s classic demonstrate the anxieties that move from the margins to the centre of the narrative and suggest much about contemporary preoccupations surrounding the perils of growing up in the new century, but the motivations and outcomes are not always the same. I will examine this trend in representative works in various media including film (Tim Burton’s 2010 *Alice in Wonderland*), videogames (the 2011 *Alice: Madness Returns*), and graphic novels (Raven Gregory’s 2009-11 *Return to Wonderland*).

Keywords: *Alice* books, Tim Burton, Lewis Carroll, childhood, film, graphic novels, Raven Gregory, American McGee, video games, visual culture.

While the land at the bottom of the rabbit-hole where Lewis Carroll’s Alice found herself in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) was curious and disturbing enough, the original Wonderland was benign compared to its avatars in recent adaptations and iterations. The re-envisioning of *Alice* dates back to Carroll’s day, as Carolyn Sigler’s *Alternative Alices* shows us, but in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the controlled menace of the original is transformed into outright violence, insanity, and sexual threat. In order to negotiate this darkening terrain, Alice is portrayed as a young woman in her teens or early twenties. In retellings and revisions in media from film to videogames to graphic novels, I explore the question of how and why a Victorian children’s adventure has become unsuitable for children. In her final confrontation with Alice, American McGee’s Red Queen says, “This realm is for grownups” (McGee 2000). Whether

relatively benign, as in Tim Burton's film *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), or filled with horrors, as in McGee's videogame *Alice: Madness Returns* (2011) or Raven Gregory's graphic novel series beginning with *Return to Wonderland* (2009-11), these narratives confirm that claim.

1. The Darkening of Wonderland

Both Carroll's original *Alice* and "the one that we collectively remember" have become what Paul Davis calls a "culture-text" (Davis 1990: 4). A culture-text "changes as the reasons for its retelling change"; and as with Davis's own example, Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), "every new edition, adaptation, parody, or sequel derives from an implicit critical perspective. Each rewriting of the culture-text implies a new reading of [the original] text" (Davis 1990: 4, 12; see also Hutcheon 2006: 170). In its most recent evolutions, the older Alice is a common characteristic, with other aspects, such as the relative dangers of Wonderland, proving more variable. Each of these retellings is "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis), a neo-Victorian engagement with perhaps the most famous stories of Victorian childhood. Throughout these new versions, the thematic of these dangers connects to and uncovers a related constellation of issues surrounding childhood and sexuality, memory and sanity, and various types of inheritance, menacing and otherwise.

Alice's age, which she announces as "seven years and six months" old in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871; Carroll 2000: 210-211), has long been seen as problematic even in the original stories, with some readers and critics claiming that she cannot possibly be seven because she acts like a much older child.¹ Critic James Kincaid has gone so far as to say that Alice is always already an adult, "the false child, the child who betrays by growing up" (Kincaid 1994: 289). But Laura Miller, writing about C. S. Lewis's Narnia books, suggests that fictional children may commonly have capacities beyond those of their real-world contemporaries: "The Pevensies [...] can keep their heads in a crisis; they belong to a long tradition in British fiction of what the novelist and critic Colin Greenland calls 'competent children'" (Miller 2008: 53). Lucy, the youngest Pevensie, is the most sensible and aware of the four siblings, and in her first appearance, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950), she appears to be no older than

Alice. Modern-day child protagonists such as Lyra in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series (1995-2000), Catherynne M. Valente’s September in *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* (2011), and J. K. Rowling’s initially only slightly older Harry Potter (1997-2007) follow along in this tradition, but their worlds are, if frightening and challenging, not beyond the boundaries of traditional children’s storytelling.²

In his excellent in-depth study of *Alice* in popular culture, Will Brooker comments on the tendency to emphasise the dark side of Carroll’s works:

There is a shared assumption [...] that the original text has an inherently troubled, disturbing quality beneath its lighter wordplay and banter, and that any modern adaptation failing to recognize this deeper, darker nature has actually missed the point. This is quite a shift from the apparently unanimous nineteenth-century opinion that the *Alice* books were a healthy dose of fun and nonsense. (Brooker 2004: 71-72)

The watershed event for this change in opinion was A. E. Goldschmidt’s 1933 essay ‘*Alice in Wonderland* Psycho-Analyzed’, which suggested that the text was “an unconscious distortion of its author’s desire for little girls” (Kidd 2011: 75), a view that has since become widespread. Although it is now generally acknowledged that the essay was a satire of the Freudian readings then cropping up everywhere, it opened the floodgates of *Alice* criticism to new and menacing readings. From the March Hare and White Rabbit as totems of fertility, to Alice’s fall down the rabbit hole as a simulacrum of sexual intercourse, the Queen of Hearts’s obsession with beheading as an obvious analogy for castration, and endless discussions of Alice’s ‘orality’, Wonderland became a dangerous thicket of sex and violence (see Auerbach 1973: 39-40; Auerbach 1982: 46-47; Rackin 1994: 75-77).

Not only critical readings but also adaptations followed this trend, and throughout the twentieth century, a number of darker Wonderlands followed. One notable version, Czech animator Jan Svankmajer’s 1989 film, captures the disconcerting aspects of Wonderland effectively through the operation of the uncanny, the familiar made strange. The antique toys and

everyday objects that represent Wonderland's inhabitants through stop-motion animation create a bizarre and defamiliarised world that the young actress playing Alice, Kristyna Kohoutova, navigates with calm and a greater sangfroid than even Carroll's original Alice. The association of Wonderland's distortions of size and space with hallucinogenic drugs became frequent beginning in the 1960s, most popularly associated with Jefferson Airplane's song 'White Rabbit' (1967; see also Fensch 1977: 424).

