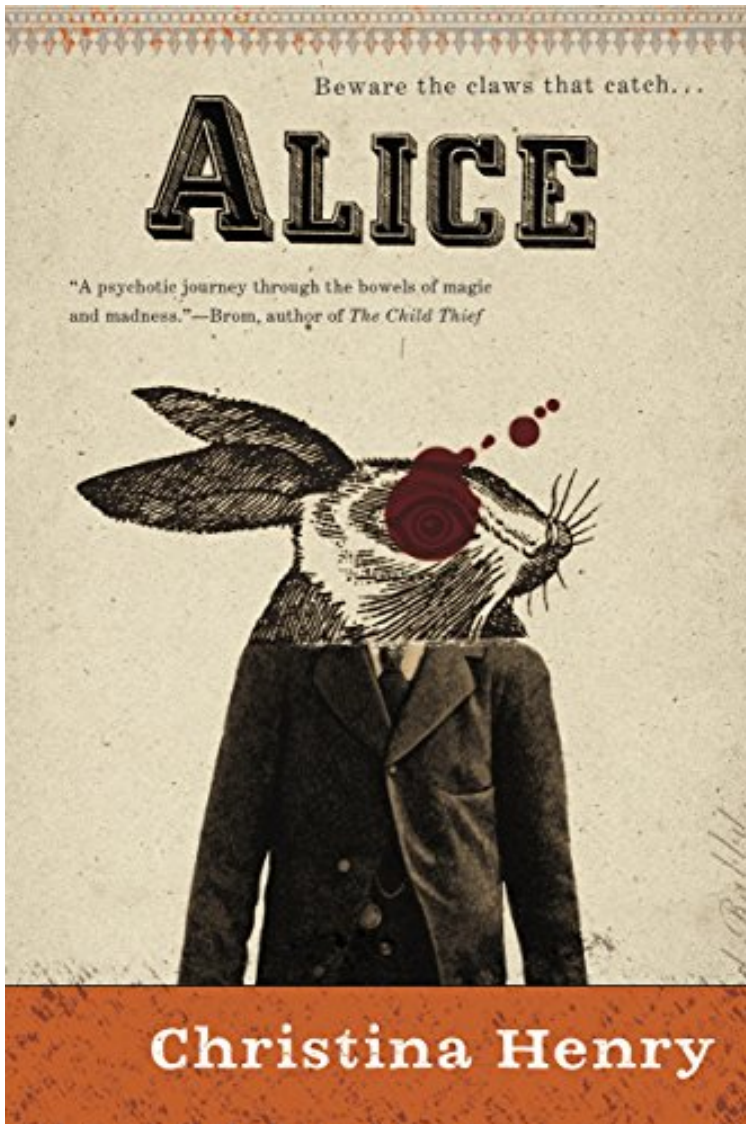


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Alice



Par Christina Henry
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA mind-bending new novel inspired by the twisted and wondrous works of Lewis Carroll...In a warren of crumbling buildings and desperate people called the Old City, there stands a hospital with cinderblock walls which echo the screams of the poor souls inside.In the hospital, there is a woman. Her hair, once blond, hangs in tangles down her back. She doesnt remember why shes in such a terrible place. Just a tea party long ago, and long ears, and bloodThen, one night, a fire at the hospital gives the woman a chance to escape, tumbling out of the hole that imprisoned her, leaving her free to uncover the truth about what happened to her all those years ago.Only something else has escaped with her. Something dark. Something powerful.And to find the truth, she will have to track this beast to the very heart of the Old City, where the rabbit waits for his Alice.From the Trade Paperback edition.ExtraitCHAPTER IIf she moved her

head all the way up against the wall and tilted it to the left she could just see the edge of the moon through the bars. Just a silver sliver, almost close enough to eat. A sliver of cheese, a sliver of cake, a cup of tea to be polite. Someone had given her a cup of tea once, someone with blue-green eyes and long ears. Funny how she couldn't remember his face, though. All that part was hazy, her memory of him wrapped in smoke but for the eyes and ears. And the ears were long and furry. When they found her all she would say was, The Rabbit.

The Rabbit. The Rabbit. Over and over. When she acted like that they said she was mad. Alice knew she wasn't mad. Maybe. Not deep down. But the powders they gave her made the world all muzzy and sideways and sometimes she felt mad. Everything had happened just as she said, when she could say something besides Rabbit. She and Dor went into the Old City for Dor's birthday. Sixteenth birthday. Sixteen candles on your cake, a sliver of cake and a cup of tea for you, my dear. They both went in, but only Alice came out.

