

Johns Hopkins University Press Podcast

Wendy Doniger, Social Research

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Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Hopkins Press podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the Hopkins Press Journals Division. I'm delighted to introduce our guest today, Dr. Wendy Doniger. Dr. Doniger is the Mircea Eliade distinguished service professor of the history of religions at the University of Chicago, Emerita. She is the author of over forty books, including: *The Hindus: An Alternative History* and *Hinduism* in the Norton Anthology of World Religions. Dr. Doniger recently contributed to the journal *Social Research's: Books That Matter* issue, which asks notable scholars to reflect on a book that deeply affected their lives. Dr. Doniger's essay, "My Life in Wonderland", describes the many ways that the works of Lewis Carroll have brought her joy and inspiration over the course of her career and life.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Wendy. I so appreciate your time.

The first thing we like to ask all our guests is if you could give us your academic origin story. What led you to study Indology?

Wendy Doniger

It began when I was really quite young. My mother gave me *A Passage to India*, E.M. Foster, and then she gave me Rumer Godden's translations of stories, and so I was interested in India. And then when I started high school, I learned Latin and my Latin teacher privately taught me a bit of Greek and I liked Greek better than Latin cause it had a funny script and was harder. And she said, "If you like that, you'd love Sanskrit." I said "What is Sanskrit?" It was the language of India. So it came together more and more, and at the same time I came from a very political family. This was the 50s, a lot was going on. McCarthy, my mother was a Communist, lots was going on. And I got tired of it, and I wanted to go long ago and far away, and Sanskrit seemed to be the place. So, I began at Radcliffe, if I chose Radcliffe because it was the only place at that time that a woman could learn Sanskrit in college, it was- well basically women's Harvard. I began as a seventeen-year-old freshman at Radcliffe studying Sanskrit. And it was a good guess- it was a guess of course - what do you know when you're seventeen? But it was a good guess, and I never regretted it. I loved having private tutorials with the Sanskrit professor and all my colleagues at Radcliffe were in five hundred person classes with Harvard boys studying English Literature and so forth. So, it suited me, and I loved everything about India. I loved its excesses. I loved the way that you could wear purple and orange together while everyone else was just sort of wearing brown or basic black. And I loved the Indian painting where you get lots and lots of things into it, instead of just one portrait and a landscape, which I thought was boring. Didn't like Renaissance art at all. It just suited my tastes, and I never looked back. It was a guess, it was

only a guess. But, it was an educated guess and it was right. It was really right - I was lucky. I was very lucky.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's a rare gift, yeah. Wonderful, thank you. The latest issue of the journal *Social Research* is a special issue, and the title is "Books that Matter 2" because it's the second time that the journal has invited authors to reflect on a particular book, a special one that deeply affected your life or how you think or what you think about. Your essay, which is called "My Life in Wonderland" is a really wonderful reflection on how the work of Lewis Carroll has had a meaningful part of your life. When you were asked by the journal – approached by the journal - to contribute to the issue, were the *Alice* books your immediate choice, or did you have a hard time picking a particular title?

Wendy Doniger

Immediate choice. Absolute immediate. I think about Alice a lot. I – she gets into a lot of my writings in one way or another. It's a book I love. In the essay I talk about how I was raised on the book by my mother, and how people who know me always give me Alice presents: Alice packs of cards and Alice cups and I have a wonderful mirror where one side is Alice heading into the mirror and the other side is Alice coming out of the mirror. So, it was – I play Alice sometimes. I have an audio book of it and every once in a while I play it instead of a Brahms quintet or a Louis Armstrong or something. Just play a little bit of Alice, it's something I sort of know by heart. I can't recite the books by heart. But, if you give me the beginning of a sentence, I can probably end it, finish it for you. So, it was an obvious choice. And also, I knew that all of my learned colleagues would say that their favorite book was Proust or Plato or some highfalutin', intellectual thing, and it was of thumbing my nose a little bit of academia and saying, "You wanna know what book I care about? THIS is the book I care about." And so, it was fun doing it that way too. So, it was overdetermined why I chose that, but lots of fun writing this.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Thank you and thank you for it, it was absolutely a joy to read. Your essay starts with a reflection on how you sort of see - or saw your own mother in the characters of the Queen of Hearts and the Red Queen. And I as I read that, I was thinking about it and I was thinking about how a lot of the characters in *Alice* that she encounters are metaphors for the types of adults that one would encounter as a child in your life, which also I think is - for me anyway, was a reminder of *The Little Prince* and the way that that was done really well in terms of like a young person encountering all these different types of grown-ups. My question is, do you think that Lewis Carroll was making a specific commentary with the Queens about the British monarchy which some people think that's what that means or was it more just grown-ups and adults writ large in terms of how he painted those characters?

