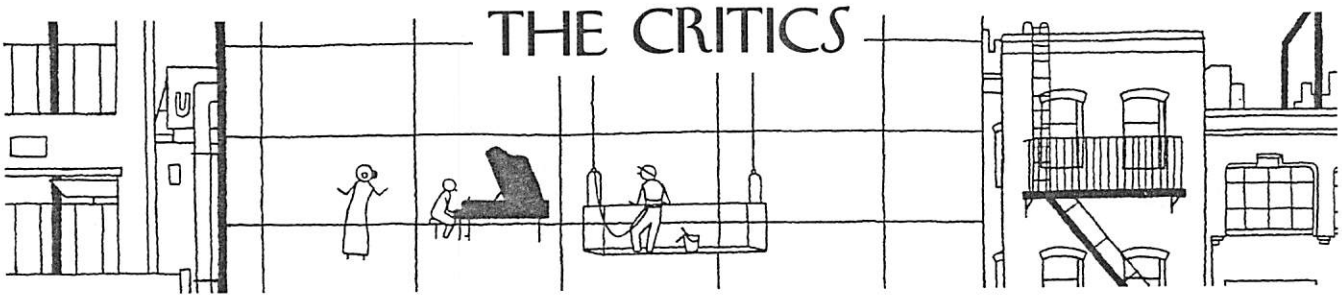


A CRITIC AT LARGE

OZ IS US

Celebrating the Wizard's centennial.

BY JOHN UPDIKE

A hundred years ago, "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," by L. Frank Baum, was published by the soon-to-be-defunct Chicago-based firm of George M. Hill. The Library of Congress is hosting a commemorative exhibition, and Norton has brought out a centennial edition of "The Annotated Wizard of Oz," edited and annotated by Michael Patrick Hearn ($39.95). Hearn, we learn from a preface by Martin Gardner, became a Baum expert while he was an English major at Bard College, and put forward an annotated "Wizard" when he was only twenty years old. Gardner, the polymathic compiler of "The Annotated Alice" (1960) and "More Annotated Alice" (1990), had been invited to do the same, in 1970, for Baum's fable; disclaiming competence, he recommended the young Bard Baumist to Clarkson N. Potter, who published Hearn's tome in 1973. In the years since, Hearn has produced annotated versions of Charles Dickens's "Christmas Carol" and Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn," added to the vast tracts of Baum scholarship, co-authored a biography of W. W. Denslow, the "Wizard" 's illustrator, and labored at a still unpublished "definitive biography" of Baum. Presumably, he and Norton have been patiently waiting, with fresh slews of annotation and illustration, for the centennial (which is also that of Dreiser's "Sister Carrie," Conrad's "Lord Jim," Colette's first Claudine novel, and Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams") to roll around.

It is not hard to imagine why Gardner ducked the original assignment. The two "Alice" books are more literate, intricate, and modernist than Baum's "Wonderful Wizard," and Lewis Carroll's mind, laden with mathematical lore, chess moves, semantic puzzles, and the riddles of Victorian religion, was more susceptible to explication, at least by the like-minded Gardner. But Baum, Hearn shows in his introduction, was a complicated character, too—a Theosophist, an expert on poultry, a stagestruck actor and singer, a fine amateur photographer, an inventive household tinkerer, a travelling china salesman, and, only by a final shift, a children's writer. He was forty-four when "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" was published. His prior bibliography included a directory of stamp dealers, a treatise on the mating and management of Hamburg chickens, a definitive work entitled "The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors" (also celebrating its centennial), and a few small volumes for children. Baum's life (1856-1919) reflects the economic and ideological adventurism of his America. Hearn tells us that his father, Benjamin Ward Baum, "followed nearly as many careers as his son would. He was building a barrel factory in Chittenango [New York] when the boy was born, but made a fortune in the infant Pennsylvania oil industry only a few years later." Lyman Frank, one of nine children, of whom five survived into adulthood, was raised on a luxurious estate in Syracuse and educated by English tutors. He was a dreamy reader of a boy. He lasted only two years at Peekskill Military School, and went on to Syracuse Classical School, without, apparently, graduating. He married the twenty-year-old Maud Gage when he was twenty-six and, grown into a lanky man with a large mustache, was touring as the star of a musical melodrama, "The Maid of Arran," which he had written—book, lyrics, and music. His mother-in-law, Matilda Joslyn Gage, was a prominent feminist and a keen Theosophist; she had not wanted her daughter to leave Cornell to marry an actor. But Maud did anyway, and when she became pregnant Frank left the theatre. With his uncle, Adam Baum, he established Baum's Castorine Company, marketing an axle grease invented by his brother Benjamin and still, in this slippery world, being manufactured.