Perhaps the most influential of the more recent dark Wonderlands is the videogame *American McGee's Alice* (2000), which sends an institutionalised teenage Alice, traumatised by the death of her family in a house fire, into a damaged Wonderland inside her mind.³ It is arguable that the dark Wonderlands that followed in its wake were influenced, in one way or another, by its visual imagery and character reconceptions, as well as by its effective presentations of Wonderland's dangers. In addition, its depiction of Alice as a weapon-wielding teenager quickly became iconic, spawning action figures, costumes, and fanworks. In the game, Alice returns to Wonderland, now a dark and dangerous place that is clearly a manifestation of her own psychological torment, thus tracing a descent from the psychoanalytical readings dating back to Goldschmidt. It is inhabited by sometimes corrupted and always distorted versions of the characters she has met in the novels, and much of the fascination of the game is waiting to see the form each childhood favourite will take. The Cheshire Cat, who serves as Alice's guide and mentor, is mummy-like, almost skeletal, complete with the earring common to Egyptian cat statuary, while the Queen of Hearts, Alice's ultimate enemy, has acquired Cthulu-like tentacles, suggesting a heritage of horror. At the end of the game, the Queen finally reveals her true face and it is Alice's, reflecting her self-inflicted psychological torments. When Alice defeats the Queen/herself, there is a montage of Wonderland restored to its earlier, happier state, suggesting a return to mental and emotional stability through Alice's physical version of the psychoanalytic talking cure.⁴

An earlier take on a similar damaged-Wonderland concept occurs in the fantasy sequences in the 1985 Dennis Potter-scripted film *Dreamchild*, directed by Gavin Millar. The elderly Alice Liddell Hargreaves, Carroll's real-life child-friend and inspiration for the fictional Alice, has travelled to New York to participate in a celebration of Carroll's centennial. The event

has triggered memories that shift back and forth between Alice Liddell’s own past and the Wonderland fantasies. As portrayed by puppets designed by Jim Henson, the Wonderland creatures have an aura of menace and decay about them, embodying Alice’s adult perceptions that something is not quite right with her childhood memories. Although its ending suggests reconciliation, the film examines the possibility of *Alice’s* author as “the neighbor who might be a sexual predator”, a concept that has increasingly become a central preoccupation of the popular imagination in the culture at large (Nelson 2010: 56).⁵ Carroll’s real-life identity as Charles Dodgson, once seen as the mild-mannered family friend with an innocent fondness for little girls, has shifted towards Dodgson-the-paedophile in the popular imagination. Morton Cohen’s 1979 publication of four of Dodgson’s nude photos of female children added fuel to the fire (Auerbach 1982: 61). So did new readings of familiar photos, perhaps most notably *Alice Liddell as a Beggar Maid* (1858), now widely perceived as a disturbingly sexualised portrayal. “To some”, notes Roger Taylor, “the direct, knowing gaze of Alice combines in a telling way with naked limb, cupped hand, and exposed nipple to create a sexually charged image” (Taylor 2002: 64). Dodgson also has his defenders, however, particularly among scholars and critics. Amy Leal writes that “Dodgson’s cartes de visite would not necessarily have titillated or disturbed in the Victorian era, [although] they look like kiddie porn to us” (Leal 2007: B16), and Taylor refers to “Dodgson’s current baseless reputation as a pedophile[, which] tells us more about the state of our society than it does about his own behavior” (Taylor 2002: 56). But, as Will Brooker points out, the popular press tends to condemn him outright as a paedophile, despite the inconclusive evidence.⁶ Dodgson has been “put [...] on trial in 2000 and convict[ed] by modern standards” (Brooker 2004: 57). This taint of rumoured paedophilia, combined with the Freudian readings of textual elements discussed above, has led to a Wonderland now fraught with sexual danger, clearly no safe place for a young child.

Kali Israel, in examining “other Alices”, points out that Alice’s ageing is not a new phenomenon, and she specifically connects this to the above discussed concerns: “The shift of Alice’s name to stories about Alices indisputably old enough to be erotic agents may both exhibit awareness about those photographs – and questions about sexuality and agency – and offer an easy out” (Israel 2000: 272). But Israel’s “other Alices” fall under an expanded definition of Alice-inspirations and rarely return to the

Wonderland of the original texts. Helen Pilinovsky, in an essay looking specifically at *Alice* adaptations, argues that

Alice's maturation is based on an uneasy fascination with the circumstances surrounding the composition of her original story and the myth of her relationship with Lewis Carroll, and [...] in many retellings Alice is aged in order to excuse that interest. (Pilinovsky 2009: 176)

This sexualising of Wonderland is apparent, to a greater or lesser extent, in all of the twenty-first-century Alices I examine.

However, Alice's ageing goes beyond the potential sexual threat, and her transformation into a desiring, as well as legitimately desirable, subject is only part of the story. Many of the adult Alices are victims of other types of threats, including madness and death. To survive Wonderland, Alice must become a young woman capable of defending herself on all levels. In the contemporary versions, she manages to overcome dangers and predators, sexual or otherwise; she becomes a physically proactive warrior-heroine of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* type, a victim turned victor.⁷ Buffy herself began in creator Joss Whedon's imagination as the "subversion of the horror movie trope of the fragile (and doomed) [...] cheerleader attacked by a monster in a dark alley; in contrast, Buffy scared monsters into becoming afraid of meeting *her* in dark alleys" (Anon. n.d.). While not all of these Alices are equally effective as empowerment fantasies, each of them ends up armed and defeating the threats down the rabbit hole or behind the looking-glass.

I have chosen to focus on three media-based sequels, rather than textual treatments, partly because of their visual elements, which are an integral part of their presentation, and partly because of the comparatively wide audiences most of them have achieved.⁸ Adaptations that shift media, according to Linda Hutcheon, occupy a different space from their inspirations, which allows for differing experiences: "some media and genres are used to *tell* stories [...]; others *show* them [...]; and still others allow us to interact physically and kinesthetically with them" (Hutcheon 2006: xiv, original emphasis). We read about Alice, we watch her, we play her. Two of the examples I examine here are set in the Victorian England of the originals, and the third in the present-day United States,⁹ but each

reconsiders aspects of the Victorian past including childhood, sexuality (paedophilic and otherwise), memory, sanity, and the dawning of psychoanalysis, as well as notions of agency and inheritance.