Two weeks later came Alice, covered in blood, babbling about tea and a rabbit, wearing a dress that wasn't hers. Red running down the insides of her legs and blue marks on her thighs were fingers had been. Her hand went without thought to her left cheek, touched the long thick scar that followed the line of bone from her hairline to the top of her lip. Her face had been flayed open when they found her, and she couldn't say how or why. It had been open for a long while, the blood oozing from it gone black and brackish, the skin around it tattered at the edges. The doctors told her parents they had done their best, but she would never be beautiful again. Her sister said it was her own fault. If she had stayed out of the Old City as she was supposed to, this never would have happened. There was a reason why they lived in the New City, the ring of shiny new buildings that kept the Old City at bay. The Old City wasn't for people like them. It was for the filth you threw away. All children were warned about the dangers of straying to the Old City. Alice didn't belong there. The hospital where Alice had lived for the last ten years was in the Old City, so her sister was wrong.

Alice did belong there. Sometimes her parents came to visit, doing their duty; their noses wrinkled like she was something that smelled bad, even though the attendants always dragged her out and gave her a bath first.

She hated the baths. They were icy cold and rough with scrubbing, and she was never permitted to clean herself. If she struggled or cried out they would hit her with the bath brush or pinch hard enough to leave a mark, always somewhere that couldn't be seen, the side of her breast or the soft part of her belly, with a promise of more where that came from unless she behaved. Her parents didn't visit so much anymore. Alice couldn't really remember the last time, but she knew it had been a long time. The days all ran together in her room, no books to read, no things to do. Hatcher said she should exercise so she would be fit when she got out, but somewhere in her heart Alice knew she would never get out. She was a broken thing, and the New City did not like broken things. They liked the new and the whole. Alice hardly recalled when she was new and whole. That girl seemed like someone else she'd known once, long ago and far away. Alice? A voice through the mouse hole. Many years before, a mouse had gotten into the wall and chewed through the battening between her cell and Hatcher's. Alice didn't know what had happened to the mouse. Probably got caught in a trap in the kitchens, or went out on the riverside and drowned. But the mouse had led her to Hatcher, a rough voice coming through the wall. She had really thought she'd gone round the bend at first, hearing voices coming from nowhere. Hey, you, the voice had said. She'd looked around wildly, afraid, and scuttled into a corner on the far side of the window, opposite the door. Hey, you. Down here, the voice said. Alice resolutely put her fingers in her ears. Everyone knew hearing voices was a sign of madness, and she'd promised herself she would not be mad no matter what they said, no matter how she felt. After several moments of happy silence she released her fingers and looked around the room in relief. A great sigh exhaled from the walls.

The mouse hole, you nit. Alice stared in alarm at the small opening in the corner opposite. Somehow a talking mouse was worse than voices in her head. If mice were talking, then there really were men with blue-green eyes and long furry ears. And while she didn't remember his face, she did remember she'd been afraid. She stared at the mouse hole like something horrible might suddenly emerge from it, like the Rabbit might unfold himself from that space and finish whatever he had started. Another sigh, this one shorter and much more impatient. You're not hearing bloody voices and a mouse is not speaking to you. I'm in the room next to yours and I can see you through the hole. You're not crazy and there's no magic, so will you please come here and speak with me before I go madder than I already have? If you're not in my head and you're not magic, then how do you know what I'm thinking? Alice asked, her voice suspicious. She was beginning to wonder whether this wasn't some trick of the doctors, some way to draw her into a trap. The attendants gave her a powder with her breakfast and dinner, to keep her calm, they said. But she knew that those powders still allowed her some freedom to be Alice, to think and dream and try to remember the lost bits of her life. When they took her out of her room for a bath or a visit, she sometimes saw other patients, people standing still