Maud's sisters and brother had all settled in the Dakota Territory; in 1888 Frank moved with his family to Aberdeen, South Dakota, where he opened a variety store, Baum's Bazaar. Drought and depression caused the store to fail; in 1890 Baum took over a weekly newspaper, calling it the *Saturday Pioneer*, and by 1891 it, too, was failing. He found employment in Chicago, first as a reporter and then as a travelling salesman with the wholesale china-and-glassware firm of Pitkin & Brooks. The two-and-a-half-year Dakota interval gave him, however, the Plains flavor crucial to the myth of Dorothy and the Wizard; gray desolation and hardscrabble rural survival compose the negative of which Oz is the colorful print. In Baum's Kansas, "even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere." Chicago's spectacular White City, built of plaster and cement for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition on the lakeside marshes, gave both Baum and his illustrator, Denslow, the

glitz and scale, but not the tint, of Oz's Emerald City. A contemporary writer, Frances Hodgson Burnett, likened the White City to the City Beautiful in Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress," and wrote:

> Endless chains of jewels seemed strung and wound about it. The Palace of Flowers held up a great crystal of light glowing against the dark blue of the sky, towers and domes were crowned and diademed, thousands of jewels hung among the masses of leaves, or reflected themselves, sparkling in the darkness of the lagoons, fountains of molten jewels sprung up, and flamed and changed.

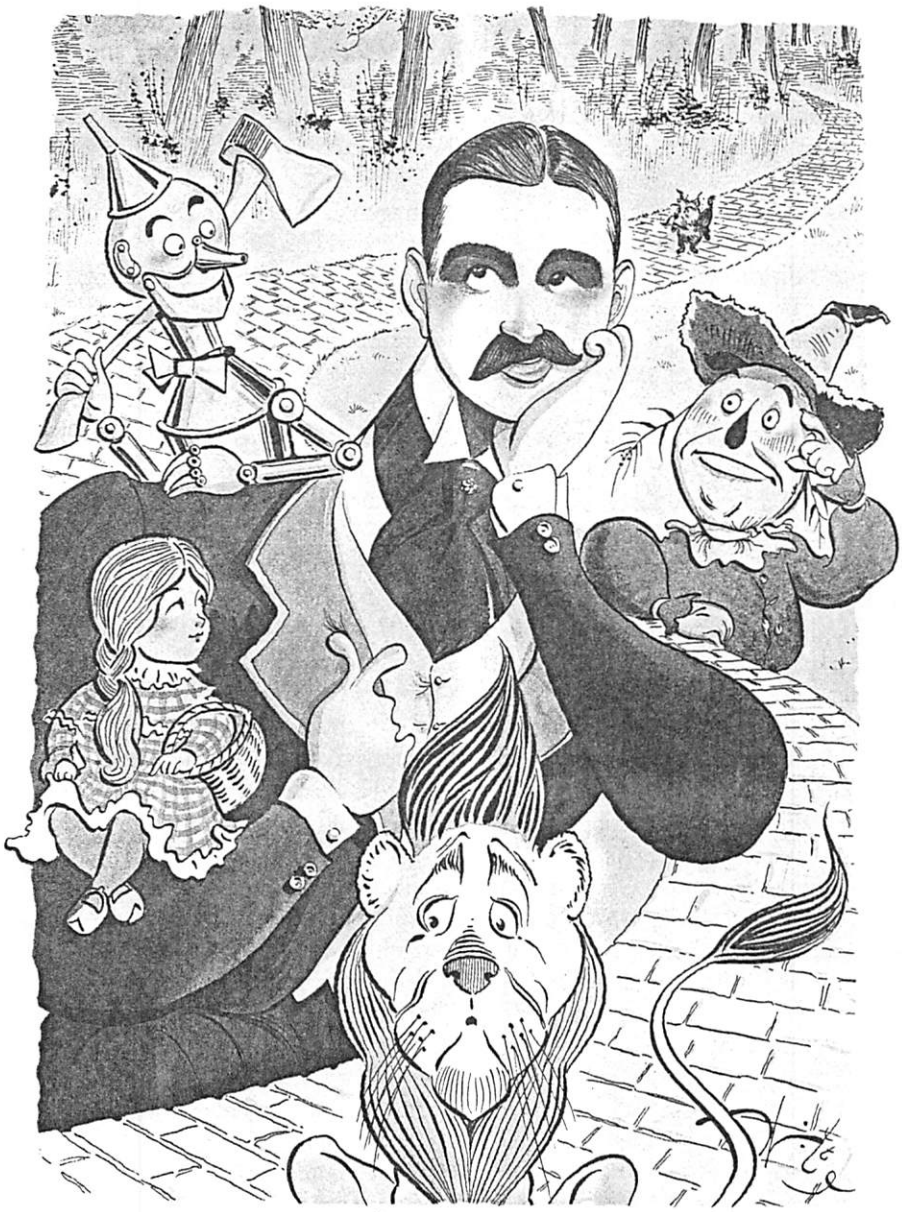
Woven of electric illusion (newly feasible, thanks to the Wizard of Menlo Park) and quickly an abandoned ruin, the White City fed into Baum's book a melancholy undertone of insubstantiality. A Bobbs-Merrill press release in 1903 claimed that the name Oz came from the "O-Z" drawer of the author's filing cabinet, but the name resonates with a Shelley poem known to most Victorians:

> And on the pedestal these words appear:
> "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
> Look on my works, ye Mighty, and
> despair!"
> Nothing beside remains.

A note of hollowness, of dazzling fraud, of frontier fustian and quackery taints the Wizard in the first of the many Oz books, before a plethora of wonders turns him into a real sorcerer. In the M-G-M movie, the seekers along the yellow brick road rapturously sing, "The Wizard of Oz is one because . . . because of the wonderful things he does"; then it turns out that what he does is concoct visual hokum with a crank and escape in a mismanaged hot-air balloon.

But Baum, who turned to editing and writing as a way of spending more time with his four young sons, proved to be an authentic wizard as a children's author. He had made the acquaintance of William Wallace Denslow, a footloose artist from Philadelphia who had come to Chicago for the Exposition; the two had definite and ambitious ideas about what children's books should look like, and paid for the color plates of their first collaboration, a book of Baum's verses called "Father Goose, His Book." The book attracted praise from Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Admiral George Dewey and, Hearn says, "became the best-selling picture book of 1900." That year saw the publication of no fewer than five titles by Baum, of which the "Wizard" was the last. Hill was overwhelmed by orders, and went back to press four times, for a total of ninety thousand copies. The Minneapolis *Journal* called it, in November, "the best children's story-book of the century"—high praise if the nineteenth century was meant, more modest if the infant twentieth.

In 1902, the George M. Hill Company went bankrupt, in spite of Baum's success, and the rights to the "Wizard" were placed in the crasser hands of Bobbs-Merrill; meanwhile, Baum and Denslow parted, each taking the Oz characters with him, since their contract provided for separate ownership of text and illustrations. That same year saw the opening, at Chicago's Grand Opera House, of "The Wizard of Oz," a "musical extravaganza" created by Julian Mitchell, who was later to mastermind "The Ziegfeld Follies." Mitchell had scrawled "No Good" across Baum's script for a five-act operetta closely based on his tale, and substituted a vaudevillian hodgepodge that capped its Chicago success with a year-and-a-half run on Broadway and a road career that lasted, off and on, until 1911. The extravaganza increased Baum's wealth, but it also encouraged his tropism toward the theatrical. His first sequel to the "Wizard," "The Marvelous Land of Oz," in 1904, was designed to be the basis of another extrav-



MICHAEL WITTE

As a writer, Baum rarely knew when to quit, unfurling marvel after marvel.

aganza, featuring the vaudeville performers David C. Montgomery and Fred A. Stone, who had played the Tin Woodman and the Scarecrow in the Mitchell production. The book was dedicated to them and loaded with patter and puns suitable to their routines. It sold as a book but failed as a musical called "The Woggle-Bug," with lyrics by Baum and without, in the end, Montgomery and Stone. Anticipating the piggyback publicity system perfected by Walt Disney, Baum promoted this unfortunate production with a "Woggle-Bug Contest" in a Sunday comic page, drawn by Walt McDougall and titled "Queer Visitors from the Marvelous Land of Oz."