2. Girl-Power in Wonderland

The influential videogame *American McGee’s Alice* was optioned for a film, with *Buffy* star Sarah Michelle Gellar attached at one time, but was not produced. However, its themes and imagery are influential in not one, but three subsequent films released in 2009-2010, each featuring a proactive and sometimes physically aggressive teenage/adult Alice, violent and adult imagery, and revisionist versions of Wonderland and Looking Glass characters. But while each, in its own way, suggests it will be darker and more adult than the original texts, in all of them potential perils are softened, more so than in adaptations in other media. It is in Alice’s journey towards adult fulfilment, as well as her freedom of movement, that her age becomes paramount. While two of the films, Nick Willing’s *Alice* miniseries (2009), shown originally on the Syfy channel in the U.S., and the British independent film *Malice in Wonderland* (2009),¹⁰ both with modern-day settings, centre on heterosexual romance tropes that are tantamount to Victorian marriage plots (in all of these films, sexual danger is minimised), the film that retains its nineteenth-century setting rejects the marriage plot in favour of Alice’s independence. It is the latter, Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), that will be examined here.

Burton’s film is a sequel, which takes place twelve years after Alice’s first journey to Wonderland, and is therefore not properly an adaptation (see Hutcheon 2006: 9). However, the fact that he retains the title generally assigned to film adaptations of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*¹¹ – as do previous adaptations directed by Clyde Geronimi et al. (1951, Disney), Jonathan Miller (1966, BBC), and Harry Harris (1985, Irwin Allen Productions), among others – suggests that it is nonetheless a reinterpretation of the original. The film was released by Disney, the studio responsible for the best-known of the *Alice* adaptations, the 1951 animated film directed by Geronimi et al. For modern audiences, Disney’s *Alice in Wonderland* has arguably displaced Carroll as the best-known *Alice* text. Its lead character, unlike Carroll’s forthright and proactive heroine, is “a defeated little girl”, passive and easily intimidated, exhibiting little of the original Alice’s curiosity and principally anxious to find her way home

(Ross 2000: 219).¹² Burton's film replaces this 1950s Alice with a new version, more like her Victorian original, and simultaneously a wish-fulfilment fantasy for twenty-first-century girls.

Burton's Alice Kingsleigh is nineteen and believes that her earlier visit to Wonderland was a childhood dream. Alice does not precisely have further adventures in the film; mostly she re-encounters many of the same Wonderland denizens she met as a child. That she does not remember them means that each, from the White Rabbit to the participants in the Mad Tea Party, is being interpreted afresh through Alice's adult eyes, this time in the darker Wonderland (or Underland, as the film has it) languishing under the Red Queen's tyranny. But while the dangers seem more appropriate for Alice's adult self, as we shall see, it takes her some time to catch up with her own childhood competence.

In comparison to the earlier Disney version, brightly coloured and mostly cheerful despite its protagonist's weepiness, Burton's film is relatively dark. Considering earlier films such as *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Beetlejuice* (1988), and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), however, his *Alice* surprised many viewers, who had expected something closer to the disturbing, gothic atmosphere of *American McGee's Alice*. Burton's dark aesthetic is limited primarily to certain aspects of the film's visual presentation. Although Alice, with her ever-varying sizes, finds herself in dark forests of distorted, leafless trees and mushrooms that grow over her head, she faces little that is truly terrifying. There is one memorably grotesque scene where she wades across the Red Queen's moat using the severed heads of the Queen's victims as her stepping stones,¹³ but for every twisted tree, there is a bright flower. The White Queen's courtiers, their black lips and nails contrasting with their white clothes and hair, are the film's most gothic element, yet they radiate benevolence, even if the Queen herself clearly has a repressed other side that leaks through when she brews a potion, consisting of such peculiar items as "urine of the horsefly, buttered fingers", and "three coins from a dead man's pocket" (Burton 2010), to return Alice to her original size. "She really likes the dark side, but she's so scared of going into it that she's made everything appear very light and happy", according to Anne Hathaway, who played the White Queen. "But she's actually living in that place out of fear that she won't be able to control herself" (qtd. in Salisbury 2010: 174).

Although such trace elements may leak through, Burton’s is the only child-safe Wonderland among the recent iterations. While the script renames the place Underland, suggesting a dismal and dangerous place, the name is merely descriptive of its location down the rabbit hole. Despite being a subterranean location, Underland has a vast expanse of sky. The fury of the villainous Red Queen is largely impotent, rendered cartoonish by the visual impact of Helena Bonham-Carter’s digitally enlarged head. Though the Bandersnatch is fearsome on first encounter, Alice is rescued by a very small warrior in the person of the Dormouse (here female and armed with a very small sword), and later wins the beast over to her side through an act of kindness. The ultimate villain, the Jabberwock, is large and dragon-like, but far less terrifying than John Tenniel’s original illustration.

In fact, this *Alice in Wonderland* is, or wants to be, a female empowerment fantasy. It has been seen as “an unquestionably inspired feminist reimagining”, with an Alice who resembles Carroll’s protagonist in her independence and curiosity (Aikens 2010: 28-29), and the film at least partially achieves this goal. At its beginning, Alice is en route with her mother to Lord and Lady Ascot’s garden party, a petulant nineteen-year-old displaying her rebellion largely through her anachronistic refusal to wear a corset,¹⁴ and torn between her duty to marry well (most Victorian middle-class women’s only economic option) and her wish for some kind of authenticity and independence, which centres for her on memories of her deceased father.¹⁵ Charles Kingsleigh, who is portrayed as a visionary who imagined opening up the Far East trade for Britain,¹⁶ and who encouraged Alice in her individuality by telling her that “all the best people are [mad]”, here also originates the classic White Queen line about believing “six impossible things before breakfast” (Burton 2010). Alice inherits from her father not wealth (her mother is pushing her towards marriage with Lord Ascot’s prosaic son Hamish in part because of their poverty in the wake of Mr. Kingsleigh’s death), but imagination. Her original visit to Wonderland is clearly connected with the imaginative vision both she and her father possessed.

While Alice ultimately fulfils the warrior-woman trope common to these versions in her defeat of the Jabberwock, it is remarkable that her younger self largely handled Wonderland more effectively than does her adult self. This difference is so noticeable that the White Rabbit faces scepticism from his allies as to whether the Alice he has fetched back is, in

fact, the right Alice at all. She neither remembers her earlier visit nor is much interested in heroics, preferring instead to remind herself repeatedly that this is merely a dream. Her moment of empowerment is triggered by the Mad Hatter's frustrated accusation that she has lost her "muchness". Having been shrunk small enough to be hidden in a teapot and to ride on the Hatter's brim in the wake of his capture by the Red Queen's forces,¹⁷ she is left tiny and alone. The bloodhound Bayard rescues her, saying that she must be the fated heroic Alice returned, or the Hatter would not have sacrificed himself for her. In response, Alice claims agency for the first time.

