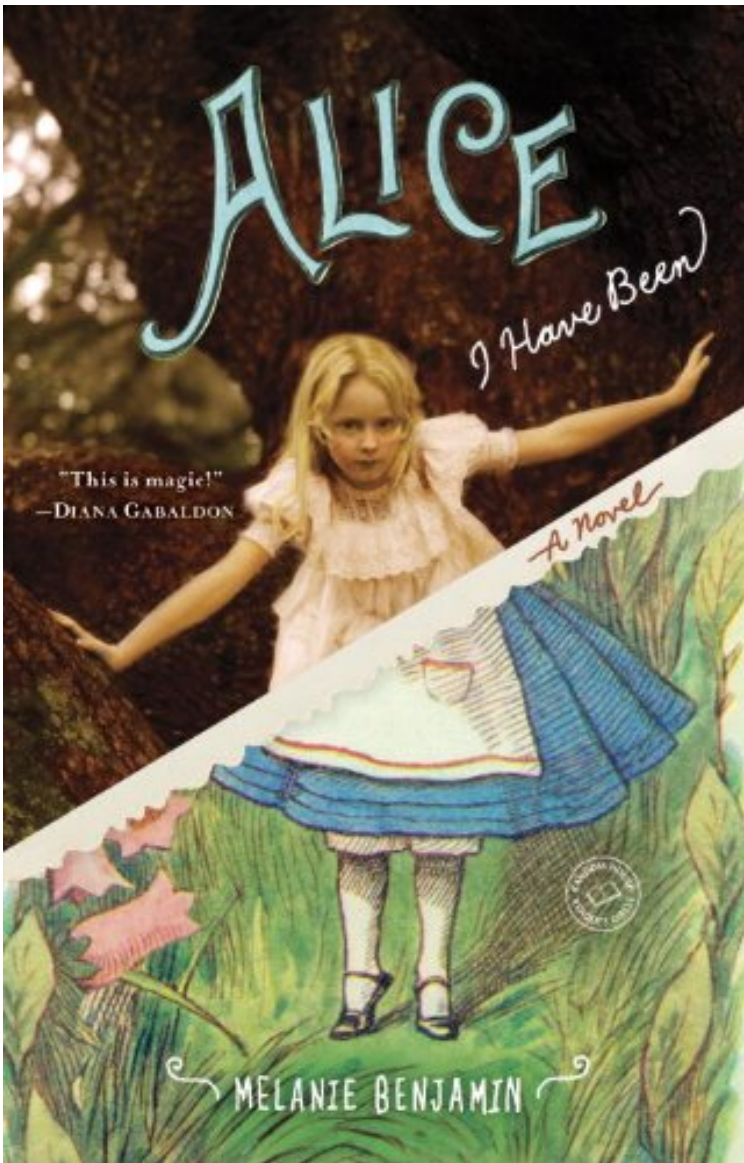


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# Alice I Have Been: A Novel



Par Melanie Benjamin  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBONUS: This edition contains an Alice I Have Beendiscussion guide and an excerpt from Melanie Benjamin's The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb. Few works of literature are as universally beloved as Alices Adventures in Wonderland. Now, in this spellbinding historical novel, we meet the young girl whose bright spirit sent her on an unforgettable trip down the rabbit holeand the grown woman whose story is no less enthralling. But oh my dear, I am tired of being Alice in Wonderland. Does it sound ungrateful? Alice Liddell Hargreavess life has been a richly woven tapestry: As a young woman, wife, mother, and widow, shes experienced intense passion, great privilege, and greater tragedy. But as she nears her eighty-first birthday, she knows that, to the world around her, she is and will always be only Alice. Her