with dead eyes and drool on their chins, people who were alive and didn't know it. Those people were difficult to deal with. They got injections instead of powders. Alice didn't want injections, so she wasn't going to say or do anything that would alarm the doctors. Doctors who might be trying to trick her with voices in the wall. I know what you're thinking, because that's what I'd be thinking if I were you, the voice said. Were in the loony bin, aren't we? Now, come over and have a look through the hole and you'll see. She stood cautiously, still unsure it was not a trick, whether of her mind or the doctors. She crossed under the window and crouched by the mouse hole. All I can see are your knees, the voice complained. Come all the way down, won't you? Alice lowered to her stomach, keeping her head well away from the opening. She had a vague fear that a needle might flash through the hole and plunge into her eye. Once her cheek was on the ground she could see through the small, tight opening. On the other side was an iron grey eye and part of a nose. There was a bulge just where the rest of the nose disappeared from view, like it might have been broken once. It didn't look like any doctor she knew, but Alice wasn't taking any chances. Let me see your whole face, she said. Good, the grey eye said. You're thinking. That's good. Not just a pretty face, then. Alice's hand moved automatically to cover her scar; then she remembered she was lying on that side of her face and he couldn't really see it anyway. Let him think she was pretty if he wanted. It would be nice to be pretty to someone even with her fair hair all snarled and nothing to wear but a woolen shift. She heard the swish-swish of wool on batting as the grey eye moved away from the hole and became two grey eyes, a long broken nose and a bushy black beard with flecks of white in it. All right, then? the voice asked. I'm Hatcher. And that was how they met. Hatcher was ten years older than Alice, and nobody ever came to see him. Why are you here? she asked one day, long after they were friends, or at least friends who never really saw each other. I killed a lot of people with an axe, he said. That's how I got my name. Hatcher. What was your name before? Alice asked. She was surprisingly undisturbed by the knowledge that her new friend was an axe murderer. It seemed unrelated to who he was now, the rough voice and grey eyes through the hole in the wall. I don't remember, he said. I don't remember anything from before, really. They found me with a bloodied axe in my hand and five people dead around me all slashed to pieces. I tried to do the same for the police when they came for me, so I must have killed those people. Why did you do it? Don't remember, he said, and his voice changed a little, became hard. It's like there's this haze over my eyes, black smoke filling everything up. I remember the weight of the axe in my hand, and the hot blood on my face, in my mouth. I remember the sound of the blade in soft flesh. I remember that too, Alice said, although she didn't know why she said that. For a moment it had been true, though. She could hear the sound of a knife piercing skin, that sliding slicing noise, and someone screaming. Did you kill a lot of people too? Hatcher asked. I don't know, Alice said. I might have. It's all right if you did, Hatcher said. I would understand. I really don't know, Alice said. I remember before and I remember after, but that fortnight is gone, save for a few flashes. The man with the long ears. Yes, Alice said. The man who hunted her, faceless, through her nightmares. When we get out we'll find him, and then you'll know what happened to you, Hatcher said. That had been eight years before, and they were both still there, rooms side by side in a hospital that had no intention of ever letting them go. Alice? Hatcher said again. I can't sleep. She blinked away the memory, brought on by the moon and the sound of his voice. I can't sleep either, Hatch, she said, crawling along the floor to the mouse hole. It was much darker down here. There was no light in their rooms save that of the silver moon through the bars, and the occasional passage of a lamp by the attendant walking the halls. She could not see the color of his eyes, only the wet gleam of them. The Jabberwocks awake, Alice, Hatcher said. It was then she noticed his voice was thin and reedy. Hatcher wasn't often afraid. Mostly he seemed strong, almost relentlessly so. All day long she heard him in his room, grunting with effort as he went through his exercises. When the attendants came to take Hatcher to his bath, there was always a lot of noise, punching and kicking and yelling. More than once Alice heard the crunch of bone, the angry curse of an attendant. She asked once how come he didn't get injections like all the other troublemakers. He'd grinned, his grey eyes crinkling at the corners, and said the injection had made him wild, wilder than before, so after that they left him alone. He didn't even get powders in his food. Hatcher was never scared, except when he talked about the Jabberwock. There's no Jabberwock, Hatch, Alice said, her voice low and soothing. She'd heard tales of the monster before. Not often, although lately it seemed to be on his mind more. I know you don't believe in him. But he's here, Alice. They keep him downstairs, in the basement. And when he's awake I can feel him, Hatcher said. There was a pleading note under the fear, and Alice relented. After all, she believed in a man with rabbit ears, and Hatcher accepted that without question. What can you feel? she asked. I feel the night crawling up all around, blotting out the moon. I feel blood running down the walls, rivers of it in the streets below. And I feel his teeth closing around me. That's

