Girls' role models inhabit land of Oz

THE LOST WORD

KATHARINE M. ROGERS
on L. Frank Baum's
THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ
AND OTHER OZ BOOKS

A recent exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, "Brave Little Girls," presented a refreshing corrective to the traditional literary images of girls. Instead of being helped through their little-girl problems by big brothers or wakened from their sleep by a prince's kiss, the girls in these books take matters into their own hands: A black girl wins the white male leading role in her class play by practicing hard and getting everybody's vote; a disheveled tomboy princess rescues her sister from a band of goblins.

The exhibit suffered, however, from one glaring omission. It left out the author of one of the most popular series of books for children, L. Frank Baum, who liberated generations of little girls through his creation of the land of Oz in 1900.

In addition to "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," whose heroine is a model of good sense, resourcefulness and self-assurance, Baum wrote 13 more Oz books, nine of which center on Dorothy or other independent little girls who welcome adventures and deal with difficulties on their own.

In many ways, Baum was ahead of his time in the role he created for Dorothy. In "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," she rescues three adult male characters and leads them to the Wizard. She destroys two wicked witches (if unintentionally). Not even the most frightening experiences can reduce Dorothy to panic or despair. Even when she and her house are caught up by a cyclone, she resolves "to wait calmly and see what the future would bring." Far from being lonely or frightened in a strange land, she appreciates its beauty and novelty while taking practical measures for getting home.

By the fifth book, "The Road to Oz," Dorothy "was getting used to queer adventures, which interested her very much." In "Glinda of Oz," she asks to go along on a dangerous mission, for "Whatever happens it's going to be fun — 'cause all excitement is fun."

The Oz books start from the assumption that novel experiences are to be greeted with optimism and that anyone confronted with a problem, children included, can solve it through constructive thinking and good sense. Such a message is particularly helpful to little girls, who are so often taught to play it safe and depend on others. Without any self-conscious preaching, Baum simply presents children of both sexes as naturally active, adventurous, self-confident and resourceful.

Dorothy is not the only Baum heroine who exudes pluck and self-reliance. The most emancipated character in the whole Oz series is Scraps in "The Patchwork Girl of Oz." Designed by a magician's wife to be a household maid and constructed of a crazy quilt stuffed with cotton, Scraps was supposed to be endowed with only those qualities from the magician's cupboard that would suit her for her menial job: obedience, amiability, truthfulness.

But a boy who sees all this thinks it "unfair and unkind to deprive [Scraps] of any good qualities that were handy," so he adds to the mix every one he can find on the magician's shelf: cleverness, judgment, courage, ingenuity, learning, poesy and self-reliance. The result is a character who contributes far more by her wit than she could by humble compliance.

Illustration by W.W. Denslow from the 1900 edition of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz"

Scraps is even less conventionally feminine than Baum's realistic girls, being conspicuously devoid of modesty, propriety and tenderness of heart. She never sits still, she scoffs at authority, and she brashly announces her opinions. In contrast to the foolishly sentimental Tin Woodsman, she rejoices that the magician's wife forgot to give her a heart, which "must be a great annoyance," as it "makes a person feel sad or sorry or devoted or sympathetic — all of which sensations interfere with one's happiness."

The wiser authorities in Oz come to value her cleverness and good temper and decree that she may "live in the palace, or wherever she pleases, and be nobody's servant but her own."

In addition to offering girl readers models that liberate them from restrictive gender roles, the Oz books offer them an alternative to a male-dominated society. For it is only females who have power in Oz. The Wizard (the only male authority figure) is, of course, a humbug whose powers are illusory. It is only Glinda the good witch who can solve Dorothy's problem, which, unlike those of her male companions, is a real one.

By blending fantasy with the familiar, the Oz books present more usable role models than either realistic stories or traditional fairy tales. Although Oz is a fairyland, it is a distinctively American one, where manners are democratic and magic is much like technology. The Oz protagonists are neither victims nor princesses, but normal girls who confront magical situations just as readers imagine they would do themselves.

On the other hand, setting the books in fairyland makes it possible simply to ignore ordinary gender roles. The enterprising heroines do not have to be cut down to size, nor do actual conditions have to be falsified for them to fulfill their aspirations.

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"The Lost Word" appears on the second Sunday of each month. In it, distinguished commentators remind us of interesting but often forgotten writers and books from years past.