life was permanently dog-eared at one fateful moment in her tenth year the golden summer day she urged a grown-up friend to write down one of his fanciful stories. That story, a wild tale of rabbits, queens, and a precocious young child, becomes a sensation the world over. Its author, a shy, stuttering Oxford professor, does more than immortalize Alice; he changes her life forever. But even he cannot stop time, as much as he might like to. And as Alice's childhood slips away, a peacetime of glittering balls and royal romances gives way to the urgent tide of war. For Alice, the stakes could not be higher, for she is the mother of three grown sons, soldiers all. Yet even as she stands to lose everything she treasures, one part of her will always be the determined, undaunted Alice of the story, who discovered that life beyond the rabbit hole was an astonishing journey. A love story and a literary mystery, *Alice I Have Been* brilliantly blends fact and fiction to capture the passionate spirit of a woman who was truly worthy of her fictional alter ego, in a world as captivating as the Wonderland only she could inspire.

Chapter Twelve

You look lovely that rose tulle over the tulle is perfection! Oh, I do wish I was going! Covering her face with her handkerchief, Edith coughed fitfully and then fell back against her pillows, her hair a tangled mess of curls. Her face was nearly as red as her hair. Yes, you'd be a perfect vision, with all that coughing! I know it's unfair, and Aubrey will be vexed, but you know what Dr. Acland said. You're to stay in bed for a week, at least. It's so unlucky! And for once I thought I'd be the belle of the ball instead of you! Papa was going to announce the engagement tonight. Edith smiled weakly, and turned her head to sigh over the beautiful blue taffeta gown hanging in the cupboard. I'm never the belle of the ball when you're present, so I relish the chance tonight. May I borrow your diamond star clip for my hair? Yes, of course! I'll look wonderful with your diamond earrings! I smiled my thanks and rummaged around in her jewel case until I found the clip; dancing over to the looking glass above the mantel, I pinned it in my hair, just above my left ear. Is this right, do you think? I turned. It's perfect. Oh dear! And Edith was off on another coughing fit again. Poor darling! I'll ring for the nurse. Dr. Acland said we weren't to get too close, in case it's measles. I do wish I could give you a kiss, though, before I fly. I'm rather excited for tonight, silly, but I am! How many Commemoration Balls have I attended? None like tonight, Edith managed to choke out, between coughs. Finally they subsided, and she fell back against her pillows once more. Do you think the Prince will propose, then? I really don't know, but perhaps he might. I was too superstitious to say more, even if I could not stop myself from smiling in anticipation. We had made so many plans in these last few days, as his time at Oxford drew to an end; some were quite unattainable (I doubted, for instance, that the Queen would countenance Leo's idea of moving to America in order to organize the recently emancipated slaves into helping the British recapture the colonies), but others more down to earth. I knew he had also spoken to Papa. Yet there remained the matter of obtaining the Queen's permission, and I had not been able to ask if he had written her. Still, I sensed it, my future; it was close, so close I could wrap my arms around it; wrap my arms around him. Perhaps, tonight, he would simply waltz me out of Oxford, right under everyone's noses. Giggling, I began to waltz around Edith's room, holding my skirts up, showing off my new silk dancing slippers. Edith giggled, too, as best she could, but when she began to cough again, I stopped. Oh, I'm making you much worse! I'll finish my toilette in my own room. You rest now, darling, and I'll save you a program and tell you all the gossip in the morning. Oh, I do wish I could go! She couldn't help but shed a tear, even as she beamed at me from the depths of her pillows, looking like a dyspeptic angel in her white nightgown. Keep Aubrey company! And I can't wait to congratulate you in the morning! Good night! I blew her a kiss, then hurried out of her room, shutting the door softly behind me. Downstairs, outside the front door, I could hear Bultitude stomping his feet and grumbling; the carriage must have arrived. Where on earth was Sophie? She was supposed to have brought down my gloves and wrap ten minutes ago. I headed back to my room to retrieve them myself; I did hope she had remembered to dress in her good black silk, and pack her needle and thread in case I needed repairs later.