what hell do, Alice, if hes ever set free. Hes been imprisoned here a long time, longer than you or me. How could anyone trap such a beast? Alice wondered aloud. Hatcher shifted restlessly on the floor. She could hear him moving around. I dont know for sure, he said, and his voice was quieter now, so that she had to strain to hear him. I think a Magician must have done it. A Magician? Alice asked. This was more far-fetched than anything Hatcher had said before. All the Magicians are gone. They were driven out or killed centuries ago, during the Purge. This place is not that old. How could a Magician have captured the Jabberwock and imprisoned it here? Only a Magician would have the skill, Hatcher insisted. No ordinary man would survive the encounter. Alice was willing to indulge his fantasy of a monster in the basement, but she couldnt countenance this myth about a Magician. It didnt seem wise to argue, though. Hatcher took no powders and had no injections, and sometimes he could get agitated. If he got agitated he might howl for hours, or beat his hands against the wall until they were bloody despite the padding. So she said nothing, only listened to his shallow breath, and the cries of the other inmates echoing through the building. I wish I could hold your hand, Hatcher said. Ive never seen you altogether, you know. Just bits through the hole. I try to put all the bits together in my head so I can see all of you, but it doesnt look quite right. In my head youre just grey eyes and a beard, Alice said. Hatcher laughed softly, but there was no mirth in it. Like the Rabbit, just eyes and fur. What would have happened if we met on the street, Alice? Would we have said hello? She hesitated for a moment. She didnt want to hurt his feelings, but neither did she want to lie. Her parents lied. They said things like, Youre looking well, and, Were sure youll be home soon things Alice knew were not true. Alice? Hatcher asked again, and brought her back to him. I dont know if we would have seen each other to say hello, she said carefully. I lived in the New City, and I think... You seem like you were from the Old City. Well, la-di-da, Hatcher said, and his voice was hard. Fancy girl wouldnt soil her dainty hem in the Old City. Except you did. You got good and soiled. And now youre here, just like me. His words were like knotted fists to her gut, and all the breath seemed to leave her for a moment. But they were true words, and she would not pretend otherwise. The truth was all she had left. The truth, and Hatcher. Yes, she said. We are both here. There was a long silence between them. Alice waited in the darkness, the moonlight shifting on the floor. Hatcher seemed to be walking the knives edge tonight, and she would not be the one to knock him off. I am sorry, Alice, he said finally, and he sounded more like the Hatch she knew. Dont she started, but he cut her off. I should not say such things, he said. Youre my only light, Alice. Without you I would have succumbed to this place long ago. But the Jabberwock is awake, and he makes me think of things I should not. The sound of a blade in flesh, she said, echoing the memory of his words. And warm blood on my hands, Hatcher said. I feel most like myself when I think those thoughts. As if that is who I really am. At least you have some idea, Alice said. I never had the chance to find out. I lost my way first. She heard him shifting again on the floor. I feel like Ive got bugs inside my skin, he said. Sing me a song. I dont know any songs, she said, surprised by this request. Yes, you do, he said. You sing it all day long, and when youre not singing it youre humming. Something about a butterfly. A butterfly? she asked, but as soon as she said this, it came back to her, and she heard her mothers voice in her head. This sound was so painful, piercing her heart, this remembrance of love that was lost to her forever. She began to sing aloud, to cover the memory with her own voice. Sleep little butterfly Sleep little butterfly Now the day has gone Sleep little butterfly Sleep little butterfly Soon the morning will come Close your eyes and let the night go round you Hell keep you safe and warm Sleep little butterfly Sleep little butterfly Soon the morning will come. Her voice trailed off, her throat full of love and loss and pain. Hatcher said nothing, but she heard his breath go deep and even, and she let her eyes fall shut. She matched her breath to his, and it was almost like holding his hand as the night closed in. Alice dreamed of blood. Blood on her hands and under her feet, blood in her mouth and pouring from her eyes. The room was filled with it. Outside the door Hatcher stood hand in hand with something dark and hideous, a thing crafted of shadow with flashing silver teeth. Dont take him from me, she said, or tried to say, but she could not speak through the blood in her mouth, choking her. Her eyes were covered with smoke then, and she couldnt see Hatch or the monster anymore. Heat enfolded her body, and then there was nothing but fire. Fire. Fire. Alice, wake up! The hospital is on fire. Alice opened her eyes. Hatchers grey one was pressed to the mouse hole, and it was wild with fear and anticipation. At last! he said. Stay low, away from the smoke, and get near the door but not in front of it. Alice blinked as he disappeared. The dream still clung to her brain, and her mouth was dry. Her shift clung to her body, and her face was wet with sweat. The odor of smoke finally permeated her nostrils and her fuzzy head, and there was another smell toolike cooking meat. She didnt want to think what that might be. Alice turned so she was flat on her back, and saw a thick blanket of smoke just a few inches from her face. The heat beneath made the floor an agony to lie upon, but

