

Down the Treacle Well

Ellis Nelson

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Ellis Nelson's nostalgic fantasy novel *Down the Treacle Well* pays tribute to Lewis Carroll's Wonderland through its story of American brothers who are transported into a Victorian world.

Ben and his younger brother Kyle are at Oxford University, where Kyle's synesthesia is the subject of a conference that their neurologist mother is attending. But their excursion to the Ashmolean Museum goes awry: the Alfred Jewel causes mysterious vibrations that haul them back to 1864, where they meet Reverend Charles Dodgson (Carroll). Dodgson—who is otherwise prone to capable extemporizing as an Oxford don—is distressed: Alice, who inspired his tale, left to explore the underground, and retrieving the Alfred Jewel is crucial to restoring order. And Alice has landed in urgent trouble.

The boys retrace Alice's steps. Ben is the more reserved of the two; he expresses trepidation and wonders about the possibility that they'll be trapped in time. Kyle, though he's pragmatic, is the eager adventurer of the pair. They receive help from Dodgson and a girl with psychokinesis, too. As they travel, they encounter colorful obstacles that they manage via combinations of pluck, wit, fortunate collaborations, and wild luck (as when Ben develops a sudden, useful ability).

Oxford's storied landmarks and grounds are a fun backdrop, and sufficient references are made to the original story's universe. But there are also unusual embellishments that distinguish this tribute tale: here, Wonderland inspired real historical figures who traveled there, including kings and philosopher John Locke. The group's plans take on new importance when this is revealed: they have to preserve the secret ties between the worlds.

A time travel novel with an appealing literary premise, *Down the Treacle Well* follows talented boys on an important rescue mission.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2023)

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