

L. Frank Baum:

A Hero's Journey

Do you remember the first time you ever watched the movie, "The Wizard of Oz"? Were you one of the people who couldn't sleep that night out of sheer terror of the Wicked Witch of the West? (She was so scary, they actually made a whole "Sesame Street" episode devoted to explaining to small children why they needn't be afraid of her. She appeared in the episode in full costume!) Or did you get the bejeezus scared out of you by those flying monkeys?

The author of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" (that is the title of the book on which the movie was based), L. Frank Baum, would have probably been surprised by those scary elements of the movie, but we'll never know because he died 20 years before Judy Garland became Dorothy Gale. The rest of us can be surprised that a movie made in 1939 is still watched by so many people today. It's not just a classic, it's a classic that people still watch and often with their children.

Baum's connection to South Dakota is just three years long, from 1888 to 1891. He had been writing stories and working in the theater but, even though he himself had been born into a very wealthy family, was having trouble making ends meet. A catastrophic fire in a theater showing one of his plays put a definite end to that endeavor, so he and his new wife, Maud Gage, packed up the truck and moved to Aberdeen, in the Dakota Territory.

Baum tried his hand at retail, opening a store called Baum's Bazaar. It quickly went bankrupt. He tried editing the local newspaper, The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer. It, too, failed and, bereft, he took a job as a newspaper reporter in Chicago. Baum never returned to South Dakota again.

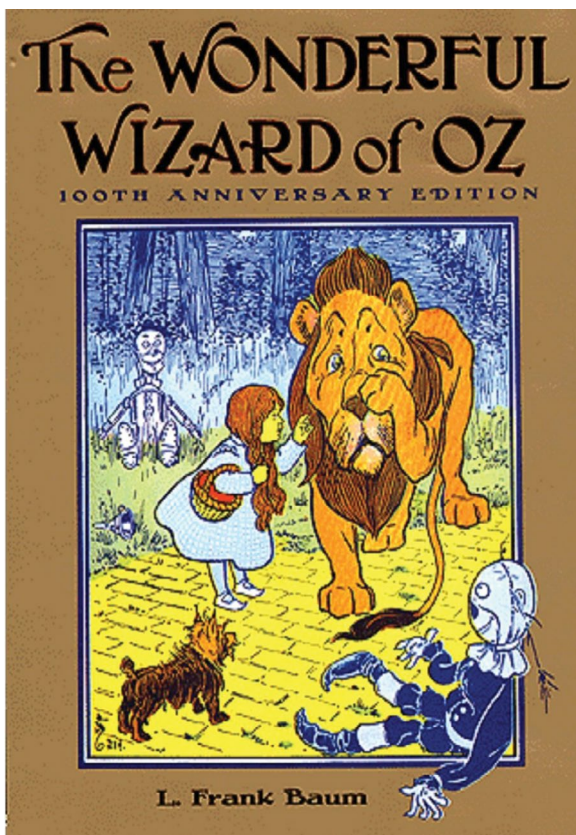


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But South Dakota (when Baum moved there, it was the Dakota Territory but when he left, it had achieved statehood) left its mark on Baum, and Baum left his mark on the state. Do you remember the opening scenes of the movie, those kind of dismal, kind of blasé black-and-white vistas? The drab countryside, the drab farmyard, the drab people. That was his perception of South Dakota, which, at the time, was suffering through a long, devastating drought. It proved to be the perfect foil to Oz, which was impossibly colorful, outrageously peopled (remember the munchkins?), and magically animated (right down to those apple trees which, come to think of it, were also pretty scary).

But there is more to it than that. Much more. One of the classic themes in books and literature is the hero's journey. That theme basically sets out a person—usually a young person—who will face any number of difficult challenges, triumph over them all, and ultimately win the day. L. Frank Baum's story had a unique twist. He started with a little girl, in fact a little orphaned girl, Dorothy. But her quest is not some noble journey aimed at freeing enslaved people or saving others from starvation and deprivation. It is not even about slaying monsters. All Dorothy Gale wants to do is get home. A Kansas tornado drops her into the most beautiful place outside of the world, people with interesting characteristics who instantly love and protect her, and all she can think about, all

she wants is to get home. Home, to a black-and-white, colorless place of an aunt and uncle and hired hands, who all have far too much to contend with to pay her any mind. Or so it seems.



But her intrepid travel through Oz is not just a hero's journey, it is a heroes' journey. Dorothy is on a quest, but so are the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion. (No, we aren't forgetting Toto, but he is kind of just along for the ride; his destiny is Dorothy's destiny as well.) And you already know this story. Dorothy is trying to get home. The Scarecrow wants a brain, the Tin Man a heart, and the Cowardly Lion some courage. And so, they set off to find all of these things by traveling to see the Wizard of Oz, the Wonderful Wizard of Oz.

Getting those things means fending off and ultimately destroying the Wicked Witch, battling trees, sneaking into a castle, escaping a field of flowers meant to put you to sleep forever, and sticking together through thick and thin. Oh, and surviving those menacing flying monkeys.

But the real message of the movie doesn't really come to you until you reach the very end. Their first visit to the Wizard sends them off to the witch's castle on a seemingly impossible quest. The second visit leaves the Wizard facing an impossible quest. The Wizard is a fraud. He can no more give the Scarecrow a brain, the Tin Man a heart, or the Lion some courage than you or I could. He's a pretend wizard.

He's also a very lucky wizard. He's lucky because he knows something those three companions of Dorothy don't know. He knows that the only people who can give them what they desire are... themselves. In their hard fighting and hard work and deep friendship with Dorothy, they have

already found what they are looking for, even though they don't know it. When the Scarecrow figured out how to find his way into the witch's castle, face down the monkeys, and hurdle every other barrier, he developed his brain. He gave himself a brain. When the Tin Man risked his life to help Dorothy find the way home and his pals their way back to the City of Oz, he developed his heart, his caring for others. He gave himself a heart. And when the Cowardly Lion overcame his craven nature to enter the castle and defeat the guards, he developed his bravery. He gave himself courage.

The Wizard, that windbag, never did nothing for nobody, nowhere,



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L. Frank Baum

no how. And that is how all of our lives work. There is nothing important in life that anyone else can actually give you. If you want to be intelligent, you have to go to school and study and finish your work. Nobody else can do it for you, not if you want to actually get the education. If you want to be successful in a job or career, there is only one person that can make that happen, you. If you want to have good friends, if you want to meet someone you love and get married, if you want to raise children and delight in their lives, same deal. It's all you.

It is because you are on a journey. And the hero of that journey is you. Who else could it be?

Dorothy found her way home, but only once she had helped all of her friends. L. Frank Baum became a success in life, but only after he had done the hard work of writing many books and found his calling in writing books for children. He couldn't rely on his wealthy parents to make him a success. He couldn't rely on his friends to push him forward and become a literary success. All those people helped him, of course. But Baum, like each of us, had to do the hard work, find his Yellow Brick Road, and start the long journey to success and happiness. A happiness which he provided, not coincidentally, to the whole world.

In fact, Baum even put this message very clearly in his book, out of the very mouth of the Wizard himself: "Oz, left to himself, smiled to think of his success in giving the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman and the Lion exactly what they thought they wanted. 'How I help being a humbug,' he said, 'when all these people make me do things that everybody knows can't be done. It was easy to make the Scarecrow and the Lion and the Woodman happy, because they imagined I could do anything.'"

What they didn't quite understand was that they were the only ones that could have accomplished those things for themselves. They, not the Wizard, were the heroes of their own lives.

