



RETURN TO OZ

a history of the journey



The iconic 1939 MGM film *The Wizard of Oz*, one of the best-known stories in American popular culture was based on L. Frank Baum's charming 1900 publication, one of a canon of 14 Oz books which inspired younger generations and continues to do so through today's collectors



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I grew up a child of the '80s; I was about seven years old when the Disney film *Return to Oz* was released and I remember with great excitement going to see the film, and later having my dad buy me the accompanying film book from the school book club. I think this was the start of my Oz obsession, and so my dad, being the wonderful father that he is, dutifully read to me every night before bed from the collection of Oz books; and when I say books – I mean the whole 14 that L. Frank Baum wrote!

When many people think of Oz they recall the *Wizard of Oz* and nothing more but the magic that came alive in these fantasy fairytales of a faraway land where animals spoke, people didn't age and little girls ran the land invoked my imagination. It was the female leads in the Oz books that had the power, went on adventure and





ruled. Growing up in the '80s, an age of women's power dressing and empowerment with a feminist upbringing and education, I was brought up to believe, like Dorothy and Ozma, I could do anything.

From chickens to prose

L. (Lyman) Frank Baum (1856-1919) led an interesting life giving various ventures ago, before finding his feet as a successful children's book author. He was 44 years old when *The Wizard of Oz* first hit the shelves of the bookshops in 1900.

Baum grew up in New York, the son of a wealthy oil merchant and for one of his birthday gifts in his teenage years his father bought him his own printing press, which he used to produce his own little magazines for fun. A little later, he developed an interest in chickens – of all things – which led to his breeding them at the age of 19, after which he took a fascination in the theatre. It would seem his father helped him finance his way into a theatre company, and off he went travelling. All these influences and





experiences would later help with his Oz books. His interest in chickens, for instance, led to the character of Billinda the talking hen. On his travels he met his future wife, Maud Gage. Maud's mother, Matilda, was a writer and leading suffragette, and it was with her encouragement that Baum wrote down some of his bedtime stories he made up for his sons and published his first children's book *Mother Goose in Prose* in 1897.

Just prior to that, in 1891 the family moved to Chicago, following many failed business attempts by Baum and his badly managing the family business he had inherited. Baum was earning a living as a travelling salesman, selling china and glassware door to door when the success of his first book took off. He became a member of the Chicago Press Club and met designer, illustrator and cartoonist W.W. (William Wallace) Denslow (1856-1915). They soon became partners, and together financed a book in which Denslow created the eye-catching illustrations and Baum wrote the children's poetry. *Father Goose* was published in 1899 and became a top seller on the children's book lists.

Rare first editions

Off the back of this triumph, Baum decided he would like to have a go at writing a full length fairytale, a story he had been creating in his head for some time. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* went on sale in 1900, but unfortunately didn't make the sales expected. The publishers went bankrupt in 1902; making this original very first edition run of books of *The*



Wonderful Wizard of Oz, published by George M Hill Company, highly collectable. Of the first binding from the first printed edition, it is believed that only ten copies or less have survived, making a copy in good condition worth in excess of \$150,000.

In 1903 the book was printed again by publishers Bobbs-Merrill, this time under another title, *The New Wizard of Oz*. So don't be fooled if you're looking at buying old editions, this is the same book as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the title MGM used when they produced the film in 1939 and, subsequently, the one under which the book has been published ever since.

From book to stage show

Through Baum's past experiments working in theatre, it seemed like a natural transition to translate the *Oz* book into a stage show and, between 1901 and 1902, Baum and Denslow worked on this as partners, as they had done with the books. However, this was short-lived as Baum and Denslow soon parted ways after financial disagreements. The stage show opened in Chicago in mid 1902, and from there it went on to open in Broadway at the beginning of 1903. The actors playing the Tinman and the Scarecrow stole the show and so when Baum finally gave into demands for another *Oz* book, he wrote of the adventure of these two characters, and not of Dorothy.

