

Don't Judge a Book by the Cover: The Evolution and Development of Book Cover Design in Children's Literature

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Abstract

Many children are taught from an early age that you should not look at a book's cover in order to decide whether it is worth our time. However, despite our best intentions, we do judge books by the first thing that is spread across the cover. Beginning in the 15th century, the early years of printed book production saw books made without covers; it was the individual buyers who would acquire bindings to fit their tastes and finances. Book design and what a book cover does has changed through the centuries as we change our preferences in what is aesthetically pleasing and fitting with the theme of the text. These changes were made to benefit the readers considering how we still judge our interest by first impressions. After all, a cover can say a thousand words.

There is an unseen danger that comes when judging the cover and image of a book which is most prominent among the literature intended for children. It is here that we can witness the variety and evolving changes in what is expected from a book cover. An individual book can go through a dozen different cover designs based on edition, country, or even if a movie has been made. I will be exploring the evolution of book covers in children's literature while investigating how the cover design demonstrates the publisher's intentions and alters the perceptions of readers. I will then look at the cover design of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which was first published in 1865 and has over one hundred editions and adaptations, in order to look more closely at the intentions of book cover design and the changes that reflect popular perceptions.

What's in a Cover?

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland has gone through hundreds of editions since its publication in 1865, whether that be hardback or paperback, digital or audio. With each new rendition, a new cover design is also likely to appear. In general, the design and intention of book covers has shifted within the last century. With different interests, expectations, and artistic appreciation altering between decades, the covers of children's books have changed too even though the text inside remains exactly the same.

Despite our best intentions, we all inevitably judge books by their covers. Publishers know that the cover design of a book can dramatically affect who will read the book and who will buy the book. Children's literature has been particularly subject to careful cover design which influences the perceptions of potential buyers and readers.

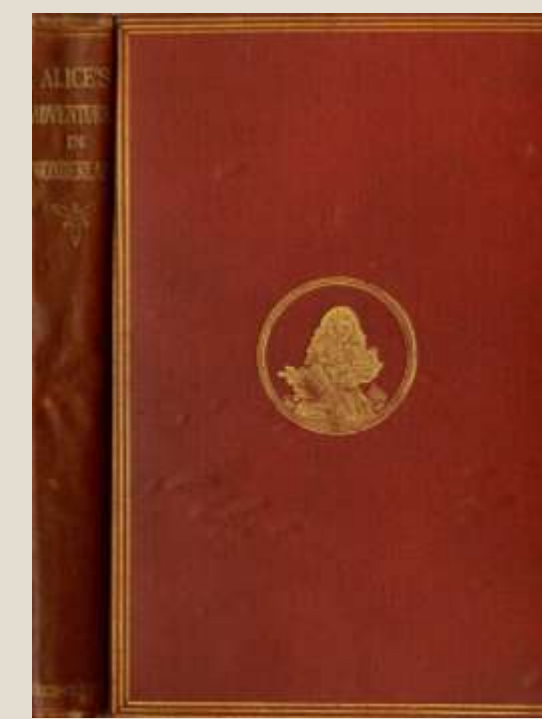
In an article by Elizabeth Dutro, gendered marketing and book design are considered as a part of children's reading practices. Regardless of the actual content of the book, some covers of books were perceived to be intended for either a female or male audience due to the design. Dutro's article illustrates just one of many different factors is how a book cover is designed and what intentions are meant for that design.

Alice in Wonderland: Selecting Covers

In order to limit the cover designs I will be looking at I will be focusing on the books that have been published by Macmillan Publishers. When Lewis Carroll first published the children's classic, it was with Macmillan (founded in London, 1843) that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was first published. There are a number of other publishing houses who now have the rights to the story, but by limiting my exploration to only Macmillan's publications, I will be able to look at the oldest versions of the cover as well as how that original company has changed to match audience and buyer expectations. As another limiter, I will only be looking at versions of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* which have not been abridged, adapted or cut into different stories, or editions that also include the sequel *Through the Looking Glass*.

