

How to live with the absurd: Lewis Carroll's disciplined grip on the nonsense of life -- a strategy for survival and a way to enjoy the world!ⁱ

"Began a poem on Nothing but have not made much of it yet." Entry in Carroll's Journal - November 1856

This is a modest attempt to follow Lewis Carroll down his famous rabbit hole and into his Wonderland of celebration and survival. His love of nonsense helped him live with uncertainty and his *Alice in Wonderland* is, in part, about the trickiness of words. It's "a celebration of language - its pleasures, anxieties, rewards and risks . . ." ⁱⁱ And any help living with uncertainty and the absurd seems wonderfully appropriate in an election year.

G. K. Chesterton wrote,

"It is not children who should read the words of Lewis Carroll . . . [Carroll's nonsense should be read by] sages and gray-haired philosophers . . . in order to study the darkest problems of metaphysics, the borderland between reason and unreason, and the nature of the most erratic of spiritual forces, humor, which eternally dances between the two. That we do find pleasure in certain long and elaborate stories, in certain complicated and curious forms of diction, which have no intelligible meaning whatever, is not a subject for children to play with; it is a subject for psychologists to go made over."

In his own life-time Carroll's nonsense was turned into something of an industry. And, again, an election year shows us that turning nonsense into an industry isn't a lost art. We might note that the US had a guided missile in the 1960s called the Snark and there was a cartoon showing Krushchev, after announcing that the Soviet Union would resume nuclear testing, sticking his

head around a corner, a cloud mushrooming from his mouth and bearing the single word “BOO.” And if you know your *The Hunting of the Snark* you know the word he was trying to say.

I also confess that this is a bit of a love-letter to the peculiarities of English humor, which has stood me in good stead over the years. I was brought up on the quietly insane poems of Edward Lear (they first appeared in 1846) and the stories of Lewis Carroll. Later came the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan and the comedies of Oscar Wilde.

“Parody, irony and absurdity, often impenetrable to outsiders, became and remain the essence of ‘English humor,’ both laughing at and celebrating its own foibles – what has been called ‘the importance of not being earnest.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

As I read the other day in a *Fortune Cookie*, “Don’t trust reality. It’s only a collective hunch.” Carroll would have liked that.

But even if you find yourself falling down a rabbit hole, you need some structure, some recognizable narrative form to give the semblance of coherence. You need a story to give life some appearance of order.

Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Human Kind* (Harper Collins 2015) outlines the fundamental role played by myth and storytelling in enabling human beings to live in community.

The secret (Harari claims) was probably the appearance of fiction. Large numbers of strangers can co-operate successfully by believing in common myths. Any large scale human cooperation – whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe – is rooted in common myths that exist

only in people's collective imagination, or so he claims. Here's where the trouble begins - with the word *only*. Is everything simply "made up" by our self-contained imaginations? Harari assures us that this is so. Carroll would not have agreed.

Structured nonsense is important to Carroll because it makes us doubt our doubts. Harari has no doubt that "There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, no justice outside the common imagination of human beings." We humans have survived only because we have the capacity to believe stuff that isn't real. Our delusions save us. But may also end us one day.

Here's where Lewis Carroll provides an important corrective in insisting that a sense of the absurd opens us up to deeper truths. Stories keep the questions open and the doubts doubtful.

The Rabbinical method of interpreting texts comes to mind. Interpretation is a matter of endless argument. No one gets the last word. I think of two examples: the first has to do with the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. There were 10,000 Israelites, each facing one letter. Each letter had 10,000 meanings. It would take a committee of 10,000 Israelites to figure out one letter let alone one word of the revelation. The second example is the story of the Torah as a great palace of thousands of rooms. All locked. Outside each room is a golden key. It's the wrong key! It takes an enormous cooperative effort to open just one door. Both stories remind us of the complexity of language and just how hard it is for

us to communicate with each other. You may remember the two women screaming at each other from different tenement buildings in London's East End. An observer remarked, "They'll never agree because they're arguing from different premises."

When it comes to the current political landscape, Humpty Dumpty comes to mind. "When I use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all." Who gets to determine what's real? Who is master of the narrative? Who gets to tell our story - especially at a time of the breakdown of language?

Lewis Carroll -- the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson -- was a strange man: a brilliant mathematician and an ordained deacon in the Church of England. He was also a photographer, a magician and story-teller. Born on 27 January 1832 - in his father's Cheshire parish ("a sternly intelligent perpetual curate") -- Carroll's early childhood was extremely moralistic and isolating. Not unusual for the time.

