THE MAGICAL LITERARY WORLD OF THE WIZARD OF OZ

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Abstract: Frank Baum is well-known across the world for decades now, by children and parents, readers and researchers alike. It has been published and republished, translated in numerous languages, sometimes more than once in the same language. It has known countless illustrations and several adaptations for the big screen and for the stage, some with great success, like the famous musical fantasy of 1939. We are all familiar with the wonderful recount of Dorothy, her dog Toto and her unusual friends in the land of Oz. But how much do we actually know about the story behind the story? How much do we know about the story of the author himself and the numerous continuations of the story? Relying on some important studies on this literary work, this article aims to shed some light on this celebrated and beautiful book's backround.

Keywords: children's literature, Frank Baum, Wizard of Oz

Motto: *The imaginative child will become the imaginative man or woman most apt to create, to invent and therefore to foster civilization. (Frank L. Baum)*

Frank L. (Lyman) Baum, who lived and wrote at the threshold of the nineteenth and twentieth century, is the American author of the famous 'Oz' stories - fourteen full-length volumes during his lifetime. He was also called 'The Royal Historian of Oz', thus acknowledging for the young learners the reality of the magic land of Oz he invented - the idea promoted being that characters from the book themselves were telling Baum about their adventures, using the modern invention of wireless telegraph.

Born in the state of New York, Baum had a heart condition which meant that much of his childhood was spent indoors, reading - a fact which probably greatly developed his imagination; sent to the Military Academy of Peekskill he had to drop out due to his heart problems and upon his return, he set up a small printing press and started a family newspaper, a fact which also points out his interest in books from an early age. He went on to becoming a journalist, apart from working in his family oil business. It was said that his early work as a shop assistant was the incentive for the Oz name, as he was selling grains by the ounce. Baum himself stated, on the other hand, that the Oz idea came to him while working in his study, where he noticed the O-Z drawer of his filing cabinet.

As early as 26 years old, Baum staged a melodrama based on his own lyrics and music and drawing upon a popular writing of the time, *The Maid of Arran.* His father's occupation of theater owner put its mark on his personal evolution, as he was always interested in theatrical productions. His production was presented in New York, but also in other cities, even as far as Canada.

After marrying and changing several jobs and cities, Baum came to author a book of stories based on nursery rhymes, the same he used to entertain his four sons. This first book, published in 1897 and entitled *Mother Goose in Prose*, was illustrated by Maxfield Parrish. Baum wrote it following the counsel of his mother-in-law, the well-known suffragette Matilda Gage, who advised him to publish some of the stories he enjoyed telling his four children instead of working hard as a salesman for a china company. *Mother Goose* became the best-selling children book of the year and ignited his career as a fantast writer. Two years later, he published a second picture book with rhymes, the best-selling *Father Goose, His*

Book, illustrated by William Wallace Denslow. This started a nice collaboration between writer and illustrator that continued with two other similar volumes published in 1900.

The success of *Father Goose* led to at least two things: Baum bought a summer cottage by Lake Michigan, naming it *The sign of the Goose* and went on to transforming another bed-time story for his children into a book, giving thus birth to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, also published in 1900. This was undoubtedly the greatest success of Baum's career and one of the most celebrated children books of all times. Baum wrote several more books and a lot of Oz volumes; he also took part in the stage production of *The Wizard of Oz* in 1902, which not only had a great success but also encouraged him to continue the adventures of Dorothy and her friends. The second Oz volume tells the story of Tip, a boy from Oz and his friends: Jack Pumpkin-head (a Scarecrow look-alike), a Saw-Horse, a creature entitled 'H.M. Woggle-Bug T.E.' and the already famous Tin-Man. At the end of this story, Tip undergoes a magical transformation, turning into Princess Ozma, the rightful ruler of Oz, which was to appear in further Oz volumes, as well. This second book was also adapted for the stage under the name of *The Woggle-Bug*, but enjoyed little success. Baum continued to write, this time under several literary pseudonyms such as 'Laura Bancroft' or 'Edith van Dyne' who became quite popular with the girls' stories series entitled *Aunt Jane's Nieces.*