Wendy Doniger

That's a good question. I think the monarchy is already there. In children's games - chess is hardly a child's game, but some children play chess and certainly cards. So, in the cards, you already have kings and queens that comes from the European origin of the cards. Chess is actually an Indian game. The term checkmate is actually "shāh māt" which means "the king is dead" in Persian.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh! I didn't know that! How wonderful! I love that.

Wendy Doniger

You're actually speaking a bit of corrupted Persian. And it comes from the Mughal period in India and it gets into colonial Britain, and all that sort of thing. So, there is a colonial history in the card figures. But it's also interesting that they are kings and queens and kings queens in chess and so forth. So, what I think is, it is about grown-ups, and it's about the way that for a child, grown-ups have the kind of unreasonable, absolute monarchy. The absolute authority and power that monarchs have. So, your mother says you have to go to bed now and you say "why?" and she says, "because I say so". That's the way kings and queens talk. When we're grown-ups, if someone says "I'd like to go there", you say "Why?" and then say "Well, I think this or that". The treatment of children as subjects, I think it's a wonderful expression of the feeling that children have that they're powerless. These are unreasonable arguments. "Why should I go to bed now? It's bright daylight now." It's a completely stupid thing to say, and yet you have to do it. That's the kind of authority that the Red Queen and the White Queen have. They say things completely nonsensical, and Alice says "That's not right, is it?" But that's it. That's the way it is. So, I think the kings and queens come into the nursery rhymes, "The king was in his counting house, counting out his money. The queen was in her chamber eating bread and honey." I mean there's so many kings and queens in the nursery rhymes of ordinary children. They never saw kings and queens. Why are these stories all about kings and queens and it's - fairy tales, too - about princesses. So, the idea of royalty in children's literature is partly romantic, and it's partly a child's view of the world of unreasonable, absolute authority. And it's most brilliantly expressed I think in *Alice in Wonderland*. But the queens in particular are so unreasonable - "Off with their heads!". I think it's a wonderful picture of how the world looks for a child in the presence of unreasonable adults - like parents.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah. And as a person who grew up reading the book and now is a mother of two young children, when those tables turn it's like - "Oh I get it on a whole other level now!"

Wendy Doniger

I have power.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right! And I do ask them to go to bed and it is broad daylight out and that is totally unreasonable. Oh it's true, brushing your teeth, it's just, "Why? Why?"

Wendy Doniger

Don't ask me why, just do it!

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right. Yeah. I just had that argument about three hours ago. One of the parts about your essay that I loved the most was you just rattled up a bunch of snippets and quotes from the books that have made their way into the daily vernacular of you and your family. My question is what do you think it is about Carroll's writing that makes it so prone to sticking in your head, almost like a catchy song?

Wendy Doniger

Well, it is catchy. I think catchy is a word for it. It's simple. These are stories about children and for children. There are satires on big fancy words. Humpty Dumpty makes up for the mushroom scene with the caterpillar. There are lots of – all of *Jabberwocky* - big words. So, there's jokes about big big words. Portmanteau words that mean two things. And that's why Carroll does not use big words. He uses very simple words, one, two syllable words - which do have a sing-song quality, which is easy to remember, and easy to chant. *One, two! One, two! And through and through. The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!* So, that's a phrase which I always use when I have to do something mindless or difficult and I think, "I can do it! One, two! One two! I can do it." So I think they're simple, catchy phrases. He writes beautifully. The rhyme schemes, the rhythm schemes are always just part of natural speech. So, it's easy to memorize. I think they just stick in your mind because they're the best kind of simple poetry. And the rhythm, the music of the lines: *Will you won't you will you won't you will you join the dance?* It's impossible to forget it once you hear it and so it comes up again. *"The time has come," the Walrus said, "to talk of many things: of ships and sails and sealing-wax, and whether pigs have wings."* I mean - it just trips off the tongue. It's fun to say.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right, yeah.

Wendy Doniger

"*You are old, Father William.*" It just - the rhythms are simple, they reflect the rhythm of ordinary English speech. The rhymes are simple. It's just very memorable stuff.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Agreed. Agreed. You also make note of how morbid the books can be. I'm gonna quote you saying that, "they are obsessed with death, like so many of the great works of children's literature". Some parents or caregivers today might be a bit shocked by the bluntness of these books and the many threats of beheading throughout them if they haven't read them before. What would you say to those that think that some of these themes and some of this imagery in these books is not age appropriate?