Alice! Mamma was gliding down the hall, handsome in her new ruby red silk gown, the bustle a cascade of white satin ruffles dotted with black velvet bows. Yes, Mamma? I need to talk with you before we leave. About what, Mamma? This business with Prince Leopold. Your father spoke to me about it this evening. He did? Perhaps Leo had heard from the Queen, then? I couldn't hide my hope; I couldn't, wouldn't, stop myself from beaming, even as I blinked away a surprising tear of joy. Mamma, however, pretended not to notice, as she merely sniffed before continuing. Yes. He's a fool, your father. He's blinded by his affection for the Prince. But he does not view the situation with clear eyes. I see. My eyes were dry now. I met my mother's gaze directly. And you do? Yes, I do. Despite what you believe, I do. What I believe? I'll tell you I believe that you cannot view the situation with anything but jaded eyes, Mamma. I believe that you cannot look at me without seeing without seeing what you want to see, which is that I'm not good enough for a prince. Confess it, Mamma. Confess that you think that Leo is too good for me. My voice

was rising, the back of my neck was bristling, just like an animal engaged in mortal combat, but I did not care. Finally, I would make my mother look at me, talk to me, treat me as an equal even if it was by challenging her to speak a truth I did not want to hear. Her dark eyes glittered, even as her eyebrows shot up in their triangular way, and I think she admired me, in spite of herself; she knew so few true adversaries. Still, she shook her head dismissively. I know the world in a way which you do not. I know the Queen. I know there might there will be inquiries. But instead of accusing me of thinking less of you, have you ever thought that I might be protecting you? Protecting your heart from getting hurt? I once thought you the most practical of my daughters, Alice, but now I wonder. You seem so desperate lately. So reckless. Why was it, whenever I tried to shape my own destiny, I was considered to be acting recklessly? Was that the fate of the unmarried woman? I had to believe it was so. Well, then, I am desperate! And if that makes me reckless, so be it! I'm desperately in love, I'm desperate to get away from here. I'm twenty-four, Mamma! Twenty-four! I should be married, I should have a home of my own, but I've been kept out of sight, put up on a shelf. And Leo found me there, and rescued me! I know something about the world, to give me some credit, at least. I've taken measures to protect myself. I thought of Mr. Ruskin, that last horrible day in his drawing room, and I shuddered. Alice. My mother's face softened; her eyes shone with what I could almost believe was understanding. I remembered that long-ago winter before Albert came, when she had asked for me, and only me, to keep her company; I had seen that same expression in her eyes then. Although never since. Alice, I do wish for you to be happy. I wish for you to have your own family, your own home like Ina, like Edith will soon. I merely wish that you and Leopold tell me this, Alice. Do you truly think he'll keep quiet? Do you truly think he'll stand by and not say a word, while you plan to marry another man, particularly a prince? Her mouth twisted up, as if she couldn't bear to even think of him, and I knew she was referring to Mr. Dodgson now. I think he'll want me to be happy, I answered defiantly, speaking what was in my heart, for it was what I truly wished for him. You do? Mamma raised an eyebrow. Then you're a bigger fool than I took you for. The words stung, like a slap across my face had she called me ugly, I wouldn't have minded, but I realized I had long set a great store in the fact that Mamma thought me sensible but I would not let her see my pain. I'll join you in the carriage in a moment, Mamma. I must find Sophie first. Without meeting her gaze, I brushed past her and headed to my room. Before I reached the door, I heard her say, once, Alice. It was not a command; it was more like a prayer. A mother's prayer? I wondered. I could not know, for I had never once heard my mother ask God for anything. I ignored her and entered my room, shutting the door behind me. I found Sophie sitting like an obedient child at my dressing table; I told her to hand me my wrap and gloves, and to try, for pity's sake, not to crush my nose on the drive to the ball. Then I ran to the mirror for one more look had I ever stared at myself more than I had this evening? Holding my reflection in my gaze, I forced myself to shake off the effects of Mamma's words; I slowed my breathing down, felt my cheeks lose some of their heat, blinked my eyes so the tears would not fall. I t... *Revue de presse* "Benjamin offers a finely wrought portrait of Alice that seamlessly blends fact with fiction. This is book club gold." *Publishers Weekly*, starred review