there was no way to escape it. The sounds filtered in then. The crack of flame, of heavy objects crashing to the ground. Horrible, horrible screams. And close by, the repeated grunts and pounding of someone slamming his body into the wall. Hatch was trying to break the door down in his room. The noise was terrible. Alice did not think it was possible. The walls might be soft, but the doors were iron. He would kill himself. Hatcher, no! she cried, but he could not hear her. There was a sound of something crunching, but Hatcher did not cry out, and then there was no more noise. Hatcher, she said, and her voice was soft and sad. Two tears leaked from the corner of each eye. There was no point in getting up then, if Hatcher was gone. The smoke and the noise told Alice that the fire was well under way. The attendants and the doctors would not bother to free the patients, especially when most families would be thrilled to be free of the burden of their mad relatives. So they would all burn. Alice found she was not as distressed about this as she ought to be. Perhaps it was the powder in last night's dinner, or the smoke that filled her lungs in place of air. She felt very calm. She would just lie there and wait until the fire came. Her eyes closed again, and she drifted away, away to a place she had never been in real life, a silver lake tucked in a green valley, wildflowers dotting the shore. There was no smell of medicine there, or harsh burning soap. There was no smoke and no pain, no heartache and no blood. It was the place she always went, the place where her mind hid when the doctors asked questions she did not want to answer, or her parents sighed in disappointment. Something grabbed her around the shoulders, and her eyes flew open in shock. It had been years since anyone touched her except to drag her to the bath. Hatcher's face was close to hers, twisted in anger, and blood ran from a cut on the side of his head. I told you to get near the door, you silly nit, he said, dragging her up to sitting and then immediately pushing her down to her belly. Follow me, he said, crawling toward the door. The open door. She followed automatically, keeping his filthy bare heels in sight. She wanted to ask how he had gotten out, how he wasn't battered and dead. But he was moving along with surprising quickness into the hall. He paused after a few moments so she could catch up to him. There was no one except the two of them, and the frantic pounding of other patients still trapped in their boxes. It was then she noticed that his right arm hung at an odd angle and he was using only his left to pull his body along. Hatch, what happened? she asked. She was out of breath from just that short period of exertion. It came out when I broke the doorframe, he said. Ill fix it later. We have to go. The floor is getting hotter, and he's almost out. Who? Alice asked. He started along again. The Jabberwock. Hatch, she said, trying to keep up with him. Her lungs and throat were burning. Were going the wrong way. The stairs are behind us. The stairs are on fire, Hatch said. I've already checked. We've got to go out this way. But, Hatch, Alice said, shaking her head from side to side to clear it. The smoke was getting to her. Were on the third floor. Well go out the back to the river. Just keep up, Alice. The river? she said, and a faint alarm sounded in her head. There was something about the river, but she couldn't recall exactly what it was. Just then they passed the door of a patient who was repeatedly throwing himself against the iron and screaming. The cloud of smoke above them blocked the small viewing window, so Alice was fairly certain the man could not see them escaping. She felt a tinge of guilt all the same as they went by. What about the others? Alice asked. Shouldn't we let them out? There is no time, Hatcher said. And they would only be millstones in any case. They've no sense. We'd have to lead them from here like children. And then what? Would we take them with us? No, Alice, it's best to leave them as they are. We must get away before he's free. It was a cold thing he said, but true. Not the bit about the Jabberwock getting free, but the other part. She and Hatcher would not be able to safely lead the others to freedom without endangering their own lives. Hatcher reached the end of the hallway before Alice did. He came to his knees, and she noticed he held a small ring of keys in his left hand. Where did you get those? she asked. From the attendant at the top of the stairs. How do you think I opened your door? he asked as he methodically fitted first one key, then another, then another. There was nobody in the corridor when we came out, she said. I took his keys and threw him down the stairs. That's how I knew the steps were on fire, he said. The fifth key clicked, and Hatcher pushed the door open, waving her inside the room. A cloud of smoke followed them in before Hatcher was able to close the door behind them, but it dissipated quickly as the far window was open. The heavy, seething air of the City, hardly fresh, poured into the room. Still, it had been years since Alice had smelled anything but the rank asylum-unwashed bodies, laudanum, chloroform, vomit and blood and burning soap over it all. By contrast the soot and refuse outside seemed like a burst of clean country breeze. Suddenly a head appeared in the window from outside. It was one of the attendants, a ginger-haired man with only half a nose. His eyes widened when he saw Hatcher and Alice in the room, and he started to climb back inside. Before the man could get any further than throwing one leg over the sill, Hatcher was upon him. He punched the man in the face hard with his left hand, twice, three times. Then he kicked the man in the side so

