

Through the Looking Glass...to Des Moines

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) – In his day, Lewis Carroll was a writer, a mathematician, a photographer and a story teller.

Today, the author of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" is an industry.

Alice books are still printed 140 years later, artists keep drawing the Mad Hatter and Carroll's other fanciful characters and scholars continue producing books and papers on Carroll and his works.

From movies to video games to court opinions, Alice permeates modern culture. So naturally, there's a Lewis Carroll Society.

It's a group of Carroll aficionados who meet twice a year "to talk of many things, of shoes and ships and sealing wax," of the Red Queen, the Jabberwocky and the Mock Turtle. And of a man in Victorian England whose work went well beyond the two children's books that made him famous to include photography, teaching, games and puzzles, and pamphlets on politics, logic and other subjects.

Members typically assemble in highbrow locations such as Harvard, Princeton or New York University, the Folger Library in Washington, D.C., and the Newberry Library in Chicago.

That their fall meeting would take place in Iowa is highly unusual. Credit artist Mary Kline-Misol, who has done a series of paintings inspired by Carroll's books. Her work is on exhibit at the State Historical Museum through Nov. 27.

"I'm still pinching myself. I can hardly believe it," Kline-Misol said. "If somebody said 20 years ago, if you paint it, they will come, I wouldn't have believed them. I feel very, very privileged to bring this scholastic group to Des Moines."

Meetings feature lectures, films and panel discussions. The group isn't just a bunch of academics, though. Sure, there are teachers and scholars. But the Society also has doctors, lawyers, collectors and photographers among its 330 or so members.

The president, Alan Tannenbaum, works in software strategy for IBM in Austin, Texas.

"We're a pretty eclectic group," said Tannenbaum, who has more than 3,000 books on Carroll and Alice, 1,500 figurines, plates, chess sets and other collectibles and — perhaps the pride and joy of his collection — a 1950s Alice in Wonderland pinball machine.

The program this fall includes a panel discussion with four Carroll collectors. A quick check on eBay found more than 2,400 Alice-related items for sale.

"There are some collectors who will buy anything related to Carroll," Tannenbaum said. "They're completists – or completists in a category. Some only want illustrated books. Some only want first editions. Some only want figurines. But when they collect, they've got to have them all."

They've also got to have a fat checkbook because collecting anything is expensive. A first edition "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" – Carroll's personal copy – was auctioned in 1998 by Christie's in New York. The selling price: \$1.54 million.

"That's the holy grail for collectors," Tannenbaum said.

Kline-Misol began painting Alice scenes and characters while working on her master's degree in 1986. Her project included seven pieces of Alice falling down the white rabbit's hole, which is how she got to Wonderland.

"I certainly had no conscious intention of going back to it," Kline-Misol said.

But as she worked on other projects, more Alice images began forming in her mind, so she painted them. Her works include the Mad Hatter's tea party, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, the Red Queen and various images of Alice.

She based those images on Alice Liddell, one of the young girls to whom Carroll told a story about a bored little girl looking for adventure. That story became the basis for "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," which was published three years later, in 1865.

Carroll, whose real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, followed with "Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There" in 1872.

"The characters sort of became curiouser and curiouser for me, if you will," Kline-Misol said. "They became a collaboration of Carroll and myself."

That Carroll's work receives so much attention today shows the extent of its reach, said Beth Younger, who teaches adolescent literature at Drake University in Des Moines.

"It's one of those works that functions on two basic levels," Younger said. "It really appeals to children because it involves fantasy and there are illustrations. Also, at the same time, it appeals to adults."

Carroll's words and characters live on in many forms, among the most notable being Jefferson Airplane's 1967 hit, "White Rabbit." It mentions chasing rabbits, a hookah

smoking caterpillar and eating "some kind of mushroom." The song led some listeners to suspect that Carroll's writing might have been affected by drug use, but scholars have debunked that notion, Tannenbaum said.

While the 1951 Walt Disney animation is the best known Alice movie, there have been others, including the 1933 version with W.C. Fields and Cary Grant, and the musical version from 1985 with Sammy Davis Jr. and Carol Channing. Over the years, dozens of other films contain Alice references, including "The Matrix" and "Jurassic Park."

Alice characters and allusions have appeared in comic books – Batman once battled the Mad Hatter – on postage stamps and in video games. There's a tea room in New York City called Alice's Tea Cup.

It's enough to keep a Carrollian hopping for a long time.

"You can hardly pick a field without an Alice connection," Tannenbaum said. "Carroll was just a fascinating genius."