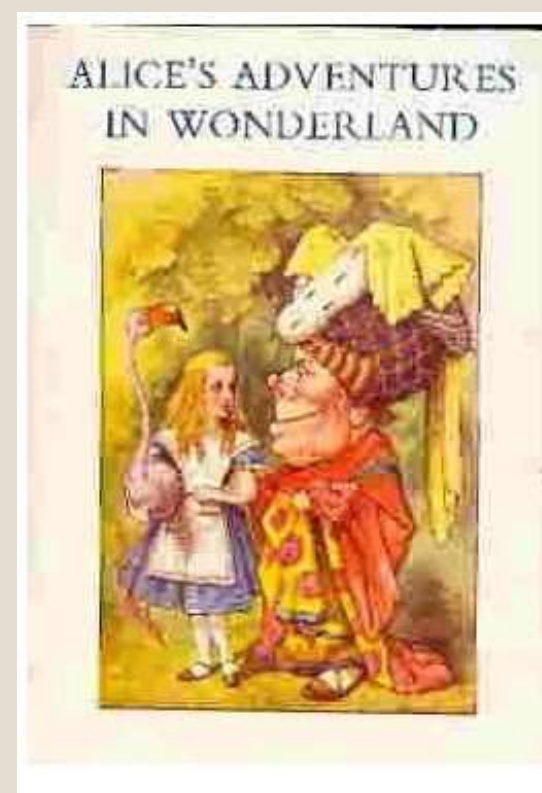
All of the cover designs I will be working with are sourced from digital archives and lists, so I will be primarily focused on the visual aspect of the cover design and not on the material, texturing, or other factor that can only be best determined through physical touch.

Covers Through the Years



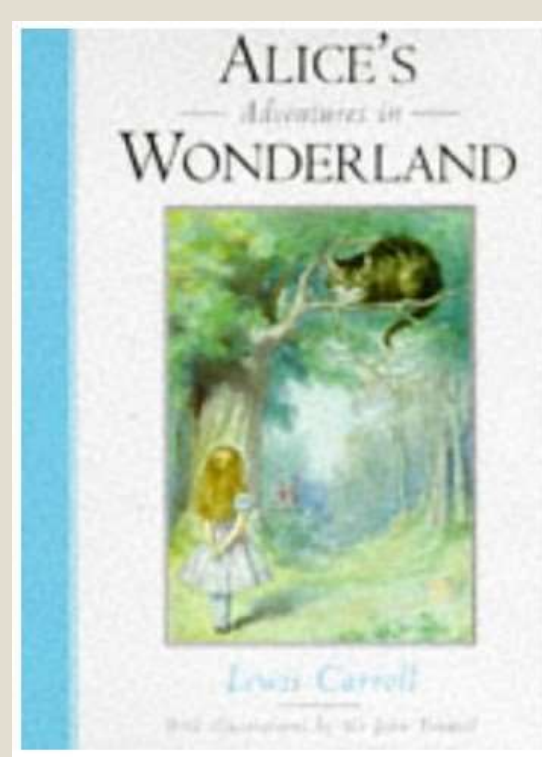
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Design from 1866-1942

December 1927
ISBN: 0-333-02946-1 / 978-0-333-02946-6 (UK edition)