After touring Europe and North Africa with his family in 1906, Baum became interested in cinematography and what it could offer to him and once returned to the United States, he made some short films based on the Oz stories and presented them across America but again, with not great success. Until 1910, Baum published another four Oz books and after his bankruptcy in 1911, he turned his full attention to the Oz series, producing a volume every year until his death in 1919. Out of these, *The Tik-Tok Man of Oz* was staged as a musical with some success and the Oz Film Manufacturing Company produced some children movies which were not very welcome at that time. Despite being ill, Baum worked hard and continued writing until the very end. It was the fourteen full-length volumes of Oz, usually released around Christmas, that established Baum's reputation as the first American fantasy literature for the youth. It is known that Baum attempted several times to end the series in order to be able to write different types of fiction, but financial issues and continuous demand from the public, young and adult alike, prevented that. Two of the Oz books were published posthumously. By then, the Oz series had become so very popular that it was continued, with the family's permission. Ruth Plumly Thompson, the first of the follow-up authors in the Oz series, produced a book every year until 1939. The endeavor continued with John R. Neill until his own death in 1943. Neill was also the one who illustrated most of the Oz stories appearing before Baum's death, so it was perhaps not a surprise that he continued the stories, as well. Even after Niell's death, several Oz stories appeared, under different authorships, totaling forty volumes altogether. Stage and film productions (movies and cartoons) fed the public's hunger for magical realm of Oz and there are still ongoing fan clubs, blogs and sites active today.

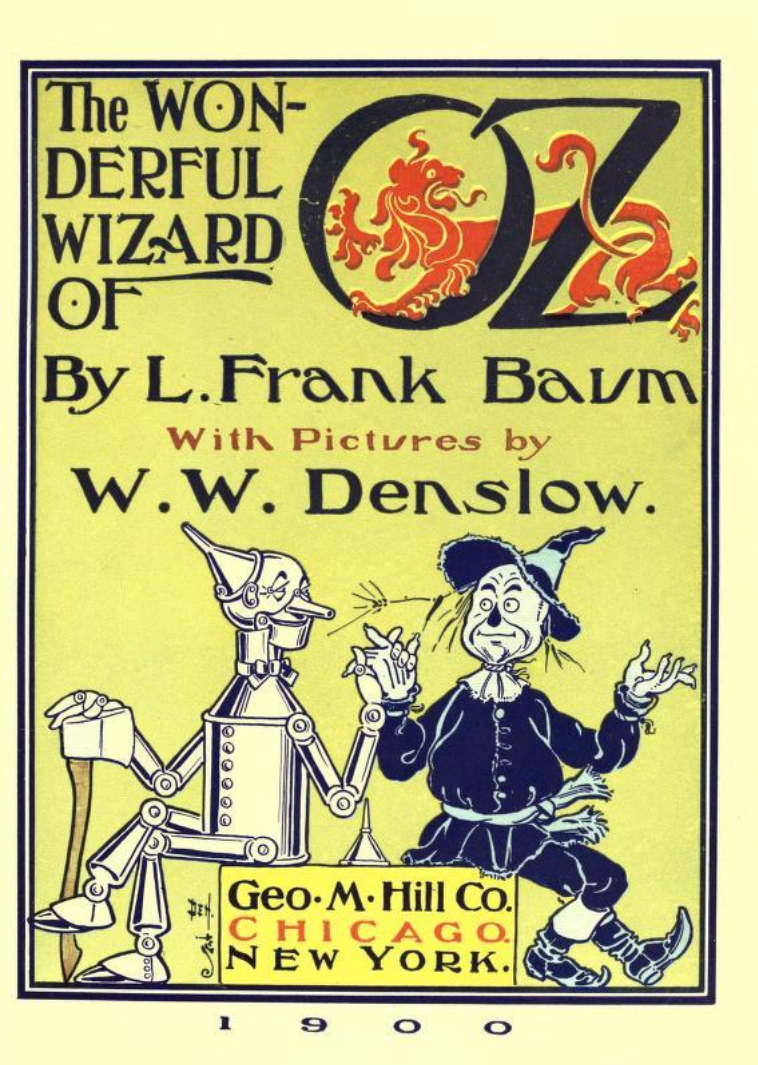

Figure 1: Original cover of the 1900's book, with illustrations by W.W. Denslow

The original title of the series, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,* tells the story of the orphan girl Dorothy and her dog Toto who are carried away by a tornado to the magical realm of Oz. There she become good friend with the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman and the Cowardly Lion. Together they go on a search for the great Wizard of Oz. He is the only one able to provide the dearest wish of their hearts - in the case of Dorothy the desire to return to her uncle and aunt's farm in Kansas. After discovering that the Wizard is a mere mortal being, all characters realize, in a typical American manner, that the qualities they so much desired to be granted: affection, intelligence and courage were already theirs and in their power to be used.

From the introduction of the book[1], Baum stated that traditional fairy stories like those from the Grimm and Andersen collections are obsolete and declares his intention of creating 'a modernized fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heart-ache and nightmares are left out' :

Folklore, legends, myths and fairy tales have followed childhood through the ages, for every healthy youngster has a wholesome and instinctive love for stories fantastic, marvelous and manifestly unreal. The winged fairies of Grimm and Andersen have brought more happiness to childish hearts that all other human creations. The old-time fairy tale, having

[1] Baum, L. F., *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,* 1900, http://literature.org/authors/baum-l-frank/the-wonderful-wizard-of-oz/introduction.html

served for generations, may now be classed as historical in the children's library; for the time has come for a series of newer wonder tales in which the stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood-curdling incident devised by the authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale[2].