Wendy Doniger

Well, we get into the whole thing of trigger warnings, and the whole philosophy that you mustn't surprise children and you mustn't warn them, and so forth. I don't really believe in that. I believe that people of all ages should read *Huckleberry Finn* and learn about racist language as well as racism from the way it is. So that's for older children perhaps. But, I think that children, we know from Freud, children do have dark thoughts. You don't invent them. You don't say, "You know things die, don't you?" Children know that things die. A puppy dies, a goldfish dies. Death is something that children worry about. Someone in the family dies, they're very few of us who are lucky enough to reach the age of six or seven without encountering something or someone dying. And I think that to make a joke of it is almost as useful as having a serious talk about it, which is also sometimes necessary. So, I think you don't put the idea into children's heads, they worry what happens. If you eat a chicken, "Was this a live chicken before I ate my chicken dinner?" and so forth? So I think it's there anyway, just as racism is there in the world and children should learn about it from Mark Twain or anybody else. And so, I don't think that's the case. Joking about it I think helps. I believe in what my Viennese mother used to call *galgenhumor*, gallows humor: joking about death, joking about serious things. You don't say, "Let's not joke about that it's too serious." It's *because* it's serious that you have to have jokes about it. So, when you think about other children's books there's a lot of death in the Grimm's Fairy Tales. Even modern stories – *Charlotte's Web*. It's all about worrying that that pig is gonna be killed. And indeed *Babe*, which is the wonderful successor to *Charlotte's Web* in this generation of children, is all about whether they're gonna eat the duck whether they're gonna eat the pig and everything. So, I think the great children's literature has always been about death and I think that this is an example of someone confronting death and worrying about it and joking about it. So, that by the end you get kind of used to the idea that death is everywhere and that when you eat things it kills them. So, I think it's good, I think it's a good way to deal with ideas and fears that children already have about death rather than, as the argument sometimes goes, that they won't think about it until they read a book. I think that's just nonsense. Of course they think about it and this is a good way to think about it.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I agree. I agree and it creates a sense of transparency, you know, that light-heartedness and that jokiness, it opens up the conversation like you just said. It allows that-

Wendy Doniger

The Bread-and-Butterfly only eats this Alice says, "Well if it doesn't get that, will it die?" And the answer is yes it dies. Let's go on to the next thing, right? What else?

Mary Alice Yeskey

One answer to that question. Right. Excellent. I'm really grateful for your description of the 1933 *Alice in Wonderland* film in your paper, which I sheepishly admit I have not seen.

Wendy Doniger

You must see it!

Mary Alice Yeskey

I know. Well, I am now that is assignment number one, having read your paper. You note that while the film is flawed, it's the best adaptation of the books that there is. Does that movie adhere more closely to the actual plot and language of the books? I really wanted to know from you what makes that film better than the many other versions there have been which you called "appalling bad" and I do agree with you. I haven't seen a good version of *Alice* anywhere.

Wendy Doniger

They're all terrible. What makes this film wonderful is not that it tells the story particularly well, it's the casting. I mean, W.C. Fields is Humpty Dumpty. That in and of itself is just such a stroke of genius! And Edna May Oliver was the Red Queen, was this wonderful character. Cary Grant as the Mock Turtle? I mean why did he even take the part? It's such a departure from his usual debonaire thing. The Mock Turtle was always weeping and moaning. And then Gary Cooper as the White Knight is also inspired. The White Knight is very tall, and keeps falling off his horse. Then you have Gary Cooper, the very very tall Gary Cooper. The whole cast goes on and on and on. So, just seeing those people in those parts is just so hilarious, that it didn't even matter what they say or do. They more or less say or do a lot of the things that are in the books. It's the combination of the two books - but they're just wonderful. The casting is simply great.

Mary Alice Yeskey

My mission now is to find out on what streaming platform I can find it and if not, then I will go to Ebay.

Wendy Doniger

I'll lend it to you. I own it. I'll lend you my copy. It's just wonderful. Like all the films, it's impossible to do it. The cartoon versions in some ways are better cause they can do the magic better, something turning into something else. But having these actors, I think was particularly wonderful. Sterling Holloway is the Frog Footman, I mean it's just- it's inspired casting. And I think all these great actors took on these really silly parts, as a lark and as a change of pace. I think there's a certain amount of drinking on set.

