

The Ending Library

Except this wasn't the right garden at all. What Alice had thought were flowerbeds and fountains turned out to be a wild rosebush and a rugged spring, and all around were brooding trees that blocked the sky.

"But I did everything right," thought Alice. "I unlocked the little door, then I ate enough mushroom to shrink myself and go through. I ought to be in that lovely garden." She turned around, thinking of returning to the hall and trying again, but the door she'd stepped through had gone. She was alone in the middle of a wood.

"Perhaps this isn't a wood," she wondered. "Perhaps it's a could, or a should, or *I wood if I could, but I don't think I should...*" She shook herself. "I can't start talking like that, or else I'll sound like the Hatter. But that garden has to be somewhere."

She hadn't the slightest idea where to look, but going somewhere felt better than going nowhere. So she walked on for a while, peering at every tree in case it hid the door.

A book halted her progress. That is to say, a book bounced off her head and landed at her feet. Rubbing her head, she picked it up. The book was brown and covered with fingerprints and scratches. It was small, no bigger than her hand, and quite slim. Its title was so long, it was impossible to fit on the spine, most of the words dangling off in a black stream:

The Unabridged Book of the River of Reva for which no Bridge has ever been built, in whose Waters drowned much of the Social Members of the Young Mouse Guild, who are not to be confused with the Elder Mouse Guild who are eaters of the Pungent Cheeses, not to be confused with the Pageant Cheeses that were served at the Birthday of the Fourteenth King of Scotland before his Assassination in 995, after which was held a long and grievous Funeral, rivalling the Funeral of the Headmaster of the Young Mouse Guild after drowning in the River of Reva for which no Bridge has ever been built, and remains Unabridged

Alice was fond of books, though this sounded rather long winded and not worth the effort. Out of curiosity, she opened the cover. Stuck to the first page was a piece of parchment that read:

Library Book

*Please return to appointed place in library
before the first day of the first month of the first year of the End,
or face public execution by the hands of your local librarian.*

You will also receive a fine.

Alice closed the book and tried to figure out where it had come from, but all she could see were trees. She leaned against the trunk of an oak. The idea of being publicly executed and receiving a fine was an exhausting prospect. Click. She started back. The part of the trunk she leaned on flipped open. Inside, the tree was hollow and filled root-to-canopy with spiralling shelves of books. She turned around and gave a neighbouring birch a cautious prod. Click. A hatch opened, revealing even more books. After trying this with several trees, it became clear the entire wood was one enormous library.

Behind her, someone coughed. A Badger sat at a stone desk. On the desk was a looming pile of books, which he stamped one by one with a red woodblock, though the pile grew no smaller. Alice walked over.

“Are you the librarian?” asked Alice.

“I am the Librarian of the Ending Library,” said the Badger, without looking up.

“Oh. Do you mean the unending library?”

“The *Ending* Library,” said the Badger.

“It’s just that I read a book about an unending library, and I’ve seen many strange things today, so I wondered if this was *that* type of library.”

The Badger snorted. “Never believe what you read in books. As I said, this is the Ending Library. Unending libraries have no end, and this library has an end: it’s over there in Section Z,” he nodded to the darkest part of the wood. “This library has no beginning. I suppose you could call it the Unbeginning Library.”

“But if the end is in Section Z, wouldn’t the beginning be in Section A?”

The Badger sniffed. “The letter A is a myth. There is no such thing as the letter A, not in *this* library. Search all you like, you will never find a single book beginning with A. I never even say words beginning with A.”

Alice felt rather put out, what with her name beginning with A. She considered mentioning that Badger contains an A, but thought better of it. She held up the book. “Could you tell me where this goes?” The Badger peered at the spine.

“That belongs in Section L.”

Alice frowned. “But the first letter of the title is T, or U if you ignore the the.”

“That book belongs in Section L,” said the Badger, “because it is has a Long and Unwieldy name. L is for Long and Unwieldy.”

“Oh. Where is Section L?”

“Next to Section B.” When she continued to look lost, he pointed to a patch of poplars, then turned back to his desk.

Alice walked to the poplars. Just like the other trees, their bark swung open when tapped. There was a gap on the shelf in the exact shape of the book. It fitted with an odd pop. While she was there, she examined the other books. Most had titles

so long they flooded into each other, and many were in nonsensical languages. And then she spotted a thin red hardback. On its spine was the title *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

“What in the world?” said Alice, pulling out the book. On the cover was a picture of none other than herself.

“Is this really about me? Or have there been many girls called Alice in places called Wonderland and I am only the latest?” But there, on the contents page, was a list of all her adventures. From following the White Rabbit, all the way to the tea-party she just attended. Stranger still, it listed another five chapters she hadn't yet lived.