hard Alice heard ribs break. Finally he pushed the now-unconscious attendant out the window, looking out after the falling man to follow his progress to the river below. He nodded in satisfaction before turning back to Alice. I was the one who bit half his nose off. He was coming back to make sure we couldn't get out do you see? He would never have let us leave. CHAPTER 2 Alice nodded. She did see. The smoke must have gone up in her brain because everything seemed soft at the edges. There's a ledge out here, Hatcher said. He went to the wall next to the window, grabbed his right wrist with his left hand, pushed his hanging right arm against the wall and did some kind of maneuver while Alice watched. When he turned back to her, his right arm appeared normal again. He flexed his fingers as if to ensure they were still functional. Throughout all of this he never made a sound, not even a hint that the process was painful, though Alice was certain it must have been. He held his hand out so she could join him by the window. She approached him, and gasped in shock when his hand closed around hers. It seemed like an electric current ran from their joined hands up into her heart, which hammered in her chest. His grey eyes sparked, and he squeezed her hand tighter for a moment. When you are in an asylum, no one ever touches you in kindness, and Alice knew the shock was as great for him. He said nothing as he released her. He climbed through the window and onto the ledge, and Alice followed him, because that was what she was supposed to do. She swung her left leg over the sill. Her shift rode up, exposing her skin to the morning chill, and she shivered. She supposed it wasn't so terribly cold out, but after the furnace of the burning hospital, the outdoors seemed frigid. Alice ducked her head under the sash and saw the ledge Hatcher wanted her to reach. Below it, too far below for comfort, was the river, grey and putrid. Now that she saw it she remembered what she had forgotten before. Hatcher moved on the ledge behind her, and his hands were at her waist, guiding her out until they stood side by side, their backs pasted against the brick exterior of the hospital. The ledge was barely wide enough to admit the length of Alice's feet. Hatcher's toes curled around the edge as if that grip could save him from falling. His expression was fierce and exultant. Were outside, Alice. Were out. Yes, she said, and her thrill at this prospect was much tempered by the sight of the river. Now that she was away from the smoke, her mind was clearer, and this plan seemed riskier than trying to climb down a set of burning stairs. The stench of the water reached her then, and she gagged. Hatcher grabbed her hand to keep her from stumbling forward into the empty air. We jump into the river, he said, and swim across to the opposite bank. We can disappear into the Old City after that. No one will look for us in there. They will think we're dead. Yes, she agreed again. But we're not supposed to go into the river. It will kill us. All the factories dump their waste there. I remember Father speaking of it. He said it was an outrage. Neither can we stay here, Hatcher said. If the fire does not consume us, then they will catch us in their nets and put us back in our cages. I cannot go back, Alice. I cannot spend the remainder of my life as a moth beating its wings against a jar. I would rather perish in the mouth of the Jabberwock than that. Alice saw the truth of this, and felt it in her heart as well. She did not want to go back inside the box they had made for her. But the river was so far below, churning with poison. What if their skin was seared from their bodies? What if they swallowed the river water and died writhing on the shore as the foul substance coursed in their blood? As these thoughts occurred, a burst of flame caused a nearby window to explode outward, startling a huddle of soot-coated pigeons that had taken foolish refuge on the same ledge Alice and Hatcher perched on. The birds took flight, squawking in protest, and Alice looked at Hatcher, knowing he saw the fear in her eyes. Now we must fly, he said. Trust me. She did. She always had, though she didn't know why. He squeezed her hand, and the next thing Alice knew she was falling, falling away into a rabbit's hole. Don't let go, Hatcher shouted just before they hit the water. His grip on her fingers tightened painfully, and she cried out, but he didn't let go. Which was a very good thing, because as soon as the horrible muck coated her head, she reflexively loosed her hold, and if Hatcher hadn't been holding her that way, she would have drowned. He yanked her, coughing and gagging, to the surface, scooped an arm under her ribs and began paddling toward the shore. Kick your feet. She fluttered her ankles weakly in the water. It felt thick and strange, with none of the fluid slipperiness water was supposed to possess. It moved sluggishly, the current hardly enough to push them a few inches off course. A noxious vapor rose from the surface, making her eyes and nose burn. Because of the way Hatcher held her, she couldn't see his face or the opposite shore that they approached. His breath was smooth and even, like he was unaffected by the miasma floating above the surface of the river. He pulled them both along with smooth, sure strokes as Alice floundered in the water, trying not to cause them both to go under. She saw the asylum burning behind them, as tongues of flame emerged from newly opened windows. The distance and roar of the fire drowned out the sound of the inmates screaming. There were people running around the sides of the building, trying to stop the spread to the adjacent structures. She had never given much thought to the places around the hospital