From the moment I fell down that rabbit-hole, I've been told what I must do and who I must be. I've been shrunk, scratched, stuffed into a teapot. I've been accused of being Alice and of not being Alice, but this is my dream. I'll decide where it goes from here. (Burton 2010)

Alice decides that she must rescue the Hatter, conveniently falling in with the plans of her would-be allies.

Gradually her memories of Wonderland begin to come back, and with them, her strength and determination. Once she begins to make her own decisions, she regains the characteristics that she had in childhood; as in *American McGee's Alice*, these recovered memories act as a sort of psychoanalytic breakthrough.¹⁸ The Caterpillar first calls her "Nohow Alice", later "Almost Alice", and finally, when she is about to take on the mantle of the Jabberwock's destroyer, "Alice at Last" (Burton 2010), suggesting that adult Alice has finally caught up with her seven-year-old self.

But while she takes on the role of the White Queen's Champion, there remains a question of agency. The Queen will not pressure her, but she makes clear she believes Alice is the most appropriate Champion, and while the Hatter, the Cheshire Cat, and others offer themselves in that role, their volunteering serves to point out that only Alice will do. The most damning limitation on Alice's free will is the Oraculum, a scroll that foretells Wonderland's future, which depicts a figure remarkably like Alice doing battle with the Jabberwock. (This illustration is based closely on one of Tenniel's originals; see Carroll 2000: 149.) At the moment of decision she

runs away, as she earlier has from Hamish’s very public marriage proposal, but this time she returns, willing to take on the role of the White Queen’s Champion. She has bowed to Wonderland public opinion, just as in the real world, she is expected to bow to public opinion and marry Hamish, but oddly the first leads to her strength to resist the second. It seems that for Alice, heroism largely involves showing up. Both the Caterpillar (“Remember, the Vorpall Sword knows what you want; all you have to do is hold onto it”) and the Jabberwock itself (“Not you, insignificant bearer, my ancient enemy, the Vorpall One”) indicate that it is the weapon, not Alice, who will ultimately defeat him (Burton 2010). Nonetheless, the text elides these questions. Alice is treated by the Wonderlanders as a triumphant ‘hero’; there is the sense that this Queen’s Champion has recovered her childhood moxie, her muchness.

In contrast to the Willing and Fellows versions, here Alice’s ultimate triumph is connected to her rejection of the heterosexual marriage plot. Burton’s retention of the Victorian setting means that Alice lives in social circumstances where marriage would have been a social and economic necessity for a young woman. Yet, having defeated the Jabberwock,¹⁹ she returns to England, where she refuses her suitor and anachronistically achieves what very few middle-class Englishwomen of her day could manage, an independent career. Lord Ascot, who has taken her refusal of his son’s hand remarkably well,²⁰ takes her into his company as an apprentice and allows her to fulfil her father’s dream. The film ends with the unthinkable image of an apparently unchaperoned young lady of marriageable age sailing for China aboard a ship named *Wonder*.

Here not sexual menace, but heterosexual romance itself is to be avoided. Alice feels a potential romantic inclination towards Johnny Depp’s Mad Hatter, red-haired like Hamish but far more to Alice’s taste in his spontaneous and eccentric behaviour. “I would dream up someone who’s half mad”, she comments (Burton 2010). But it remains unacted-on, because this Alice has more important business to attend to.²¹ Although she promises the Hatter she will return again to Wonderland, he sadly predicts that she will forget him, again. However, in the film’s final image, the presence of the Caterpillar, now a striking blue butterfly whom Alice addresses by name, suggests to us that she has lost none of what she gained on her second journey. In this final triumphant moment, Alice Kingsleigh seems much more a product of the twenty-first century than the nineteenth, though a far

better role model for young girls than her now doubly anachronistic 1951 Disney avatar. Burton's film (and recent *Alice* films in general) play with our anxieties only to revert to a more benign worldview than works in other formats. In the end, what Alice faces in this imagined Victorian setting are the concerns of a twenty-first-century young woman coming into her own, seeking autonomy through professional achievement.

3. Alice in Chains

If Burton's *Alice* is a relatively benign female empowerment fantasy, *Alice: Madness Returns*, which also has an empowered heroine, is anything but benign. This sequel to *American McGee's Alice* (2001) returns to the themes of madness and memory that are so prominent in the original game. It also adds new imagery of sexuality and paedophilia, thus complying with the now almost obligatory cultural imperative to introduce these themes into *Alice* retellings.

In his games, McGee takes the dark Wonderland concept seriously, the "inherently troubled, disturbing vision" that Brooker cites above (Brooker 2004: 71). In an interview regarding the earlier game, McGee has stated, "I've heard it said many times now that our Wonderland is closer to people's visions of the original than anything that's been created before", singling out the Disney version as being "further away from the original than *Alice* ended up" (Kramer 2000: 278, 276). In a 2010 online poll, readers of *Wired* magazine voted *American McGee's Alice* their favourite of the various post-Carroll renditions of Alice (see Thill 2010). They cited its thorough and credible world-creation as well as its effectively dark twist on a childhood classic, whether Carroll or Disney.

Videogames can be especially effective as adaptations because "in playing [them] [...] we can actually 'become' one of the characters and act in their fictional world" (Hutcheon 2006: 11). This is somewhat limited by the fact that the games are third-person, rather than first-person, so that the player manipulates Alice like a puppet instead of seeing through her eyes. This circumstance compromises her agency, making her dependent on the player as on the various forces within the story that seek to influence her. Because Alice is always already a part of the common culture, however, she retains her distinctness in the midst of both identification and manipulation by the player. In the YouTube playthroughs I watched, the gamers often talked through the play, and it was apparent that this possibly mad, certainly

violent Alice was nevertheless still the girl they knew from the familiar children’s story.