In truth, however, there are several characters in the book which are quite maleficent: the bad witches, the evil winged monkeys and some dreadful episodes like the telling of Tin Man's sad story with the axe. Furthermore, some elements of the so-called 'historic fairy-tale' do appear in the book: the bad witch and the good witch, the enchanted objects like the red magical shoes, the journey in search for magic, etcetera.

The first version of the book was entitled *The Emerald City* but it was changed, allegedly because of a superstition that a book entitled after a jewel will bring bad luck.[3] The change of the title seemed to have been lucky, as the first printing of the book sold within weeks and in less than a year 110 000 copies had been sold.

The beautiful illustrations by W.W. Denslow added to the great success of the book. The drawings were considered to be by the critics:

[...] strongly reminiscent of Walter Crane as well as being influenced by Art Nouveau and Japanese paintings. There were over 100 text illustrations, in black and one additional color (sepia, green, mustard yellow, brown, or red), many of them spreading into and around the text itself.[...] Baum himself seems not to have cared particularly for the pictures, but Denslow's representation of the Tin Man and the Scarecrow have been faithfully copied by later illustrators, film-makers and stage-designers.[4]

Baum seems to have encountered a similar problem as Lewis Caroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, a book that critics often discussed it together with: the tendency to praise illustrator more than the author.

[2] Ibid.
[3] Hahn Daniel, *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 638
[4] Ibid.

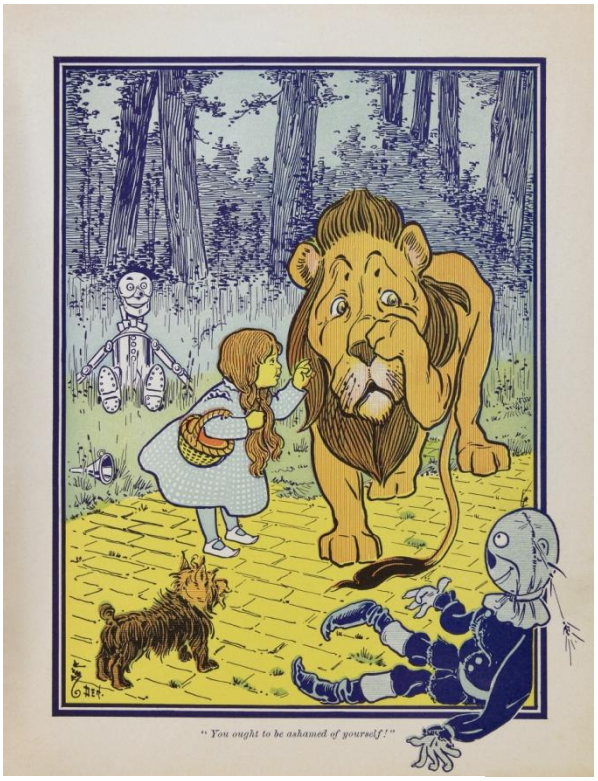

Figure 2: Original illustrations by W.W. Denslow

Baum's original style was not acclaimed by the critics. Librarians and critics alike considered the writing in the Oz books as being insipid and silly; the series was very popular with the young readers. Furthermore, there was some reticence from the public, as it was not considered educative enough for the youngsters. The chief librarian of Detroit banned it in 1957, stating that it promotes negativism and does not stimulate the thinking process of the young readers. Furthermore, in 1986, several Christian families from Tennessee asked in the

course of a public law suit for the removal of the book from the school curricula, sustaining that the book promotes human attributes that in fact belong to God alone. Also, in the view of those families, the book inaccurately promotes gender equality and personifies the animals. The judge ruled that the children from those families are allowed to leave the class when the book is being brought into discussion, but he did not exclude it from the curriculum.

Important children literature compendiums such as *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, compiled by Daniel Hahn[5] have not the most favorable opinion on the book, either:

Even 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz' is no more than workmanlike in construction - the story is told considerably better in the 1939 MGM film version than in the book - and the numerous sequels are largely reworking of the same themes over and again, though they are told with pace and humor. [Baum's] work has never been universally admired, because of its stylistic flaws, and some American public libraries have been proud to announce that they do not stock his books. But he is a figure of great importance in the history of children's fiction in the United States, being the first writer to create an unforgettable full-length original American fantasy.