before. On one side was a long, low building crouched against the bank of the river like a squat turtle. That must have been on the side that Alice's room had been; else she wouldn't have been able to see the moon. The edifice on the opposite side was huge, much bigger than the hospital, and the smoke belching from its chimneys seemed as thick and dangerous as that pouring from her former home. Put your feet down, Hatcher said suddenly, and Alice realized he was walking now, not swimming. Her toes sank into the muck, and the water was still up to her neck, but they were nearly there. A small knot of people was gathered a little ways down the bank on a jetty, pointing and exclaiming over the collapsing asylum. I see them, Hatcher said in a low voice. Over here. He guided her toward a place where the shadows lay thick despite the rising sun, away from the flickering exposure of the gas lamps set at intervals to alleviate the fog from the river and the factories. Alice fell to her hands and knees just out of the water, taking great gasps of air. Even a few feet from the river, the air was noticeably cleaner, though hardly what one would call clean, she thought. Everywhere was the stench of the water, the reek of smoke and flame, the chemical burn of factory exhaust. Underneath it all was the smell of the mornings cooking coming from the warren of flats just before them. Hatcher had done much more than Alice to get them out of the burning hospital and through the disgusting river, yet he had not collapsed like she had when they emerged from the water. He stood beside her, still and calm. Alice rolled to her seat and looked up at him. He stared, transfixed, at the fiery structure across the water. He stood so still that she began to worry, and she struggled to her feet. Hatcher? she asked, and touched his arm. His hair and clothes were steaming now that they were onshore, and he was coated in the filth they had just crossed. His grey eyes glowed in the reflection of the fire, like the coals of hell, and when he turned those eyes on her she felt, for the first time, a little afraid of him. This was not Hatch, her constant companion through the mouse hole. Nor was this the man who had methodically rescued her from a burning building. This was Hatcher, the murderer with the axe, the man who had been found covered in blood and surrounded by bodies. But he would never hurt you, Alice told herself. He's still Hatch, somewhere in there. He's just lost himself for a moment. She put her hands on his shoulders, tentatively, and said his name again, for he stared at her but did not seem to see. Then his hands were at her wrists, his grip bruising the thin skin, and his iron eyes were wild. He's out, he's out, he's out, he chanted. Now the world will break and burn and bleed... Everyone will bleed. The Jabberwock? Alice said. His mouth will open wide and we will all fall in, fall in and be devoured, Hatcher said. We must get away, away before he finds me. He knows I can hear him. He knows that I know what evil he will do. Suddenly there was a tremendous noise from the asylum, a sound like the very heart of the building crashing in on itself. Alice and Hatcher turned to watch, and all the walls collapsed like a melting sand castle. There seemed to be nothing but fire now, and the fire shot impossibly upward into the sky, well past the point where there was anything to burn. It filled the horizon, the wings of a monster outstretched. Behind the flame was a darkness, a gigantic shadow that spread, as if something that was trapped was now free, reaching its arms toward the sun. Is that... him? Alice asked. She'd never believed in the Jabberwock, not really. And perhaps there was no shadow at all. She was exhausted, and had spent some time breathing smoke and poison. Her brain might tell her there was a shadow when in fact there was none. That was the trouble with not being right in the head. You couldn't always tell if your eyes were telling the truth. Hatcher did not reply to her question. He stared for a moment at the tower of flame, and then grabbed Alice's right wrist, tugging her up the bank. The mud inhibited fast progress, but they finally managed to clamber onto the narrow cobbled path that ran around and between the warrens of tilting structures stacked crazily against one another. The Old City seemed to have no beginning and no end, a circling maze of stairways and narrow alleys connecting buildings that had been patched and rebuilt on top of crumbling ruins for centuries. There was nothing gleaming and new there, not even the children, who seemed to be birthed with haunted eyes. Hatcher ducked into the nearest alley, pulling Alice after him. The rough stones scraped her bare feet, but she understood the need to disappear quickly. Aside from the question of the Jabberwock, Alice had recognized the distinctive brass-buttoned gleam of a copper's uniform. Never mind if the asylum was naught but a cinder now. If they were caught out in their hospital whites, the police would drag them away. And Alice had a feeling Hatcher would not go quietly. So they dipped and darted between the girls with their customers pressed up against the alley walls, or old men gathered in clusters around a shell game or a cockfight. Hatcher led them deeper into the Old City, to a place where the rising sun was blocked by the closeness of the buildings and the air was blanketed in fog from the factories. Mist rose from the cobblestones, hiding approaching figures until they were nearly upon you. Which was how the men surrounded them. Hatcher paused for a moment, seeing Alice out of breath and suffering. He did not pat or comfort her, but waited. In that moment that they were still, an enormous ogre