McGee’s Alice has a goth-inflected image that fits well with the design and atmosphere of the game. Throughout *American McGee’s Alice*, and in select (mostly transitional) scenes in *Alice: Madness Returns*, she wears the classic blue dress with pinafore, but with goth-style high buckled boots, usually accessorised with a large knife, the Vorpal Blade, as well as with bloodstains, which give her an empowered, and perhaps sinister, look. (The remaining outfits in *Madness Returns* are variations on the same theme, customised to fit the visuals and thematics of each level.) She is small-breasted, clearly teenaged, but not overly sexualised. Her style suggests a combination of little girl and deadliness, the paradox behind the game itself.

Even as a non-gamer,²² I found myself more engaged by the concept, design, and overall atmosphere of the McGee games than by any of the other recent iterations; the limited amounts of plot and dialogue the games’ creators needed to incorporate may have given them an unfair advantage, since disadvantageous comparisons to Carroll’s original in plot and language are limited, while the inspired visuals are brought to the fore. The videogame formula is used effectively, though it is sometimes tedious, particularly as a player works his or her way through some of the levels unrelated to the text. *Alice: Madness Returns* contains approximately fifteen hours of gameplay, which some reviewers found overly repetitive (see, for example, Chester 2011). However, this extended engagement brings the viewer the same sense of disorientation that Alice experiences; it is deliberately disturbing.²³

One key to the success of the McGee games may be the way they combine Alice’s vulnerability with her strength. At the beginning of both games, Alice is in an institution, catatonic in a mental hospital in the first, and under the care of an orphanage psychiatrist for her hallucinations in the second. Yet, despite her vulnerable state, she manages to battle her way through the many levels of a videogame, armed with knives, pepper grinders, and lethal hobbyhorses. Ian Bogost, in *How to Do Things with Videogames*, suggests that it is a cliché that “games must fulfill roles of power, that they must put us in shoes bigger than our own, and that we must be satisfied with those roles” (Bogost 2011: 20). Alice’s hopelessness and despondency in the real world are turned on their head in the fantasy world,

where she is powerful as well as observant and, when given dialogue in the storyline segments, quick with a quip. Susan Douglas notes that the latter trait is characteristic of the pop culture warrior woman, who comes “armed with sarcastic comebacks and cutting putdowns” to show her mental, as well as physical, acuity (Douglas 2010: 77). This combination allows the player to engage with the character’s vulnerability while still having his or her wish-fulfilment as Alice triumphs in both fight sequences and puzzle solving, level after level. She challenges distorted versions of Wonderland characters, such as the March Hare and Dormouse, who have taken over the Mad Hatter’s insanely mechanised factory from the original game, and Tweedledee and Tweedledum, now sadistic asylum attendants. Others, including the Mad Hatter and the cannibalistic Duchess, enemies in the first game, serve more narrative functions here. As always, the mummy-like Cheshire Cat is her primary ally and source of advice.

Alice: Madness Returns takes place both in Victorian London and in Alice’s hallucinated Wonderland. Although the triumphant ending of *American McGee’s Alice* saw Wonderland restored to its earlier innocent glory, it has become dark once more as her psychological condition has slipped. The sense of loss and trauma from the first game, centring on Alice’s survivor’s guilt at being the only member of her family to escape from a house fire (which she believes to have been inadvertently caused by the family cat, or even more horrifyingly, by herself), here returns to the almost-obligatory underlying menace of paedophilia. Doctor Angus Bumby, Alice’s new medical attendant, is revealed as a sexual predator who arranged the fire in order to silence her heretofore unmentioned elder sister Lizzie, who had refused his advances. (Carroll, present in the first game as the family friend who wrote Alice the charming stories of the unfallen Wonderland, is thus not implicated.)

W. T. Stead’s *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* (1885), with its exposé of Victorian child prostitution, is echoed here. “I provide a service”, Bumby says. “In the great and awful metropolis appetites of all sorts must be gratified” (McGee 2011). In both the real world and in the Wonderland hallucinations, where he appears as the villainous Dollmaker, Bumby is trying to erase Alice’s memories so that he can prostitute her to child molesters, as he had done with the other orphans in his care:

I could’ve made you into a tasty bit. Clients out the door waiting for a piece from a raving delusional beauty, with no memory of the past, or no sense of the future. But you wouldn’t forget; you insisted on holding on to your fantasies. (McGee 2011)

Alice defeats him twice, first in Wonderland when he appears as a giant videogame ‘boss’ opponent with streams of blood running from his eyes, and again in the real world, when after a verbal confrontation she pushes him in front of an oncoming train. Through these violent actions, Alice directly addresses and overcomes the threat of paedophilia that surrounds her in both fiction and in the cultural imagination.

Having defeated Bumby, and thus the underlying spectre that haunts our perceptions of Wonderland, Alice walks away again, this time into a strange merging of Victorian London and Wonderland. Is she still living inside her delusions, or has she changed reality? The Cheshire Cat’s voice is heard, saying,

We can’t go home again. No surprise really. Only a very few find the way and most of them don’t recognize it when they do [...] Forgetting pain is convenient, remembering it agonizing. But recovering the truth is worth the suffering and our Wonderland, though damaged, is safe in memory ... for now. (McGee 2011; original pause)

This unsettled conclusion, which seems to leave room for another sequel, is unnerving in comparison to the full restoration of Wonderland in the original game. Commerce, like psychoanalysis, is an ongoing process. But the Cat is right; because she is on the verge of womanhood, Alice cannot go home again, either to the unfallen Wonderland regained at the end of *American McGee’s Alice* or to her lost family. She has empowered herself, but can only move forward into a new and unknown world.

4. Alice in Cthulu-Land

Raven Gregory’s graphic novel series, consisting of *Return to Wonderland* (2009), *Beyond Wonderland* (2010), and *Escape from Wonderland* (2011), provides the darkest of these new Wonderlands, the

one that most clearly demonstrates the horror aspect of the McGee influence,²⁴ but pushes the boundaries still further. Extreme and bloody violence, including graphically depicted flayings, decapitations, and other mutilations, as well as seemingly endless streams of blood, fill the pages. The narrative depicts suicide, murder, cannibalism, sadomasochism, rape, the kidnapping and exploitation of the innocent, and nearly any other horror trope imaginable, and while they are enacted on adults only in the primary narrative arc, it is clearly implied that children are victimised too.²⁵ Although the protagonist Calie is a teenager and Alice an adult during the course of the narrative, the text puts the younger Alice at risk in flashbacks; however, it keeps both child-Alice's Wonderland torments and the real-world rapes of her son Johnny offstage. Although the series contains origin stories for various characters dating back to the 1860s (see Gregory 2011b: 6-25; Gregory 2010b: 30-49, 72-103), this is the least Victorian of Wonderlands. Yet despite the trappings of graphic sexuality and ultraviolence, its message is not ultimately very different than those of the other iterations: the world (sex) can be dangerous, parents cannot always protect you, and only your own strength and resourcefulness will take you through Wonderland.