“But how odd, there's no mention of the Ending Library. It says I move straight from 'A Mad Tea-party' to 'The Queen's Croquet Ground'. I suppose whoever wrote this peculiar book lost the chapter. The Croquet Ground must be the garden I was trying to get to. I'd best take a peek, to see how to get there.” She flipped to Chapter VIII, but the page held only two words: *NO PEEPING*.

“Humph. If you're going to be like that, I'll have to take you with me. Maybe reading about where I've been will help with where I'm going.” She walked to the Badger. “Hello, I—”

The Badger glanced at the book. “Ah, I remember that one. I put it in Section L for Lack of Imagination.”

“Everything in here seems overly imaginative to me.”

The Badger shrugged. “I tried reading it, but it was so boring I couldn't get past Chapter II. I fail to see why someone would write about such everyday things.”

“Well, perhaps it would seem dull to me if I lived here,” thought Alice. “May I take this book out?” she asked the Badger.

The Badger stared. “Take it *out*?”

“Yes.”

“Take it *out*?” The Badger’s voice trembled. “Are you quite all right in the head?”

“I think so,” said Alice, “though I’m less sure with every moment.”

The Badger shook his snout. “You do not take books *out* of a library, you take books *into* a library. That’s the whole point of a library!”

“You don’t lend books at all? Whatever do you have them for?”

The Badger blinked, bewildered. After a moment, he said, “We also sell hats.” He motioned to a pile of hats that wasn’t there before: they were preposterous shapes with overflowing brims that smelled of over-brewed tea and sour milk. Each had a card that read: *Made by H. Atter.*

“No, thank you,” said Alice, not wanting a reminder of that adventure.

She returned to the poplar trees and replaced the book. She decided it was rather rude of the author to write about her without permission. Having had enough of the chapter, she turned to go, but the Badger called, “It’s unseemly to leave a library without taking in a book.”

She spun around. “But I already gave you a book!”

“No, you *returned* a book. *Taking in* a book means giving us one we don’t already have.”

“But I don’t have a book.”

The Badger rolled his eyes and brought out a pile of paper and a quill from under his desk. “Then write one.”

Alice looked at the paper. She looked at the Badger, his arms crossed. She could see no way out of this. So she knelt on the other side of the desk and wrote a book.

Few people have ever written a book in one sitting without breaks or pauses. It happened quicker than Alice expected. As soon as she touched quill to paper, words spilled out. The first thing she wrote was *The End*, and from there she wrote sentences from right to left. It became clear the quill was doing the actual writing.

When she tried to write something from her own head, the quill squealed, “Don’t do

that! That sounds awful!” or “The punctuation is horrendous! You ought to rub it out!” So she let the quill do the work.

When it finished Once upon a time, Alice put down the quill and stood up. “Here is your book.” She passed the manuscript to the Badger and as it exchanged hands, the pile of paper became a hardback. On the front was the title: The Quivering, by P.H. Quill, with unhelpful additions by A. Lice.

“How rude,” muttered Alice, scowling at the quill. “I’d like to see you pick up and write on your own.”

The Badger examined the book. “I shall put this,” he paused for a long time, “in Section A, for Average at Best.”

“I thought you said there was no Section A?”

“Suppose we change the subject.” The Badger produced a piece of paper. “Sign here.”

Alice reached for the quill, but it shrieked, “How dare you! I write intellectual works of literature, I do not sign paperwork.”

“Really!” said Alice, turning to the Badger. “Can you give me a quill that will do paperwork, please?”

The Badger opened his eyes very wide. “*Give* you a quill? This is the Ending Library! You may *lose* a quill, but you can never be *given* one. Things end, they do not begin.”

“But you already gave me a quill! How is that different?”

“What quill?” said the Badger.

Alice looked down and found the quill had disappeared. “For goodness’ sake. Where am I supposed to get a quill if I can only lose one?”

The Badger shrugged. “Find the one you’ve lost.”

“Where do I look?”

“Try Section Z. Things tend to end up there. That is the End of the Library, you know.”

Alice sighed wearily and trudged to where the trees were deep in shadows. But before she could start searching, something caught her eye. Or rather, something caught her nose. A lovely fragrance filled her senses, and she followed the smell to a door in the trunk of a tree. The door was exactly her size, and even better, on the other side, was the very garden she'd been looking for. Without sparing another thought for bookish badgers or haughty quills, she stepped through the door and found herself at last in the beautiful garden, among the bright flowerbeds and the cool fountains.