In Mary Sherwood's *History of the Fairchild Family* "a loving father takes his offspring to see a criminal rotting on the gallows as a warning to them not to quarrel, and a naughty girl who enjoys playing with candles is horribly burned to death. The title of this chapter is not 'Beware of Fire' but 'Fatal Effects of Disobedience to Parents.'" Many of the Victorians were rough on their children.

They are either little slivers of sin or examples of radical innocence whose sole purpose was to show adults how to be good. Carroll took the latter view.

The Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass* asks the question: "What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning?" For Carroll, a child was full of meaning. He embraced the myth of the redemptive child - and even indulged in a kind of cult of childhood innocence. Children were the signs of purity in a grubby adult world. Think of Carroll's relationship with young girls. He wrote letters to them beginning with "My darling Agnes . . ." which we would think peculiar to say the least. Besides, think how much sexuality is a social construct (women bought and sold on the Victorian marriage market.)? Alice herself after all became Mrs. Hargreaves - in an alliance with the idol rich?

In 1852 the twenty-year old Carroll took a First in Mathematics and so had a place and income -- small, at first but *Alice* published when he was 32 made him pretty affluent.

Mathematics provided a kind of stability for him in a world where things aren't quite what they seem and where much of what we call "reality" is invented. He loved playing with language - even with trivial examples like the fact that the word "glove" has the word "love" in it. His whimsical stories were a means of control in an uncertain world. The interesting thing is that in order to write "nonsense" he invoked what he called, "the principle of submission to discipline." Religion and Mathematics were the disciplines, which anchored his uncertainty and, his conservative politics also provided a sense of stability. The

result was an odd personality – a man who was mesmerized by the purity and innocence of childhood, who loved the absurd and yet “was rarely troubled by self-doubt or even by a great deal of thought.”

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst writes of Carroll’s “ability to submit to discipline while also playfully testing its limits”. This is why he loved the theater where things must go wrong for a farce to go right. After all, the theater “is a place in which accidents are rehearsed and muddles are planned.” He enjoyed the fantasy of losing control while, at the same time, pulling the strings! Carroll was a control freak with a sense of the absurd.

It’s not surprising that Carroll was a good amateur conjuror. And, of course, a photographer. In those days to produce a single print required “the knowledge of a chemist, the eye of an artist and the patience of a saint.” *The Directions and Instructions for photography* ran to 54 tightly printed pages. This was before Kodak’s “You press the button we do the rest” later in the century.

One hundred years after his birth the Alice in Wonderland Industry was well established. In 1932 Alice (Alice Liddell, daughter of the Dean of Christ Church) Hargreaves visited New York (she died two years later). A leader in the *Herald Tribune* summed up the popular mood: “it is not inconceivable that [Alice Hargreaves’s] presence might remind a host of worried Americans of how much more there is in the world than economics and how scant a relationship wealth has to fun.”

Carroll's message was, "When we want to make sense of life's uncertainties we write a story." Alice Liddell in 1932 tried to remember what happened on July 4th 1862 – the picnic near Oxford. On that afternoon she and two of her sisters were with Carroll and his colleague Robinson Duckworth. And that afternoon Carroll invented *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Two years later, the first written version was presented to Alice and published the following year, with the sequel in 1872.

Alice in Wonderland was a wild success, going through many editions, and spawning many imitations and exploitations over the next ten decades. The book had many interpreters, some of them fanciful. Kitty Cheatham, a journalist writing in 1932 – thinking of July 4, claimed that the story demonstrated the power of "Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness." The book celebrated the theme of constancy in a rapidly changing world.

Queen Victoria enjoyed the book and asked for a copy of his next volume. She received a beautifully wrapped package containing *An Elementary Treatise on Determinants With Their Applications to Simultaneous Linear Equations and Algebraical Geometry*. Did Carroll know what he was doing? Probably not. Yet he did love spoofs. Take for example the Midland Counties Railway Bye-law VIII: "If any Passenger should be found in or upon any of the Carriages, or shall force his way into a carriage, without having previously procured a Ticket . . . he shall be liable to a fine of Forty Shillings." Carroll wrote Railway Rule III: "When a

passenger has no money and still wants to go by train, he must stop at whatever station he happens to be at, and make tea for the station master.”

W. H. Auden said, “We are all by nature actors who cannot become something until they first pretended to be it. They are, therefore, to be divided not into the hypocritical and the sincere, but into the sane, who know they are acting, and the mad who do not.” Carroll in many ways kept himself hidden in the thicket of his crazy but calculated humor.

What are we to make of the 3000 of his photographs existing – half of them children, most of them little girls. And you can imagine that there’s been a lot of speculation about that – but all unproven. I think he was a sensitive child of his time – embracing a pessimism modulated by an eerie hilarity.