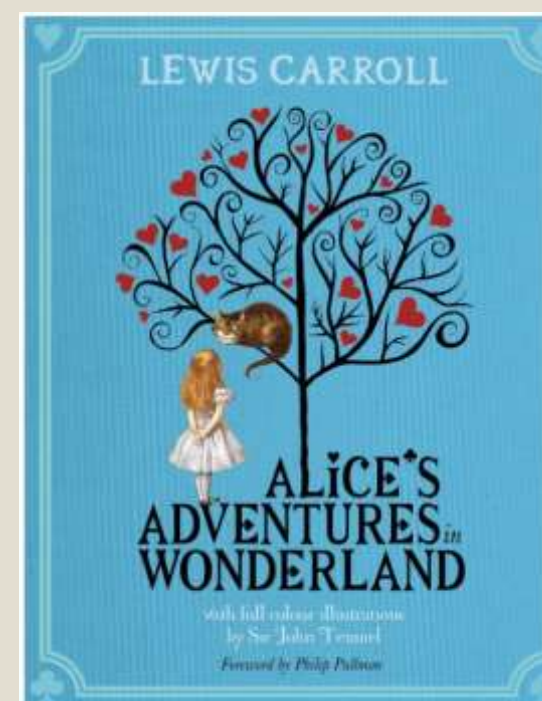
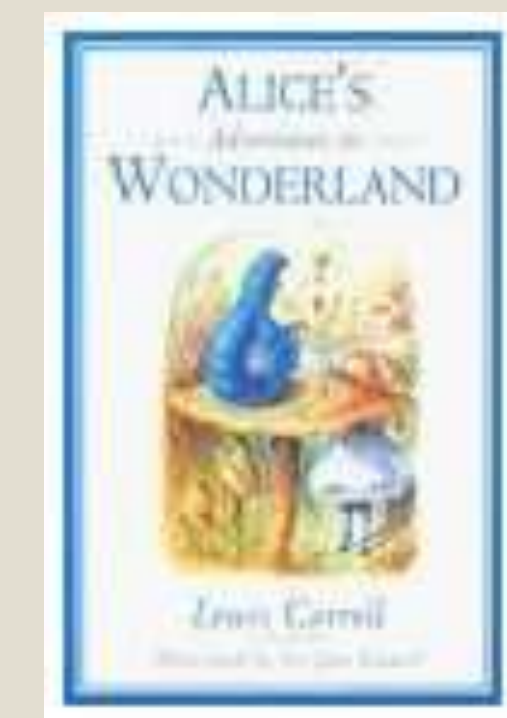
September 1977
ISBN: 0-333-23437-5 / 978-0-333-23437-2 (UK edition)

January 1980
ISBN: 0-333-29038-0 / 978-0-333-29038-5 (UK edition)



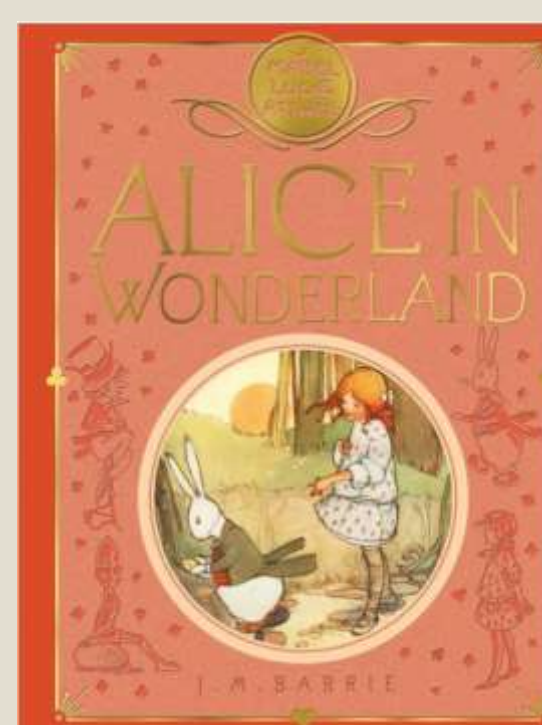
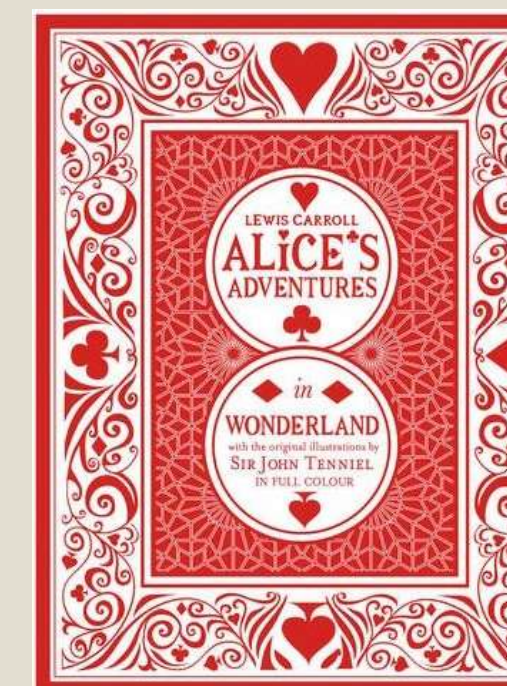
October 1995
ISBN: 0-333-64049-7 / 978-0-333-64049-4 (UK edition)