Whereas McGee's Alice had a positive experience in her earlier journeys to Wonderland, darkness creeping in only with her own later real-world trauma, Gregory's Wonderland is out-and-out evil. In a mythos that combines Carroll with H. P. Lovecraft,²⁶ we learn that Alice's Wonderland was in fact a dark under-realm, "Limbo, R'lyeh, Wonderland [...] a place where all the madness in the world comes from", a deal having been "made with a sleeping entity that would keep that madness from infecting this world" (Gregory 2009: 162). It is Alice's inheritance to be the sacrifice demanded by this pact. It is later revealed, however, that this tale of grand sacrifice is a lie; instead, Alice's great- (or thereabouts) grandfather Charles Dodgson struck a bargain, back in 1864, to preserve his own immortality (see Gregory 2010a: 121). A seven-year-old Alice does, in fact, enter this terrifying and dangerous realm as a child sacrifice. She eventually escapes, grows up, and becomes a suburban housewife in contemporary America, but ultimately slips into madness, unable to cope with what she has experienced. Her daughter, Carroll 'Calie' Liddle, searching for Alice's missing pet white rabbit, finds herself in a menacing Wonderland filled with insane serial

killers, all derived from Carrollian originals such as the Carpenter, the Mad Hatter, and the Queen of Hearts.

Not only are parental fears triggered by many of the events in these texts; they also become a central motivating factor. Alice protects Calie, helping her escape from Wonderland. In turn, Calie tries to protect her own infant daughter, Violet, returning to Wonderland to rescue the kidnapped child. The Red Queen, originally a Victorian mother, has come to Wonderland specifically to protect her son, the Red King, and takes bloody vengeance on his tormentors (see Gregory 2010b: 48-49). Even the fearsome Cheshire Cat has a beloved human mother-figure, Lena, his owner from his brief time trapped in the human realm as an ordinary cat (see Gregory 2010b: 28; Gregory 2011a: 88).

At least initially, sexuality is seen as something pleasurable. Calie and her boyfriend Brandon have a sexually active relationship that both enjoy. This point seems to play into the contemporary desire to contrast ourselves with the Victorians, in which we are “self-righteously complacent about today’s more relaxed sexual attitudes” (Weltman 2002: 80). However, there is an underlying moralism in the *Return to Wonderland* series, inasmuch as every (graphically portrayed) sexual act in this series has dire consequences.²⁷ Calie finds she is pregnant and, fearing that Wonderland might try to claim her child as tribute, flees with Brandon for New York. Her father is having a sadomasochistic affair, which ends horribly when Johnny, incorrectly blaming his father’s infidelity for Alice’s suicide, brutally kills both father and mistress. The narrative has it both ways – titillating and judgmental.

The menace of paedophilia has the greatest impact of all. Alice’s son Johnny is permanently psychologically damaged as a result of repeated incestuous childhood rapes by his uncle (see Gregory 2009: 125-126; Gregory 2010a: 104). His uncontrollable anger leads first to his torturing animals and subsequently to murder. After Calie, acting impulsively to save him from the police, pushes Johnny through the looking-glass and into Wonderland, he becomes the Mad Hatter, the third in that line, and Calie’s primary antagonist in the second and third volumes.²⁸ As Dodgson says to him in a later encounter in Wonderland, “Johnny, I know what your uncle did to you. It wasn’t your fault [...] I should have *stopped* him, Johnny. I should have kept you safe” (Gregory 2011a: 126). But it is too late. Wonderland’s madness has combined with Johnny’s own, and he has come

to enjoy his role as the Hatter. Paedophilic abuse is exceptional even among this parade of horrors, the thing so horrible that nothing can overcome it. Neither Charles nor Calie ultimately can protect Johnny, though Calie attempts to save him right up until the very last moment (see Gregory 2011a: 144-164).

Complicating any reading of the work is the nature of the visual response apparently anticipated from the reader. Women are depicted by the series' artists as highly sexualised in a way notable even among comic books, which are often far from subtle in their portrayals of the female form. Female nudity is not uncommon, and women are frequently dressed in scanty outfits, most memorably the fetishised dress-and-pinafore outfits that Alice and Calie both wear in *Wonderland*, like 'sexy Alice' Halloween costumes with very short skirts and thigh-high stockings. The pin-up galleries at the back of each volume display Calie, Alice, and other characters in moments outside of the storyline, in titillating poses, and with the occasional addition of horrific imagery.

Yet despite the visual commodification that she undergoes, Calie proves capable of handling herself even on her original encounter with *Wonderland* – "I learned a lot from watching horror movies", she comments (Gregory 2009: 94). On her final return, she takes on the full trappings of the warrior woman. Arriving back at the now-deserted family house, she announces, "My name's Carroll. Carroll Liddle. I'm back" (Gregory 2011a: 5), much as any pop culture hero would before a climactic battle. She refuses the infantilising Alice-fetish costume, although the Xena-esque leather bustier and thigh-high boots that replace it simply substitute one level of fetish for another. As Douglas has written, "warrior women in thongs fused feminism and femininity in a fantasy reconciliation between the fury of Riot Grrrl and the body politics of *Cosmo*" (Douglas 2010: 76). Douglas goes on to express concern that these "fantasies of power" end up "distract[ing] us from social inequalities" (Douglas 2010: 3, 5); and certainly, whatever her actions, Calie seems designed specifically to appeal to the male gaze.