Mary Alice Yeskey

They were probably having a blast. (laughs)

Wendy Doniger

I think they were having a great time. And it's reflected in the movie. That just makes it funnier.

Mary Alice Yeskey

You can feel the joy.

Wendy Doniger

I think so. I think so.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Excellent. You touched on many ways that these books have tied into your academic research. How does the Alice universe find connections in Indology?

Wendy Doniger

It finds it in Indian mythology. I'm a particular kind of a student of India. I'm not a historian. I'm not really a literary expert, either. I really write about mythology of Hinduism. I really don't know that much about Buddhism, and not much at all about Islam. So my specialty is ancient Hinduism, ancient India, which was Hindu for many centuries. The Rigveda, the Upanishads - the two great Sanskrit epics - The Ramayana and the Mahabharata. And the theology of India as well, which has a great deal to do with dreams and illusions and transformations. So, things become other things a great deal in Indian mythology. Dreams are real, people get into other people's dreams. Dreams become real. The whole dream mythology of *Alice in Wonderland* - the fact that the two adventures are dream adventures. They don't really happen, Alice dreams

and then wakes up, Alice dreams and then wakes up. And there's a lot about dreaming, particularly in *Through the Looking Glass* where the Red Queen is dreaming of Alice while Alice is dreaming of the Red Queen. So, the idea of dreams nested in other dreams and of us having no existence except in the mind of the dreamer - is part of ancient Indian theology, really - that we are part of the mind of God and that is what our existence is. And that we wake up from a series of dreams and a series of rebirths. There is a great deal of dream theology and dream mythology in India which I found very compatible with inspired in some ways by - I've written a lot about dreams in Indian mythology and in several of my books I've used *Alice in Wonderland* and the dream of the White King. This is not a surprise, since Lewis Carroll was a Don at Christ Church College in Oxford in the 19th century and knew a great deal about India. And knew a lot about Indian theology, too - and the whole paradox of dreaming, there was just a lot of Indian thinking in the two books. India was part of Britain's colonies then, with dealing with the colonial age. So, I think that it's a two-way stretch. It's not just the case that I'm influenced by Lewis Carroll in my study of India, but that he was influenced by Indian philosophy. He must have known quite a lot of Indian philosophy living as he did in being a British intellectual at that time. So, I think I recognized in *Alice in Wonderland* a lot of Indian theology and mythology. And in my own writings, I started writing about dreams, illusions and other realities in the 1980s. And just this year I published an essay on being - the idea of being a part of the dream of God, and I actually cited Lewis Carroll in it. So, I think it's the same world that I lived in in the Sanskrit texts is the world that Lewis Carroll lived in at Oxford in the 19th century - with an awareness of Indian philosophy. So, there's a serious actually historical overlap and the way that he developed the ideas was very useful to me in coming to my own understanding of the Indian version of those same ideas: of being a part of somebody else's dreams, of waking up to reality, reality as being an awakening, the whole - "bodhi" means awakening. The whole idea, of waking up from the dream. The illusion of reality is a dream of reality, and if you're really enlightened, you wake up. So, I found that compatible.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I love it! And I just- I love listening to you speak on that because it's just such a testament - you know and I tend to get really romantic about academia and about literature, but it's just such a testament that just like centuries and countries can just have this straight line across. It's not you trying to *make* that connection. That connection is *there*.

Wendy Doniger

The connection is there.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, I love that.

Wendy Doniger

Then your job is to differentiate it and say, “But...” and you have to learn Sanskrit. If everything’s in Lewis Carroll, then why bother to learn Sanskrit? No, it’s not exactly the same in India. Once you’ve established the link, then you say but they do something else with it and he does something else.

Mary Alice Yeskey

He changed it this way. Yeah.

Wendy Doniger

That’s fun, too.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I’ve always felt an immediate and strong kinship with people who love the *Alice* books as much as I do, which is one of the reasons why I was so delighted to come upon your essay. And I feel like I might be making a sweeping generalization here, but I feel like there’s a certain kind of person- someone who just is a lover of wordplay, someone who sort of delights in the weird and the odd, that these books really draw in – that’s drawn to these stories. Would you agree? Do you think there’s just kind of a certain-sort of, nerdy weirdo that really likes the Alice books? (laughs)