Fashion history in fairytale illustrations

As Baum had fallen out with W.W. Denslow, his latest publishers Reilly & Britton (later called Reilly & Lee) found a new illustrator John R. Neil,



who went onto illustrate the rest of Baum's *Oz* books. I personally prefer Neil's illustrations which are far more in the romantic, softer and classical style of illustrations at the time than the harder, bolder images of Denslow.

Neil depicts Dorothy in the fashions befitting a young girl at the turn of the century. When Neil first illustrates Dorothy, in *Ozma of Oz*, she wears a spotted, high neck, long sleeve dress. The dress is short in length, which was commonplace for children until they became of age, and belted around the hips creating a billowing effect over the belt and indicative of the ladies 'wasp waist' fashions of the time. By contrast, the style of the long dress, headdress and hairstyle of Ozma, the magical child ruler of Oz, is informed by the Art Nouveau movement; an iconic style now recognised in Art Nouveau Parisian posters, made popular by Prague artist Alphonse Mucha.

Ozma's large sweeping robes were fashionable with artists and intellectuals (and wives of) at the time, as a new form of freedom, of movement dress reform – in stark contrast to the corsets at the time.

Later, the original *Oz* illustrator Denslow went back and re-illustrated all the *Oz* books, which I am not a fan of; although the illustrations have a charm





of their own, the odd colour plate he uses makes Dorothy look more like one of the *Simpson* cartoon characters than a charming little girl. However, when MGM looks for inspiration for their depiction of Dorothy, it is this original version by Denslow in her blue chequered dress and long brown hair in bunches that they use.

More than one film

Baum toyed with film right from the early stages and in 1910 bought a house in Hollywood, the developing centre for the American film industry. Many *Oz* films of varying degrees of success were made before the MGM hit with Judy Garland.

Bedridden with illness in the last years of his life, Baum concentrated on writing and wrote right up to his death in 1919. The last book he wrote and published was *The Magic of Oz*, and the following year his 14th *Oz* book, *Glinda of Oz*, was published posthumously from his notes.

Many books were written about *Oz* after Baum's death by different authors but I have never been drawn to read these. Baum was so much a part of his books; it is very touching to read his dedications and letters to the readers at the start of each of his novels, acknowledging the ideas of children who had written to him.

It is a great shame that Baum was not around to witness the success of MGM's film hit *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. As film was a media which greatly fascinated Baum and he enjoyed to dabble in, it seems only fitting that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, along with *Gone with the Wind*, were the first full length colour films which made film history on their release in 1939.

My hope is that this latest *Oz* film – *Oz the Great and Powerful* – will spur on a new generation of *Oz* devotees, like me with the '80s Disney adventure



I went to see as a child, *The Return to Oz* (which was loosely based around the books *The Land of Oz* and *Ozma of Oz*). The new film uses some of Baum's characters and ideas but is mostly made by the Disney writers to appeal to today's moviegoers.

This film is pre Dorothy and based on the story of the Wizard and his trip to *Oz*. Visually it pays homage to the iconic MGM musical hit of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* on many levels. Disney was clever in keeping enough of the iconic visual references from the first film to bring some correlation and relationship to their prequel. Jazzing it up for today's audience there is certainly a lot more romance than was ever seen in any of Baum's books; as can be also said for the Broadway hit musical *Wicked*. It would be nice to see some of Baum's original books made into films, as there are so many to choose from, instead of others writing new stories around the idea.

Notes for collectors

Collecting the books today, particularly first editions, it is not always easy to determine what is what. There are many versions and reprints of the *Oz* books out there. For an in-depth guide I would look at the www.rareozbooks.com website. With buying modern reprints, I would suggest sticking with the original illustrators for their versions: Denslow for *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and Neil for the rest.



In my day, my father had to order each book through our local bookshop and have it shipped from America while these days you can order them all online. Alternately, if you fancy a copy with a bit of age but are not worried about the edition, try scouting through the children's section of any good second-hand bookshop where you should find copies between \$20-\$50 each.

Acknowledgements

Photo credits: Fred Trust from rareozbooks.com; Mark Burgess from Marks Book Barn, Sydney

Further reading

Allen Eyles, *The World of Oz*, Viking, Harmondsworth Middlesex 1985

Written in dedication to my father and his many hours of bedtime reading