loomed out of the darkness and swung a club at Hatcher. Alice opened her mouth to scream, but a filthy hand covered it and another hand latched on her breast, squeezing it so hard tears sprang to her eyes. What have we here? a rough voice cooed in her ear. A little lost lamb? She kicked out, tried to slip out of his clutch as Hatcher and the ogre whom she now saw was a man, the largest man she had ever seen disappeared into the fog. Her struggles were useless against her captors strength as he dragged her away. His free hand moved from her breast to the hem of her shift, pulling it to her waist, his fingers on her thighs, and she went wild then, biting down on the hand that covered her mouth because she remembered remembered a man over her in the flickering light, pushing between her legs, and it hurt, she screamed because it hurt, but he kept at it until she bled. The man who held her now swore as he felt her teeth but he did not let go. Little hellion, he snarled, and slammed her forehead against the brick wall. She went limp and dazed then for a moment, and something wet and sticky covered her eyes. Then she was on the ground on her belly, her bare thighs scraping against the stones, and his hands were on her bottom, pulling her legs apart. Just go away, she thought. You're not here; you're in a green field in a valley, and the sun is shining down, and here comes someone smiling at you, someone who loves you. Then the hands on her were gone and she heard the sound of flesh meeting flesh. She rolled to one side, her shift still up around her waist, and wiped the stickiness from her eyes. Hatcher was pounding her attacker repeatedly with his fists. He had pushed the mans back against the wall and was methodically reducing the mans face to an unrecognizable blob of jelly. After several moments, Hatcher released the man, who fell limp to the ground. He did not appear to be breathing. Hatcher turned to Alice, his chest heaving. He was covered in blood, his hands and his chest and his face. His eyes went from the cut on her head to her bare waist, and lingered there for a moment. Then he said, Cover yourself, and turned away to search the mans pockets. Alice pulled the shift down to her knees again and used the wall to help her stand. She leaned there for a moment and her body began to shake all over. When Hatcher turned back, her teeth were chattering. He held a small pouch in one hand. Full of gold, he said, nudging the limp body with his toe. Probably a slave trader. He would have used you and then sold you. I th-th-think I w-w-was sold before, she said. She had a memory of money changing hands, of seeing a smaller hand being filled with gold from a larger one. By the man with the long ears, or to him? Hatcher asked. She shook her head. There had only been that flash of terror, of memory best forgotten. There had been a man, but she couldnt remember his face. Then her mind reasserted itself, keeping her safe. He paused in front of her, a savage splattered with the blood of her attacker, and there was something about his face that was oddly vulnerable. May I...? he asked, and he mimed putting his arm around her shoulder. Everything inside her clenched and cried no. Then the moment passed, and she remembered how he had stared at her bare legs but turned away instead of falling on her like a ravening wolf. She nodded, and saw relief on his face. *Revue de presse* Careful, this white rabbit will lead you on a psychotic journey through the bowels of magic and madness. I, for one, thoroughly enjoyed the ride. *Brom*, author of *The Child Thief* I loved falling down the rabbit hole with this dark, gritty tale. A unique spin on a classic and one wild ride! *Gena Showalter*, New York Times bestselling author of *Alice in Zombieland* A dark, delightfully disturbing fall down a rabbit hole of madness and mystery. This is not your mammas Alice! If you're looking for a book that will make you feel like you were just on a bender with the blue caterpillar, I highly recommend *Alice*. *R.S. Belcher*, author of *Nightwise* A horrifying fantasy that will have you reexamining your love for this childhood favorite. Smooth velvety prose blends well with the deliciously complex characters and interesting storyline A world that is nothing like Lewis Carroll ever imagined. *RT Book s* (top pick) Hands down one of the most imaginative and entertaining books Ive read all year. *Vampire Book Club* A dark and deeply disturbing revisit of *Alices Adventures in Wonderland*. Who wouldnt like it? *Kirkus s* Henry retains all the surreality of Carrolls tale but makes it even darker, leading readers down a scarier rabbit hole and into a city thats fantastical, scary and frankly more satisfying than Carrolls original The writing is brisk, the story compulsive A fun, chilling, exciting, magical read. *The Oklahoman*