Some appraisal was, however, published at the time. For example, the prestigious *New York Times* magazine talked about *The Wizard of Oz* as being 'a book that rises far above the average children's book of today, high as is the present standard'.[6]

In 1903 the book was reissued by another publisher, as the original publisher had gone bankrupt and the title was changed into *The New Wizard of Oz.* The change of title was meant to avoid confusion with the hugely successful musical *The Wizard of Oz*, released in Chicago in 1902, although the play was not entirely based on the book.

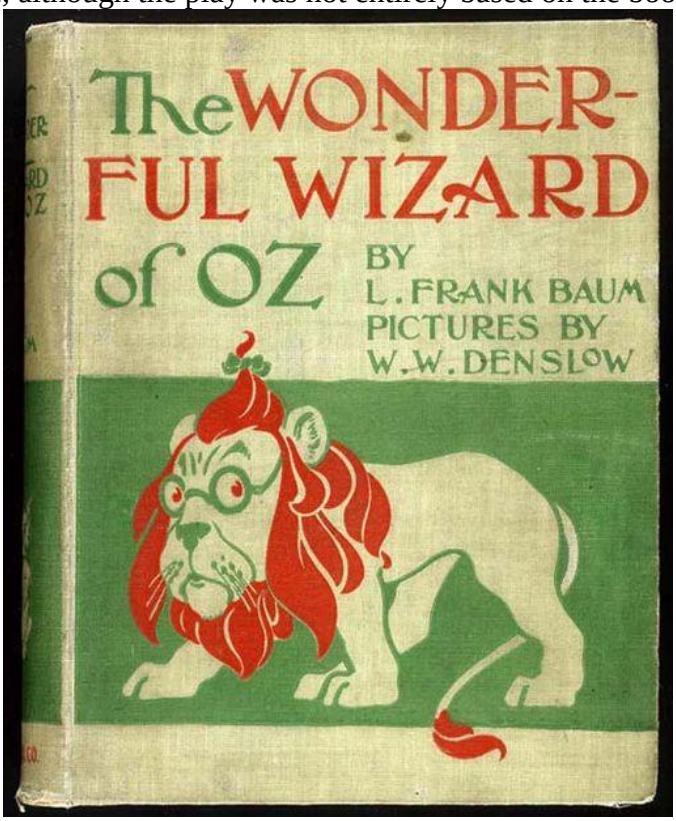

Figure 3: *Old edition of The wonderful wizard of Oz*

As stated above, Baum himself experimented with cinematography and filmed scenes from the book, even colorful ones. Even a silent film was released in 1925, starring Oliver

[5] Hahn Daniel, *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 57
[6] *New York Times*, 8 Septemeber 1900

Hardy as the Tin Man, but with little success. Despite several film adaptations over time, some even as recent as 2013, the widest acclaimed movie still remains the iconic 1939 MGM release with Judy Garland as Dorothy and the music scores signed by Harold Arlen.

As well as the numerous sequels to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* produced by Baum and various other writers after his death, Denslow - the original illustrator of Baum's books produced in 1903 a book of his own, entitled *Pictures from the Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, with a new story to fit the pictures by Thomas H. Russel and also created a series of *Scarecrow and Tin Man* comics for a magazine of the time (December 1904 and January 1905).

More editions of the original book appeared over the years, along with numerous translations in various languages (Romanian included), although only the original, initial title is usually translated and popularized, also perhaps of the great success of its adaptation into the MGM film. Many translations kept the original Denslow illustrations, but there were several local illustrators in some cases. For example, the Romanian editions, the first during the times of Ceausescu and lot others after the fall of the Communist regime, had local illustrators, each with his or her own vision of the characters. Some of the most famous illustrators of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* had been, over time, Michael Hague and David McKee; a much acclaimed pop-up version pf Robert Sabuda appeared in 2000.

A spread from *The Wonderful Wizard of OZ: A commemorative pop-up* by L. Frank Baum and art by Robert Sabuda[7]

Baum was certainly very much concerned with the United States of his time and his hope for an imaginative child that would later on become the man or woman able *to* foster civilization referred to the civilization of his contemporaneity. For that particular child did Baum create the fantastic realm of Oz - called *his believable unbelievable country* by his follower in writing, Ruth Plumly Thompson who wrote nineteen Oz books following his

[7] *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz: a Commemorative Pop-up*, illustrated by Robert Sabuda, Simon&Schuster Ltd, 2001

death. In a note to a new edition of *American Fairy Tales* from 1908, Baum discusses the characteristics of American fairy tales. He considers on the superficiality of America's history, a new country in itself, reflected in the stories of not-so *deep history*, but he is proud, at the same time, of the *wide-awake youngsters* and the *modern tales about modern fairies*, bearing *the stamp of our own time* and depicting *the progressive fairies of today*.[8]

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