Entrepreneurial Victorians were able to turn people’s enthusiasm for *Alice In Wonderland* into an industry. Take the love of fantasy and adventure and add the interest in Spiritualism and you have a money-maker. (Dickens Gradrind as publisher!) There was even a Wonderland theatre on the Whitechapel road. On Easter Monday in 1896 there was a performance by Mons Hayden who swallowed a watch, which could be heard ticking. There was also a tattooed lady and a troupe of performing pigeons, a man with a seven foot beard and an armless Midget Lady “who was 32 inches tall and went through ‘a MARVELLOUS PERFORMANCE WITH HER FEET.’”

Wonderland was even invoked by social reformers and by a member the newly formed Labor Party. *Wonderland* helped you imagine a different kind of

world and helped you bring it into reality. The world could be changed. It didn't have to be like this. *Wonderland* was revolutionary. In 1776 our Founders dared to imagine a world without monarchy.

If you want a contemporary example, you might look at the obituary of David Bowie in *the Economist* (January 16th 2016). While there's no direct appeal to Carroll – they couldn't be more different! -- there is an appeal to the absurd, a wallowing in uncertainty and even sexual ambiguity. What's missing is the zany humor. Bowie had swallowed Nietzsche who was no match for Tweedle Dum or Tweedle Dee.

Think of the 1960s London, and Bowie moving from mod to Buddhist, from rocker to folk artist, inventing characters like Ziggy Stardust and albums named *Spiders From Mars*. Bowie was a kind of snark dashing from persona to persona into an ever darker world of threatened annihilation reinforced with cocaine abuse. About Bowie it was said that his diet was "red peppers, cocaine and milk" – you could almost imagine Carroll writing that? Bowie's last video – *Blackstar* -- was released on January 8, 2016. "The video for the track 'Lazarus' shows him singing 'I'll be free – ain't that just like me?' before walking backwards, trembling, into a wardrobe, and pulling the door closed. He had [according to the Economist] choreographed his own death . . . Within days 'Lazarus' had been watched 17m times.

“Bowie loved enigma and ambivalence, including the enigma of his own being – the basis of his art – and the ambivalence surrounding his sexuality . . . He eventually ‘came out’, as he ironically put it, as heterosexual.”

There’s a fine line between social satire and the embracing of the decadence of a destructive nihilism. It’s a dangerous game.

Perhaps Carroll’s most Bowie-like poem is *The Hunting of the Snark (An Agony in 8 Fits)*. The poem makes us both laugh and feel unsettled, uneasy. It was written over a two year period (1874 to 1876).

The plot follows a crew of ten trying to hunt the Snark, an animal, which may turn out to be a highly dangerous Boojum. The only one of the crew to find the Snark quickly vanishes, leading the narrator to explain that it was a Boojum after all. The poem is dedicated to young [Gertrude Chataway](#), whom Carroll met at the English seaside town [Sandown](#) in the [Isle of Wight](#) in 1875. Included with many copies of the first edition of the poem was Carroll's religious [tract](#), *An Easter Greeting to Every Child Who Loves "Alice"*. Putting the Snark alongside Easter?

After crossing the sea guided by the Bellman's map - a blank sheet of paper! - the hunting party arrives in a strange land, and the Bellman informs them of the five signs of a [Snark](#): its "meagre and hollow, but crisp" taste; a habit of rising late and taking breakfast during five o'clock tea; "its slowness in taking a jest"; a "fondness for [bathing-machines](#)"; and its ambition. The Bellman warns

them that some snarks are highly dangerous boojums. This news causes the Baker to faint. Once revived, the Baker recalls that his uncle warned him that if the Snark turns out to be a Boojum, the hunter will "softly and suddenly vanish away, and never be met with again."

With this in mind, they split up to hunt the Snark: "They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care; / They pursued it with forks and hope; / They threatened its life with a railway-share; / They charmed it with smiles and soap."

Two explanations of which event in Carroll's life gave rise to *The Hunting of the Snark* have been offered. Biographer [Morton N. Cohen](#) connects the creation of *The Hunting of the Snark* with the illness of Carroll's cousin and [godson](#), the twenty-two-year-old Charlie Wilcox. On 17 July 1874, Carroll travelled to [Guildford](#), Surrey, to care for him for six weeks, while the young man struggled with [tuberculosis](#). The next day, while taking a walk in the morning after only a few hours of sleep, Carroll thought of the poem's final line: "For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see." Others suggest that the event that inspired the poem was the sudden death of Carroll's beloved uncle, [Robert Wilfred Skeffington Lutwidge](#), caused by a violent mentally-ill patient in 1873, during Lutwidge's time as an inspector of lunatic asylums. They support their analysis with parts of the poem, such as the Baker's uncle's advice to seek the Snark, you remember, with thimbles, forks, and soap, which, evidently, were all items the lunatic asylum inspectors checked during their visits.