Despite frail health (angina, gallstones, inflamed appendix), Baum was a whirlwind of activity until his death, at the age of sixty-two. Along with thirteen Oz sequels, he wrote a teen-age-oriented "Aunt Jane's Nieces" series under the name Edith Van Dyne, young people's books under four other pseudonyms, an adult novel published anonymously, and many unpublished plays. Splendidly dressed in a white frock coat with silk lapels, he toured with film-and-slide presentations called "The Fairylogue and Radio-Plays." A reviewer in the Chicago *Tribune* wrote that "his ability to hold a large audience's attention during two hours of tenuous entertainment was amply demonstrated"; these early electronic productions were expensive, however, and by 1911 had helped bankrupt him. Thriftily moving his California winter residence from the Hotel del Coronado to a "handsome bungalow he christened Ozcot," in Hollywood, Baum found himself surrounded by the burgeoning movie industry without being able to tap into it profitably. The Oz Film Manufacturing Company, with Baum as president, produced some silent films, beginning with "The Patchwork Girl of Oz" in 1914, but, dismissed as "kiddie shows," they fell short at the box office. In 1925, six years after Baum's death, a movie of "The Wizard of Oz" was released; according to Hearn in one of his sterner moods, it was "totally lacking the magic of Baum's book" (though a Laurel-less Oliver Hardy played the Tin Woodman), and "had a dreadful script, written in part by the author's son Frank J. Baum." It was M-G-M's 1939

Denslow's final drawing captures Dorothy's hurry to get home.

adaptation, of course, that hit the jackpot: the three-million-dollar film showed no profit on its original release, but it became a staple of postwar television. A hundred years after the "Wizard" 's publication, the movie is the main road into Oz.

Oz had very quickly become zoned for commercial activity, and there is something depressing about the chronicle of its exploitation, a chronicle that Hearn caps with a compendious footnote taking us up through the all-black "Wiz" (stage 1975, movie 1978) and the dead-on-arrival Disney "Return to Oz" (1985). And then there is the upcoming television series "Lost in Oz," produced by Tim Burton. It is hard to read Baum's later Oz books without feeling the exploitation in progress, by a writer who only dimly understands his own masterpiece. After his death, the series was extended by Ruth Plumly Thompson, who between 1921 and 1939 added nineteen titles; then, briefly, by John R. Neill, whose spidery, often insipid drawings illustrate all the Oz books but the first; by Jack Snow, a "minor science fiction writer"; by Rachel Cosgrove; by Eloise Jarvis McGraw and Lauren McGraw Wagner; and even by Baum's son, who legally battled his mother for the precious trademark "Oz." And, Hearn indefatigably tells us, "of late there has grown up a peculiar literary sub-genre of adult novels drawing on the Oz mythology," such as Geoff Ryman's "Was" (1992) and Gregory Maguire's "Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West" (1995)—the products, presumably, of Oz-besotted children now aged into postmodern creators freed from fear of copyright infringement.

