

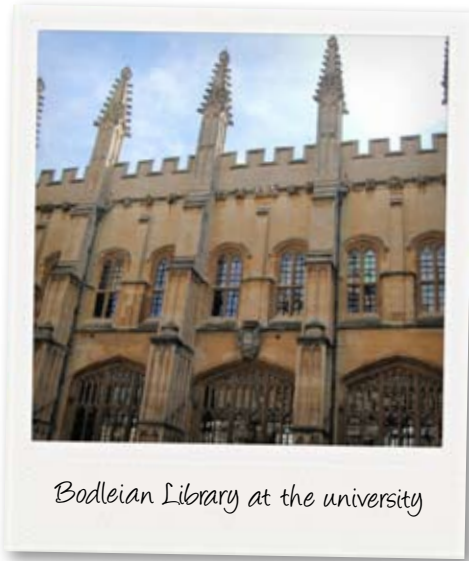


Tumbling Down Oxford's rabbit hole

The English town of Oxford, with its world-famous university, has been a byword for serious scholarship for centuries. But as **gr** reader ASHLEIGH MEIKLE points out, it's also been a magnet for writers who have created many of literature's most whimsical and endearing characters.

Stepping into Oxford is like entering a world of dreams, accessible only through some of the great classics of children's literature that many of us have read at some point in our lives – although they are most magical when read in childhood. Upon entering this magical place, it felt as if I were being greeted warmly by the Pevensie children and the benevolent lion Aslan from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Toad, Rat and their friends from *The Wind in the Willows*, and Alice and the White Rabbit. They are my old friends from childhood, forever in Oxford and between the pages of the books in which they live, and to whom I return to when I am in need of reassurance. I was torn between entering the wardrobe into Narnia, diving down the rabbit hole to eat and drink the food that

would make me bigger and smaller, or going 'Poop-poop!' in a car with Toad. I wanted to enter all these worlds at the same time – the quaint and magical Oxfords of Alice, Lucy Pevensie and Toad, far removed from the suffocating, grimy London of Dickens, where put-upon drudges eked out a miserable and oppressed existence and where maltreated orphans pilfered to survive. Oxford, with its long literary history, is a beacon to writers. Many books with connections to Oxford were written long ago, but these Oxfordian worlds continue to exist, and you can access them through tours and through the work of current writers such as Philip Pullman. But the magic truly lies amid the words of C S Lewis, Kenneth Grahame, J R R Tolkien and Lewis Carroll, authors who all had links to Oxford.

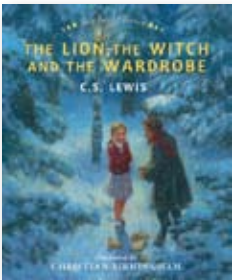


Bodleian Library at the university

A tour of the Bodleian Library at the university is an ideal introduction to literary Oxford. When you take the tour you'll gasp at the whimsical Gothic architecture of the Divinity School, which Harry Potter fans will recognise as the Hogwarts Infirmary from the films. As I stood there, I felt as if Madam Pomfrey could waft

through the door at any second with a bottle of Skele-Gro or some other magical antidote in hand. In my mind's eye I could see the beds lined up against the wall and the ailing Hogwarts students lying in them. The tour also climbs up rickety old wooden stairs into the Duke Humfrey's Library. Even at the door I could smell the musty old books, and I could imagine students of past ages hunched over their tomes as they studied diligently. An aura of ancient magic and historicity emanated from the Bodleian, and it was easy to see why this place was used as the Hogwarts Library in the Harry Potter films.

The university's Magdalen College was the dominion of C S Lewis and is where, it is said, the famed novelist and academic began to write the magical adventures of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It was here that he enjoyed the company of Tolkien and several other writers, who would play word games and go on walks. It was in these meetings that Tolkien first shared the beginnings of *The Hobbit*. But the magic of Narnia and Middle-earth float all around Oxford, not just in Magdalen College. Everywhere in Oxford there are reminders of the creators of these wonderful friends whom we first encountered in books. On St Giles' Street you'll find a quaint little pub called The Eagle and Child, where C S Lewis met with a group of fellow writers that included Tolkien, author of



The Hobbit. But the magic of Narnia and Middle-earth float all around Oxford, not just in Magdalen College. Everywhere in Oxford there are reminders of the creators of these wonderful friends whom we first encountered in books. On St Giles' Street you'll find a quaint little pub called The Eagle and Child, where C S Lewis met with a group of fellow writers that included Tolkien, author of

The Lord of the Rings. This group was known as the Inklings. I was lucky enough to eat a meal in the back room where the group originally met; it was thrilling to sit where one of my favourite authors had sat and gaze at wall-mounted photos and information about C S Lewis and soak up his lingering spirit in the pub.

Walking around Oxford, I could imagine the characters poop-pooing past in motor cars, flying by on the back of a lion and tumbling by as they sought a rabbit with a golden pocket watch who was late for an important date. Ageless and timeless, they flew by in a dizzying blur.

Upon entering, I felt as though I had tumbled down the rabbit hole and entered the Victorian era.

As you step out from Christ Church College at Oxford University – where Lewis Carroll worked as a maths academic and which was one of the settings for the 'Alice' books – you'll find Alice's Shop. Upon entering, I felt as though I had tumbled down the rabbit hole and entered the Victorian era. Here you'll find all kinds of merchandise from the 'Alice' series of books, including Mad Hatter figurines, a pocket watch just like that which the White Rabbit brandished, and a trinket box featuring the rotund figures of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Alice Liddell, the real girl who inspired Lewis to write his 'Alice' books, would visit this same shop as a child when it sold confectionery.

All through Oxford I felt as if I was guided by the roar and gentle voice of Aslan. His presence guided me towards The Kilns, the quaint house surrounded by flowers in which C S Lewis lived and where he wrote 'The Chronicles of Narnia'. Just standing outside the house was enchanting and



inspiring. My next stop was Holy Trinity Church in Headington Quarry, the final resting place of Aslan's creator. Even years later Narnia still beckons, and I go back into the book from time to time, visiting the characters and places that captured me and swept me up into a great battle.

Although Kenneth Grahame was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, it's the Oxfordian setting for his novel *The Wind in the Willows* that inspired me to include him here. Whenever I think of *The Wind in the Willows*, the first character that comes to mind is Toad, and his fascination for motor cars, gypsy caravans and his cross-dressing escapade to escape jail. His little song is a delight:

*The clever men at Oxford
Know all that there is to be known.
But they none of them know one half as much
As intelligent Mr Toad!*

The author of these immortal words wanted to attend Oxford University but his guardian did not permit him to do so, on the grounds of cost. Kenneth Grahame's presence, however, is still felt in Oxford, where he lies buried in Holywell Cemetery.

The former homes, watering holes and other haunts of writers have long been pilgrimage destinations for book lovers. But usually they are far-flung and rarely as concentrated as they are in Oxford, a city that for centuries has attracted fertile imaginations with a facility for words. Whether it's gardens or graves, pubs or libraries, shops or hallowed halls, you're sure to bump into the ghosts of plenty of writers – and their characters – when you stroll about the streets of Oxford. **gr**



Ashleigh Meikle outside Alice's Shop