Nonetheless, on her second encounter with the cannibalistic Carpenter, Calie recognises, "There's a strength there. A power I have never felt before. Something is different. Something has changed. And I think I like it." Subsequently she announces, "*This* is my sword", followed by "This is *you* dying on my sword" (Gregory 2011a: 35-36, original

emphasis). Is it her maternal feelings that give her this power, or is it simply the character rising for the final act? She succeeds in rescuing her daughter Violet (with the help of her lover Brandon, now transformed into a winged inhuman creature), and even in preventing the Jabberwock, the centre of all Wonderland’s madness and evil, from invading reality. She cannot redeem Johnny, however, who is too enmeshed in Wonderland’s darkness.

Though Calie wins the ultimate victory, she is fatally compromised. Her guilt regarding Johnny, unlike that of Alice in the McGee games, is real, and she must live with the consequences. At the end, a single mother living with her rescued daughter, Calie reflects, “I would say that we lived happily ever after, but that wouldn’t be true. Instead, I’ll just say we lived. That will have to be good enough” (Gregory 2011a: 165). There is no happy ending; the absence of peril and the rejection of the inheritance of Wonderland must necessarily be sufficient.

5. Conclusion

All of these adult Alices traverse terrain unsuitable for children, whether merely facing the new challenges and responsibilities of adulthood or battling with forces, internal or otherwise, that threaten harm to the protagonist’s psyche and well-being. While there is some overlap between categories, the videogame and graphic novel offerings, which can afford to appeal to relatively narrower audiences, take the notion of a dark Wonderland to its logical conclusions.

Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland*, as a film aimed at a broader audience, uses Alice’s greater mobility and her freedom of action largely to revisit her earlier adventures. Her recovered memories restore something of the child to the adult, helping her to recover the strength and determination of childhood to carry forward into her adult years, an inheritance from both her father and her own younger self. Though Victorian in its setting and by far the most decorous of the films, it is arguable un-Victorian in its assumption that Alice can simply opt out of marriage in favour of overseas adventure, but it provides a useful corrective to the Alices, child or adult, who simply want to go home rather than experiencing the adventure through the looking-glass.

The freer use of grotesque and horrifying imagery, as well as the open acknowledgement of sexuality in both conventional and pathological forms, in the videogame *Alice: Madness Returns* and Gregory’s graphic

novel series means that these Wonderlands, steeped in both the psychoanalytic and horror traditions, are too dangerous for children. They are, in fact, hazardous for the teenage protagonists who learn to overcome their challenges in order to survive. Recovered memories and inheritances here are connected with unspeakably horrific betrayals, including the sexual abuse of children, but must be remembered to be overcome. Behind the horror, however, these stories are not only psychoanalytic, they are moralistic, and in that quality, oddly familiar and oddly Victorian. While *Alice: Madness Returns* considers the always-haunting issue of child abuse in an ultimately productive way, allowing Alice to purge herself of residual feelings of guilt or blame, Gregory's series introduces practically every horror imaginable.

Can Wonderland get any darker? A recent episode of *Warehouse 13*, a Syfy network television show, posits Alice Liddell herself (here identified with her fictional avatar) as a psychotic serial killer, trapped inside a looking-glass to contain her evil.²⁹ Although mild in its presentation, this conceptual twist suggests that Alice's possibilities have not yet been exhausted.

Notes

1. My evidence here is somewhat anecdotal, as it includes one of my anonymous readers for this article, as well as a fellow panelist's response at a panel on neo-Victorianism at the American Comparative Literature Association in 2010.
2. In comparison to adaptations, illustrators of new editions of the *Alice* books tend to depict her as a young or at any rate preadolescent child. See, for example, the work of Helen Oxenbury (1999), Lisbeth Zwerger (1999), Anne Bachelier (2005), Robert Ingpen (2009), and Iassun Ghiuselev (2003).
3. Nicely tying McGee and the Jefferson Airplane together are several effective fan-made musical videos on YouTube, which combine imagery from the sequel game, *Alice: Madness Returns*, with Emiliana Torrini's cover version of 'White Rabbit', notably by users DaughterofDarkness7 and Playa17lol.
4. As well as Alice's recovered memory in the Burton film, above, a significant physical version of the talking cure is explored through sexuality in Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's graphic novel *Lost Girls* (2008), which features an adult Alice as one of its three female protagonists.

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5. Culturally, an increased surveillance of children is based in anxiety about child predators, first and foremost paedophiles, but also kidnappers, terrorists, school shooters, and so forth (Nelson 2010: 17-18). While Alice might have sat beside her older sister on a riverbank, growing ever more bored as her sister read a book “without pictures or conversation” (Carroll 2000: 11), a modern-day parent would make sure that Alice was occupied more productively, perhaps at soccer camp or dance lessons, or doing math enrichment exercises on her Net Nanny-monitored computer. Her sister would be expected to be more fully attuned to what Alice was doing, if in fact she was considered suitable for the supervision of her younger sibling. Wandering off and finding a rabbit hole, unaccompanied? Being left at home alone, to find her way through the looking-glass? While classic stories of childhood ranging from Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer* (1876) to Ray Bradbury’s *Dandelion Wine* (1957) cast a nostalgic glance at the unaccompanied wanderings of childhood, at home in the twenty-first century, “many parents believe that [...] children can no longer be left free to roam as they did in the past” (Nelson 2010: 56). So while seven-year-old Alice’s opportunities to find that rabbit hole are limited, only seventeen-year-old Alice can take her place.
 6. In a recent unrelated conference panel, one of my co-presenters said jocularly that the Liddell family had had to move to escape Dodgson’s unwanted attentions. There is no factual basis for this assertion; the dean of Christ Church College remained firmly in his college-supplied dwelling. Similarly, when I taught a seminar on Carroll’s works (his writings, photography, and logic problems, as well as illustrations and film versions of the *Alice* books) in 2003 and 2004, a fair number of my students presumed, coming into the class, that it was an established fact he was a paedophile; an equal number assumed he was an active drug-user as well. For some, this impression was based on rumour and reputation; for others, it was based on viewing Dodgson’s photographs of little girls. Interestingly, during the course of the semester, opinions shifted in both directions, with some students newly coming to believe he was a paedophile while others, who had begun the semester certain that he was, concluded he was not.
 7. A primary exception to this are works of fiction dealing with the Alice Liddell/Dodgson relationship, and thus addressing the paedophilia-fear directly. Alice Liddell herself appears in these, beginning in childhood, and in some cases aging into adulthood. These works include Katie Roiphe’s *Still She Haunts Me* (2001), as well as Melanie Benjamin’s *Alice I Have Been* (2009). The latter, interestingly, displaces the issue of paedophilia away from

Dodgson, making him honourable (if not unmoved by Alice's proto-nymphet charms) and instead assigning the predator role to Victorian art critic John Ruskin, also a real-life friend of the Liddell family, as well as an admirer of young girls. Ruskin's more publicly complicated sexuality, as exposed by his divorce trial, is Dodgson's companion in popular infamy (see Robson 2001: 3); see, for example, the opera *Modern Painters* (1995) and the play *The Countess* (2000) (Weltman 2002: 79-94), as well as the BBC television series *Desperate Romantics* (2009).