The potent images of the "Wizard" do cry out for extension and elaboration. The M-G-M motion picture improves upon the book in a number of ways. It eliminates, for example, the all too Aesopian (and, prior to computer graphics, probably unfilmable) episode wherein the Queen of the mice and her many minions transport the Cowardly Lion out of the poppy bed where he has fallen asleep; instead, it retrieves from the 1902 musical the effective stage business that had a sudden snowstorm annul the spell of the poppies. The movie weeds out a number of extravagant beasts and the especially artificial episode of "the Dainty China Country" so quaintly planted on the path to the witch's lair. The scenario amplifies the role of the Wicked Witch of the West, showing her as the source of all the obstacles in the pilgrims' path, as she watches them on the private television of her crystal ball. In the book, she is a relatively passive presence, easily doused ("I never thought a little girl like you would ever be able to melt me and end my wicked deeds. Look out—here I go!"), compared with the cackling green-faced film presence of Margaret Hamilton, who dies mourning her "beautiful wickedness!" Once she is dead, the film picks up speed; after the Wizard's unmasking and his unplanned departure, it is virtually over, where Baum's tale dilly-dallies through further complications on the way to the Good Witch of the South, with fresh humanoid gadgetry like Fighting Trees and armless Hammer-Heads and a mechanical plot dependency on the Golden Cap and its three-wish control of the Winged Monkeys. As a writer, Baum rarely knew when to quit, unfurling marvel after marvel while the human content—a content shaped by nonmagical limitations—leaked away. He did not quite grasp that his "Wizard" concerns our ability to survive disillusion; miracles are humbug.

The Hollywood film begins with the human, gray Kansas and, unlike the book, plants on that drab land all the actors who will dominate Oz—the three farmhands, the wicked Almira Gulch on her bicycle, Professor Marvel in his flimsy van. They are Kansans, and Dorothy returns to them. Hearn calls it "unforgivable" that the M-G-M movie cast Oz as a dream; but Dorothy on awakening protests, "It wasn't a dream." It was an alternative reality, an inner depiction of how we grow. As Jerome Charyn observes in his excellent "Movie-

W.W. DENSLOW

THE WIND IS CALM AND COMES FROM ANOTHER WORLD

Overcast August morning.
A little rain in the potholes,
A little shade on the shade.
The world is unconversational, and bides its own sweet time.
What you see is what you see, it seems to say, but we
Know better than that,
and keep our eyes on the X, the cloud-ridden sky.

Heliotrope, we say, massaging its wings. Heliotrope.

—Charles Wright

land: Hollywood and the Great American Dream Culture" (1989), "The whole film was about metamorphosis." Judy Garland, who was sixteen and noticeably buxom in the role of Baum's prepubescent Dorothy, was "a woman who seemed to flower from an ordinary little girl." Growth is metamorphosis, and self-understanding is growth. The Scarecrow already has brains, the Tin Woodman is sentimental to a fault, the Lion has courage enough, but until the Wizard bestows external evidences (in the movie more wittily than in the book) they feel deficient. Dorothy, capable and clear-sighted from the start, needs only to accept the grayness of home as a precious color, and to wish to return as ardently as she wished to escape "Over the Rainbow"—the movie's grand theme song, nearly removed from the final cut.

Like Charyn and Salman Rushdie (who has extolled the "Wizard" as "a parable of the migrant condition"), I belong to the generation more affected by the movie than by the book. For the testimony of one who read all the Oz books with adolescent credulity and delight, Gore Vidal's long essay of 1977, printed in two parts in *The New York Review of Books*, is impressive and peppery. He sees Baum as a protester against the violence of the rising American empire and "the iron Puritan order." It is true that an undercurrent of dissidence in the Oz books seems to have antagonized some librarians and critics; the director of the Detroit Library System, Ralph Ulveling, in 1957 pronounced them guilty of "negativism" and "a cowardly approach to life." Baum, in his introduction to the "Wizard," strikes a challenging note; he deplores the "horrible and blood-curdling" incidents contained in "the old-time fairy tale" and promises his readers "a modernized fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heart-aches and nightmares are left out." American Theosophy, to which Baum had been introduced by his formidable mother-in-law, mixed spiritualism and Buddhist and Hindu beliefs with a meliorism that rejected the darker, Devil-acknowledging side of Christianity. "God is Nature, and Nature God," Baum said; yet he also professed an animistic vision in which

> every bit of wood, every drop of liquid, every grain of sand or portion of rock has its myriads of inhabitants. . . . These invisible and vapory beings are known as Elementals. . . . They are soulless, but immortal; frequently possessed of extraordinary intelligence, and again remarkably stupid.

