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The Editorial Notebook

100 YEARS IN THE WONDERFUL LAND OF OZ

ONE HUNDRED years ago, L. Frank Baum's American fairy tale — *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* — appeared for the first time in bookstores.

It was an overnight success and has remained one, to be retold on stage, in films and in a series of sequels.

KEITH RUNYON

The author, a native New Yorker who moved west to the Dakota territory in the 1880s, had failed as a newspaper publisher, shopkeeper, dramatist and salesman.

But fame came Baum's way with two books for children — *Mother Goose in Prose* (1897) and *Father Goose, His Book* (1899) — and then, in September 1900, his novel about a 6-year-old Kansas girl who is transported by a cyclone to the land of Oz.

Readers have been on that journey with Dorothy and her friends the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion and the Scarecrow ever since.

This year, in commemoration of the centenary of *Oz*'s publication, a number of new editions, as well as books about the book have appeared. They shed new light on — and new explanations of — why this became quite possibly the most notable children's book of the 20th Century.

The Oz books "were a great escape from the drudgery of school and the unreliability of early black-and-white TV," recalls my colleague Bert Emke. "You never had to worry, when you opened an Oz book, that you'd find yourself staring at a test pattern."

The story is familiar to almost all of us, if not from the book, then from the 1939 movie, which has been shown on television every year since 1956 (and has been seen by more people than any other film). But what does it mean?

There have been debates for a long time about Baum's intentions. As is so often the case with great children's books, the author may have had no agenda at all. He was just a 44-year-old father of four who liked to tell stories to his children.

(And he went on telling them for the next 19 years, as he wrote 14 sequels using the Oz characters. After his death, Ruth Plumly Thompson took up the pen as the official historian of Oz.)

L. Frank Baum, the man who created Oz a century ago.

Scholars have advanced more complex explanations of the story. One theory proposes that it was Baum's reaction to the depression of the 1890s. Some even suggest that it is a commentary on the silver vs. gold standard controversy that deeply influenced the 1896 presidential election.

If so, Baum left scant written evidence. He wrote his sister: "To please a child is a sweet and lovely thing that warms one's heart and brings its own reward."

Emke recalls some of those rewards. "The stories, especially by the time you get to the ones written by Ruth Plumly Thompson, had a nice blend of the familiar and the strange. Sort of like taking a turn on a path in Cherokee Park and suddenly finding yourself face to face with the red rocks of Sedona, a talking elephant and a flying sofa."

But there's no end to the interpretations of Baum's classic, which John Fricke explores in his handsome new book, *100 Years of Oz* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 160 pp., $29.95):

"Essayists have addressed feminism, Freudian explications, and the matriarchy of the land. Dorothy has been psychoanalyzed in her role as an orphan; the Good and Wicked Witches of Oz have been made to represent different facets of Aunt Em or decoded as symbols of the Good and Bad Mother who 'deserted' Dorothy in the first place. The Kansas girl herself is . . . encumbered by 'deficient' males who hide their humbuggery, or search for brains, heart and courage."

There is yet another, more contemporary way of looking at all this.

The four main characters in *Oz* (five, if you count Dorothy's dog, Toto) provide an excellent illustration of a multicultural world. Humans and animals; men made of tin and straw.

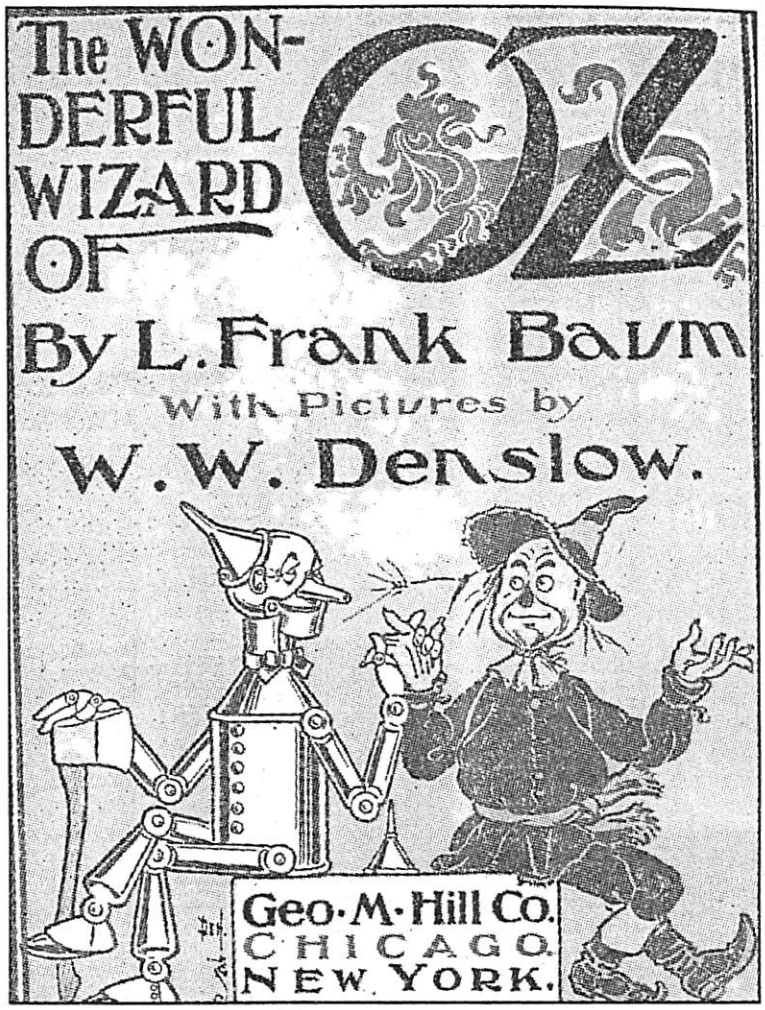
They are confronted with individual problems that seem insoluble. But working as a community, with the interests of others as well as their own in mind, they triumph.

A lot of people may feel rather comfortable with that interpretation. It makes sense to me.

I first read *The Wizard of Oz* when I was 9, during a snowstorm. I was sick with a bad cold, so there was no hope of going out to sled. Instead, my mother offered me a new edition, and I settled into a chair to follow the journey down the yellow brick road. Later, I read some of the sequels — *The Land of Oz, Ozma of Oz, The Tin Man of Oz* — when I was young, and again to my son when he was 8 or 9.

I don't know whether Baum's original book, or its sequels, are the outstanding children's literary works of the soon-ending century. This century has also given us James M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, and all the wonderful books by C. S. Lewis, J. K. Rowling and Dr. Seuss.

But without question, no



When Oz was published in 1900, this is how it looked.

book has been a more thorough part of our lives and culture than the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

It's a journey we've all taken, together, through the strange and perilous times of the 20th Century.

Keith Runyon is opinion editor of The Courier-Journal and also edits its book page.