8. One book series that has achieved wide notice is Frank Beddor's *The Looking-Glass Wars* series of Young Adult novels (2006-2009), which made the *New York Times* bestseller lists. The series, which also ages Alice to her late teens, posits that Alice Liddell is really Princess Alyss Heart of Wonderland, a much more dangerous place than Dodgson/Carroll painted it, particularly under the reign of her usurping aunt, Queen Redd. Alyss returns to Wonderland to retake the throne, in a series of videogame-like battles, and is aided by childhood sweetheart Dodge Anders, in a move clearly calculated to give male readers a point of identification. Unfortunately, this addition also means that Dodge takes over much of the heroic action that Alice would normally handle herself in most of the versions I discuss.
9. The original larger group of works I considered is evenly divided between Victorian Britain or its aftermath (Beddor; Burton; McGee; Moore and Gebbie), and contemporary England or America (Gregory, Willing, Fellows).
10. That the films were released in the same year says much about the zeitgeist that shaped them both. The DVD packaging of *Alice* proclaims, "Welcome to a Whole New Wonderland", while *Malice* informs us that Alice has "A very important date on the DARK SIDE of WONDERLAND". In fact, both feature older North American Alices, both are set in the present day, and both flirt with the notion of decadence only to pair their Alices romantically with a Wonderland denizen in conventional romances. Both films play with the expectations of the knowledgeable viewer, incorporating characters from both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*; in short, each is remarkable largely in the degree to which it is unremarkable.
11. Most of these sandwich in material from *Through the Looking-Glass* as well.
12. Some of my students, whose knowledge of Alice came solely from Disney, were surprised at her straightforward, even aggressive manner in the books. One student, who called Carroll's Alice "psychotic" on first reading, had come to prefer her by the semester's end.

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13. This moment is in contrast to the original text where, as the Gryphon says, “It’s all her fancy, that; they never executes nobody” (Carroll 2000: 95).
 14. This refusal is highly unlikely in her class and situation. Additionally, the notion that a nineteen-year-old who is ‘out’ socially would be wearing a dress that comes to above her ankles to a formal party is likewise improbable, even if understandable in the costume designers’ attempt to approximate Alice’s famous blue dress.
 15. Curiously, Willing and Fellows centre on Alice’s obsession with an absent parent as well.
 16. Something that Britain was, in fact, already doing at the time. This script, despite its Victorian setting, is not particularly concerned with historical accuracy. Kristina Aikens has pointed out that China had only recently “been forced through military action to allow British trade against its own government’s will. Viewers of the film were most likely meant to overlook this historical detail, but ultimately, Alice’s fate in this latest adaptation suggests that entering a ‘man’s world’ of adventure requires compliance with capitalism and military force” (Aikens 2010: 31).
 17. It is notable that after her original Eat Me/Drink Me encounters before entering into Wonderland proper, Alice is never again in charge of her own size, but is subject to transformations suggested or imposed by others. This passivity is in contrast with Carroll’s original story, where she more frequently than not is the one to initiate the changes.
 18. *Malice in Wonderland* centres on Alice’s recovered memories as well. In Willing’s *Alice*, memories and emotions are stolen from innocent humans (‘oysters’), and Alice’s father, now the Queen of Hearts’ chief scientist, must remember who he is to undo the damage he has caused.
 19. The film, unfortunately, makes a common mistake and takes the title of Carroll’s poem, ‘Jabberwocky’, as the creature’s name, when it actually means ‘poem about the Jabberwock’.
 20. Presumably this acquiescence reflects both his fondness for Alice and his realisation that Hamish would be better matched with a more conventional partner.
 21. The casting of Johnny Depp, Burton’s favourite leading man, as the Hatter, throws the character into prominence among the ensemble, but it is notable, again, that Willing pairs Alice romantically with his analogue, a secret resistance fighter called Hatter. (Fellows matches Alice, instead, with London cab-driver Whitey, who with his obsession with time, becomes the White Rabbit figure who leads her into Wonderland in the first place.)

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22. Here I must acknowledge my husband, Martin, for playing through portions of both games on his PS3 for me; when our joint available time ran short, playthrough videos on YouTube were invaluable in my experience of *Alice: Madness Continues*. Gamers posting walkthroughs and excerpts include GhostRobo, RydarGames, qbertaddict1, and MNHStudios. Gamers omgarrett and aseebq posted the concluding scenes to *American McGee's Alice*.
 23. For this point, thanks to one of my anonymous readers.
 24. There are also three volumes of *Tales from Wonderland* (2010-2011) by Gregory, which provide back story on various Wonderland characters, some in the present day and some extending back to the nineteenth century.
 25. In the *Tales from Wonderland* series, both the Queen of Hearts and the Red King (Suicide King) came to Wonderland as children.
 26. This linkage is emphasised in *Beyond Wonderland*, where Calie learns that her true grandfather is named Howard Philips, as in Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Her supposed grandfather, Charles Dodgson, is in fact her semi-immortal great-grandfather.
 27. Ironically, Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's massive and pornographic graphic novel *The Lost Girls* (2005), set at the outbreak of World War I, allows sexuality a far more complex and nonmoralistic role – some sex acts are liberatory, a few damaging, and others banal.
 28. The first is Jack the Ripper, the second Johnny's abuser uncle.
 29. See 'Fractures', *Warehouse 13*, Syfy, 27 August 2012 [television]; also 'Duped', *Warehouse 13*, Syfy, 25 August 2009 [television].

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