March 1997
ISBN: 0-333-66995-9 / 978-0-333-66995-2 (UK edition)



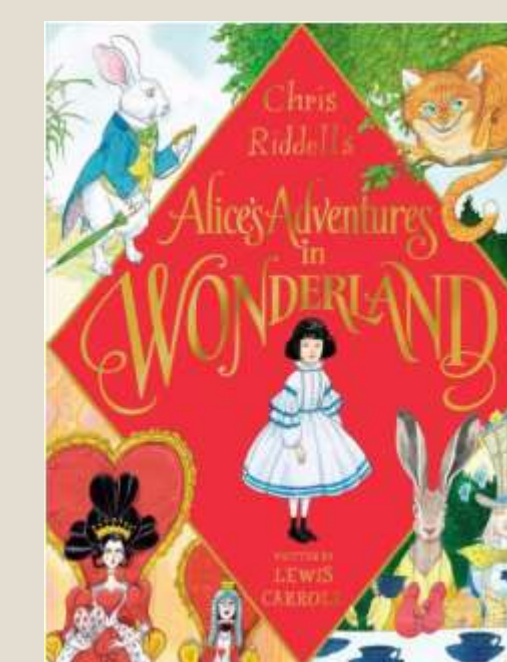
(The Macmillan Alice)
September 2011
ISBN: 0-230-75538-0 / 978-0-230-75538-3 (UK edition)

November 2011
ISBN: 0-230-75540-2 / 978-0-230-75540-6 (UK edition)



October 2017
ISBN: 1-5098-3033-2 / 978-1-5098-3033-6 (UK edition)

October 2020
ISBN: 1-5290-0246-X / 978-1-5290-0246-1 (UK edition)



Discussion

The standard first editions of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* published by Macmillan were bound in a red cloth, per the wishes of the author compared to the standard Macmillan green. This cover design of the book remained largely unchanged from 1866 to 1942. This cover design was very simple with the red cloth cover and gold-colored gilt. The gilt filled the border lines, the text for the title and on the spine and two images, one on the front and the other on the back of the book. The front image design was an image of Alice herself in a circular border. The back image was an image of the Cheshire cat's head, also in a circular frame, but smaller than the front image. According to the online archive of Early Books at the University of Maryland, Carroll specifically requested for the novel to be bound in red cloth instead of green because the red would be "more attractive to childish eyes."

Other later editions, such as the 2011 Macmillan *Alice* were designed as gift books. When books first became more accessible due to the growing print industry in the 18th and 19th centuries, they were often sold and marketed as the perfect gift. Creating books with the intention of being a special edition or gift is something that is still prevalent, as many reprints of classics are designed for beautiful gift displays.

Overall, most of the covers from Macmillan over the years have featured a young girl in the role as alive interacting with one of the more well-known characters on the cover. Regardless of the medium or artistic style of the design, each image is colorful and playful.

The most significant difference is between the most recent edition from 2020. In this edition, the cover appears to refer back to the original book which prominently features red and has Alice in the center of the design. There are more whimsical and current imaginations of other characters in each corner, all which are colorful and carefully positioned. The most stark contrast is the fact that the title character is now sporting black hair in comparison to previous illustrations which envision Alice as blonde. Perhaps Macmillan Publishing has decided to move away from the traditional view of Alice in order to present the character in ways that more children could find commonalities with.

Continuing Research

My research is far from over. In order to properly explore this topic, I will continue to research more in-depth so that I can answer the following questions:

- What influences and trends in popular culture, art, and literature affected the cover design of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*?
- How are certain designs (colors, shapes, characters, etc.) perceived by child readers?
- Does the cover design influence how the child reads and engaged with a text? If so, what is the effect?

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