

# John, WILLIAM, and ALICE IN WONDERLAND



*Children's literature that  
inspired John Lennon*

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Inside vinyl LP cover,  
*Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*

John Lennon received a copy of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a birthday present when he was eleven years old. The surreal, nonsensical volume left a lasting impression. "I was passionate about *Alice in Wonderland* and drew all the characters," Lennon told biographer Hunter Davies. "I did poems in the style of 'Jabberwocky.' I used to *live Alice*" (*The Beatles*, McGraw-Hill, 1968).

## ALICE—"LUCY IN THE SKY WITH DIAMONDS"

By the time he was fifteen, Lennon was wishing he could write something like *Alice in Wonderland*. He collected his boyhood writing in a mock newspaper he called *The Daily Howl* and shared it with friends. On one page he might reproduce one of Carroll's poems, such as "Jabberwocky" or "The Walrus and the Carpenter"; on the next would be an original poem in the same style. Reminiscing about the friends who would become The Beatles, Lennon said:

When they met me I was already [writing nonsense]. After a week of friendship with them or after a couple of weeks, I probably brought out things and said, "Read this." So this came before the other: the guitars came second (*The Beatles Anthology*, Chronicle Books, 2000).

Lennon admitted that his fascination with *Alice* had been lifelong: "I always wanted to write *Alice in Wonderland*. I think I still have that as a secret ambition." In the 1960s, Lennon published several volumes of nonsense poems in the style of Lewis Carroll, but his connection to *Alice* was also apparent in his songwriting for The Beatles. He remarked that Carroll's

writing directly influenced some of his most famous songs, such as "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."

There has been a popular theory since the 1960s that "Lucy" was about LSD. Lennon—notoriously forthcoming about controversial matters—always denied this rumor. He explained that his son Julian presented him with a drawing of a fantastic flying character and had dreamt up the phrase "Lucy in the sky with diamonds." Lennon insisted it was Carroll's *Alice*, not drugs, that inspired a song based on the character his son had invented:

The images were from *Alice in Wonderland*. It was Alice in the boat. She is buying an egg and it turns into Humpty Dumpty. The woman serving in the shop turns into a sheep, and the next minute they're rowing in a rowing boat somewhere—and I was visualizing that (*Anthology*).

"Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" appeared on the album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). The cover featured notable figures chosen by The Beatles as having influenced them—icons such as writer Oscar Wilde, poet Dylan Thomas, and singer-songwriter Bob Dylan—and, of course, Lewis Carroll. Later that year, Lennon wrote the song "I Am the Walrus," one of his most intriguing and ominous compositions, for the film *Magical Mystery Tour*. Lennon commented that "I Am the Walrus" was one of his favorite Beatles tracks and that it was based in part on Carroll's poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter" from *Through the Looking-Glass*.

Popular culture critic Michael E. Roos theorizes that the influence of *Alice* on Lennon went beyond the lyrics and

influenced the musical production itself. Roos contends that Lennon's famous experiments with music recorded backwards on the *Revolver* album were inspired by the reverse looking-glass used in the *Alice* books, as when Alice must hold the poem "Jabberwocky" up to a mirror to read it properly. To contend that Carroll inspired Lennon this way is to claim that Carroll had an indirect, but profound effect on sixties popular culture. This innovation in Lennon's music marked a pivotal swing, representing nothing less than the birth of psychedelic rock.

### WILLIAM—"ONE OF THE BOYS"

Another significant early inspiration for Lennon was *Just William*, Richmal Crompton's children's book series about a comical gang of English schoolboy hooligans. Lennon said, "I wrote my own William stories, with me doing all the things. After I'd read a book, I'd relive it all. That was one reason why I wanted to be the gang leader at school" (*Anthology*).

As Jonathan Gould asserts in *Can't Buy Me Love: The Beatles, Britain, and America* (Harmony Books, 2007), from the time Lennon was a very young boy, his imagination was captured by the *Just William* books:

Anyone who doubts the capacity of life to imitate art would do well to consider John Lennon's identification with the young hero of *Just William* . . . an incorrigible eleven-year-old who lives with his family in a quiet English village (not so different from [Lennon's] Woolton) whose peace is shattered regularly by William and his gang, the Outlaws. . . . By the time John himself attained the age of eleven, he had thoroughly assimilated William's incredulous disdain for the ways of the adult world. He had also assembled his own band of Outlaws, made up of three boys from his neighborhood named Pete Shotton, Nigel Walley and Ivan Vaughn.



Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, recorded by The Beatles, 1967. Science Museum Group, London

While the character William and his gang wreaked comical havoc wherever they went, so young John's gang caused trouble, from petty thievery to elaborate pranks. Numerous stories exist of the antics they cooked up, including rigging the chalkboard in a classroom so that it would detach off the wall the moment the teacher touched it—or, more creatively, filling the school's communal bicycle air pump with ink.

It is easy to see the affinity Lennon found in these books. Abandoned by both parents at an early age, Lennon's youth was fraught with emotional pain. William likes a particular book because it features "a small boy misunderstood and ill-treated by everyone around him." The character also claims to be a writer ("I—wrote a tale once. . . . It began on a pirate raft."), describing a story strikingly similar to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*—another book Lennon owned and loved as a child.

The members of Lennon's William-inspired gang later formed the nucleus of his first group, The Quarry Men, the band that would evolve into The Beatles. Those childhood friends confirm his obsession with the *William* books. Pete Shotton, who played the washboard in The Quarry Men, recalls that early in their friendship they swore to become blood brothers—a rite Shotton asserts was in line with the strong communal identity of the Outlaws in the *Just William* stories. Len Garry,

who played tea chest bass for The Quarry Men, recalls Lennon cuddled up with the *Just William* books as late as age seventeen.

### WILLIAM AND ALICE—"STAND BY ME"

As a young boy, Lennon turned to literature to change and shape his life. With *Just William*, Lennon found a depiction of a young English lad who conceived of himself as isolated and misunderstood, who had an interest in creative writing, and who formed a gang to act out his bold, sensational schemes. It was Lennon's template for the ideal childhood. He used *Just William* to build a surrogate family, a gang of comrades who would become his gang in music. As he began to write, Lennon emulated Lewis Carroll, drifting through the alternate universe of *Alice*. Wonderland was a place Lennon regularly escaped to in his youth, often returned to as an adult, and, through his music, is a place where he will reside forever.

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#### EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "John Lennon Talks About *In His Own Write* at The National Theatre, 1968." Interview with Lennon on the stage adaptation of his books, his childhood, his nonsense writing style, and how ideas become poems and songs. [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beatlesbible.com) (Interview transcript: [beatlesbible.com](https://www.beatlesbible.com))
- "John and Yoko." David Sheff's essay about his interview with the couple. Includes transcript of the interview as published in *Playboy*, Jan. 1981. [davidsheff.com](https://www.davidsheff.com)
- *Just William*, LibriVox. Free audio recordings of the books. [librivox.com](https://www.librivox.com) or [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)
- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, LibriVox. Free audio recordings of the books. [librivox.com](https://www.librivox.com) or [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)