It received largely mixed reviews from Carroll's contemporaries. *The Athenaeum* described it as "the most bewildering of modern poetry," wondering "if he has merely been inspired to reduce to idiocy as many readers and more especially reviewers, as possible."

The Hunting of the Snark has seen various adaptations into musicals, opera, theatre, plays, including one for trombone by Norwegian composer [Arne Nordheim](#) (1975) and a jazz rendition (2009). The poem has also inspired literature, such as Jack London's *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), the science-fiction short story "Chaos, Coordinated" (1947) by [John MacDougal](#),[[] and [Elsabeth Huxley](#)'s *With Forks and Hope* (1964).

What is the poem about? Carroll often denied knowing the meaning behind it; however, in an 1896 reply to one letter, he agreed with one interpretation of the poem as an [allegory](#) for the search for happiness. Scholars have found various meanings in the poem, among them [existential angst](#), an allegory for [tuberculosis](#) and [Henry Holiday](#), the illustrator of the poem, thought of it as a "tragedy".

Some saw in it the loss of identity. Someone suggested it was a satire of the controversies between religion and science. There was speculation that it was about the repression of Carroll's sexuality, and even a piece against vivisection. According to one interpreter the poem represents a "voyage of life", with the Baker's disappearance caused by his violation of the laws of nature by hoping to unravel its mysteries. Another saw it as "a tragedy of frustration and

bafflement," comparable to British actor [Charlie Chaplin](#)'s early comedies. And how about this? *The Hunting of the Snark* is "Carroll's comic rendition of his fears of disorder and chaos, with the comedy serving as a psychological defense against the devastating idea of personal annihilation."

"It's a Snark!" was the sound that first came to their ears,
And seemed almost too good to be true.
Then followed a torrent of laughter and cheers:
The the ominous words, "It's a Boo --."

Then, silence. Some fancied they heard in the air
A weary and wandering sigh
That sounded like "-- jum!" but the others declare
It was only a breeze that went by.

They hunted till darkness came on, but they found
Not a button, or feather, or mark,
By which they could tell that they stood on the ground
Where the Baker had met with the Snark.

In the midst of the word he was trying to say,
In the midst of his laughter and glee,
He had softly and suddenly vanished away --
For the Snark *was* a Boojum you see.

We love/need explanations and Carroll refuses to give any that makes sense. What or who is the Snark? Material wealth? Social Advancement? A symbol of the North Pole and even The Hegelian Philosopher's search for the Absolute. Who knows? So, we may as well amuse ourselves along the way. "It takes us on a journey and then teases us for assuming that we are getting anywhere other than further inside our own heads." He is gleefully opaque! A reminder of the Cheshire Cat's question, "Where are you going?" "I don't care much where -- . . . so long as I get *somewhere*."

Imagine *Alice in Wonderland* meets *On the Origin of Species*! And then bring the two worlds together! As William Empson has pointed out Darwinism was in the air like “a pervading bad smell”. Suddenly the natural world was revealed to be a place of bloody struggle and unexpected trauma. Birdsong was not a simple expression of joy, but a sexual invitation or a warning, flowers were not innocent splashes of color in the landscape, but participants in an endless turf war.” In *Alice* natural conflict is everywhere.

“For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see.” I hope you do see and I hope you’ve been both amused and unsettled by this little excursion into the world of Lewis Carroll and his strange “celebration of language – its pleasures, anxieties, rewards and risks . . .” – food for thought for our time as we approach another presidential election!

And please note a couple of things: first, the [Boojum tree](#) in [Baja California](#), Mexico, takes its name from the poem. And second, that we have our 2016 version of *The Hunting of the Snark* with the story of the Texas school board elections. There’s a retired school teacher’s version which includes a section about the President being a male prostitute, a claim that JFK was murdered by Democrats, and that the recent school shootings are a punishment for teaching evolution. Global Warming is a hoax, invented by Marx – (I’m not sure whether she meant Karl or Groucho). These are perilous times. Watch your step. Be careful where you tread. There are many openings to the rabbit hole but also many adventures to be had.

Alan Jones, the Chit Chat Club, San Francisco, April 12, 2016

This essay owes a great deal to *Lewis Carroll and the Secret History of Wonderland*
By Robert Douglas-Fairhurst The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2016

ⁱ See Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Snark*, New York, Simon and Shuster, 1962

ⁱⁱ see Robert Douglas—Fairhurst's *Lewis Carroll and the Secret History of Wonderland*.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Robert Tombs *The English and Their History*, Knopf, NY 2015