Wendy Doniger

I think so. I would add people who like whimsy, people who are whimsical, light-hearted, who don’t take themselves seriously, who are not ashamed of being silly, who not ashamed of loving children’s books. People who take themselves seriously would never say “*Alice* is my favorite book, I mean I wanna write about Proust here, let’s get serious.” So, I think that people who laugh at themselves, who have a certain kind of sense of humor. I lived for 10 years in Oxford, the happiest years of my life. I love Oxonian thinking, Donnish thinking, and I see it in Lewis Carroll, and I see it in the people that I really loved in England, who had a kind of silliness in their sense of humor. They were often great scholars and very serious people, but they didn’t take themselves too seriously. And I think the people who love the *Alice* books are people who are like that - who are always ready to laugh and to be capable of self-mockery. The *Alice* books are also about human flaws, about silly things. Alice is making such a series of terrible mistakes.

Mary Alice Yeskey

She’s such a mess, right? (laughs)

Wendy Doniger

She's constantly saying the wrong thing to the wrong people. It's wonderful. Her gaffes are simply so wonderful. "Oops", she says, "I'm sorry I said that." So, I think that people who are able to laugh at themselves are also able to laugh at Alice. At the silliness of English philosophy of English literature. I think that you find soulmates when you find – there The Lewis Carroll Society, I haven't seen it in years, but I used to hang out with people from the Lewis Carroll Society. They're great people, they're truly eccentric people. So, that's the Alice crowd really. but then also you have it in *Mrs. Minnever*. I mean a way, everybody loves Alice, they don't have to go far to find the fellow Lewis Carrollian. *Mrs. Minnever* has that wonderful scene where the Greer Garson is reading to the children while the bombs are falling, and she is reading *Alice in Wonderland*. That's the book they chose in this great propaganda film of World War II to make sure they tugged at the heartstrings at everybody who saw the film. And it does well, that's-

Mary Alice Yeskey

Easily, immediately identifiable.

Wendy Doniger

Absolutely.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And my last question is, I just wanted to know if you're working on a book or if there is anything coming up for you research wise that you wanted to share with us?

Wendy Doniger

Yes, I'm always working on a book.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I figured as much! (laughs)

Wendy Doniger

That's my middle name. I've written fifty books so I always- so I'm actually this year I'm publishing two books, one just came out - and Alice is in it! It's a book that consists of the letters that I wrote to my parents in 1963 when I was 22 and on my first visit to India. And I wrote lots and lots of letters, I typed them out, my mother saved them, they were lost for years. I only found them a couple of years ago.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh wow!

Wendy Doniger

Oh, I'm just publishing them now. It's published in India now, it will come out in America out a little bit later. And there I am trying to make sense of India and I keep quoting things, I say "it's like this", "this one was like that". I had these strange things and I'm homesick and I'm confused in many ways. I say- it reminded me of this. And *Alice* - I quoted that 12 times in these letters. "It was like the White Queen", it was like this and so forth, or I just used the phrase. So Alice is in that book of my old letters when I was very young, 22, very foolish in many ways. So, that's certainly something which is relevant to this. Then the book that's coming out next month in America, is a very different kind of a book, it's a translation of the last books of the great Sanskrit epic, the Mahabharata. It's called *After the War: The last books of the Mahabharata*. It is after the war, the war is over and then there's these hundreds and hundreds and pages of Sanskrit where they're trying to figure out what to do with their lives after the war. It's a battle between cousins, it's civil war. They have to live with people who killed their children, people whose children they killed. It's about peace and reconciliation. It's about forgiveness. It's about making friends with your enemies. I think it's very relevant to the world today.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I was gonna say, those are messages we could hear right now.

Wendy Doniger

There's definitely messages in it. It's never been properly translated, parts of it have not been translated at all, so I was pleased to put it together. I've been working on that for years and years. So that's coming out. Those are this year's books.

Mary Alice Yeskey

(Laughs) Wonderful, well I am very much looking forward to both and we will post links to the ones that are currently available in the show descriptions so that our listeners can-

Wendy Doniger

The book of letters is only available as a book in India but it's available here as a Kindle. So you can get both of them really. Or you will about to be able to get the other one, so -

Mary Alice Yeskey

Wonderful! Well, Dr. Wendy Doniger, thank you so much! This was a delight. I am going to watch the movie, I'm going to re-read the books, because you've just reawakened my already

very long, very deep love of *Alice* and I just so appreciate your time and your essay is terrific and it just filled me with joy.

Wendy Doniger

Well, I'm so pleased you liked it so well. It brings joy to my heart to see a happy reader and thank you very much for letting me talk to you about it today! Very good, great pleasure. Thank you.