Madame H. P. Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, in her book "Isis Unveiled" (1878) wrote of these Elementals as "the creatures evolved in the four kingdoms of earth, air, fire, and water, and called by the kabalists gnomes, sylphs, salamanders, and undines." This giddying, virtually bacterial multitudinousness came to characterize Oz as sequels multiplied its regions and its strange and magical tribes; but the "Wizard" itself presents an uncluttered cosmogony, drawn in bright blunt tints. According to Theosophy, our astral bodies come in distinct colors, and so do the regions of Oz, with their inhabitants. As Vidal points out, Oz exists in orderly patches like the extensive gardens that Baum remembered from

his childhood home, and which he recreated in the geometrical plots of his garden at Ozcot.

The evils of capitalism, whose rewards proved so fickle for Baum, are absent from his alternative world. Enemies of socialism find in "The Emerald City" this much quoted passage:

> There were no poor people . . . because there was no such thing as money, and all property of every sort belonged to the Ruler. The people were her children, and she [Princess Ozma] cared for them. Each person was given freely by his neighbors whatever he required for his use, which is as much as anyone may reasonably desire.

But the proletariat does not rule; rather, it is ruled in a mock-medieval manner, by benevolent tyrants more often than not female, in keeping, perhaps, with the feminist tendencies of Theosophy and Matilda Gage's militant suffragism. Baum's rulers have a parental absolutism: Glinda is the ideal, ever-resourceful mother and the Wizard a typically bumbling father in Oz's sitcom as Baum first conceived it. Though he supported the populist William Jennings Bryan in 1896 and 1900, and the literature of the late nineteenth century abounds in literary Utopias, Oz is too unearthly to carry much political punch. It is constructed not of revolutionary intent but of wishful thinking. What earthiness the "Wizard" does have derives in considerable part from Denslow's sturdy, antic illustrations. Denslow, we learn in Hearn's "Annotated Wizard," sometimes operated independently of the text: he drew a bear where Baum mentions a tiger, crowns the Lion before the author does, dresses Dorothy in her old gingham frock when Baum still has her in her Emerald City silks, and consistently omits (as does the movie) the "round, shining mark" that the Good Witch of the North plants, as protection, on her forehead with a kiss.

A centennial is a time for praise, but this reader is inclined to accept the invitation to argue with Hearn when he states, "Arguably there have been three great classic quests in American literature, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* (1851), Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1883), and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900)." Whatever their flaws of carelessness or aesthetic miscalculation, the first two titles were gloriously *written*, in the ambition of telling all the truth, "heart-aches and nightmares" included. The "Wizard" is relatively a lucky bauble, in the flat clear style of a man giving dictation. Nor does it seem to me true that "Uncle Henry and Aunt Em have come to symbolize the stern American farmer and his wife as much as the couple in Grant Wood's famous painting *American Gothic* have." Hearn has been too long peering through the magnifying glass of *The Baum Bugle*, the triquarterly publication of the International Wizard of Oz Club, "founded in 1957 by thirteen-year-old Justin G. Schiller." In the course of his devotedly researched footnotes, Hearn sometimes nods into critical banality: "Much of the charm and wit of *The Wizard of Oz* relies on Baum's irony and amusing incongruity"; the Cowardly Lion "proves Ernest Hemingway's dictum that courage is grace under pressure." A juster analogy, drawn by Hearn more than once, is with "The Pilgrim's Progress," another few-frills picaresque search story by an author in his forties with a habit of public performance (Bunyan was a preacher). The "Wizard" is a "Pilgrim's Progress" emptied of religion, except for the Theosophist inkling that there are many universes. At a time when children's literature was still drenched in what Hearn calls "the putrid Puritan morality of the Sunday schools," Baum produced a refreshingly agnostic fantasy. The witches are too comically wicked to be evil. The humbug Wizard, accused by Dorothy of being "a very bad man," protests, "I'm really a very good man; but I'm a very bad Wizard, I must admit." In another bold stroke of American simplification, Baum invented escapism without escape. Dorothy opts to forsake Oz; gray, windswept Kansas is reinstated (less thumpingly than in the movie) as the seat of lasting, familial happiness. Indeed, as a practical matter it is easier to color with contentment the place where we are than to find a Technicolor paradise. Denslow's last drawing shows the return with more exuberance than Baum's prose manages. In her hurry, little Dorothy runs so hard that her silver shoes, Baum's less photogenic original of M-G-M's glistening ruby slippers, are flying off; we feel her rounding the bases (Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, Cowardly Lion) to home plate. ♦