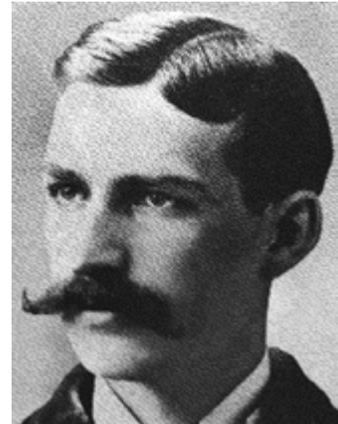


The Man Behind the Curtain: L. Frank Baum and The Wizard of Oz by Linda McGovern

L. Frank Baum in 1881

Chances are you have seen the 1939 MGM movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, at one point or another in your lifetime. But the chances maybe even greater that you do not associate it with L. Frank Baum, the author of the book on which the film was based. In fact, most people have probably never heard of him at all unless they have read his work or were born around the time when he was popular. Whether it is shown on television annually or rented at the local video store, *The Wizard of Oz* has become a staple of American popular culture. Young or old, we know where the famous, unforgettable lines originate; we know the characters by heart: Dorothy, Toto, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion, as well as the munchkins. Oz is as familiar as our own backyards.



Although the movie and the book differ in minor ways, the premise is similar and so are most of the characters. The only significant difference that might matter to a child and possibly to an adult, is that in the movie, Dorothy's journey to Oz is only a dream, purely imaginary, in other words, not real. In the book, however, there is no such rationale. Instead it invites the child to use his or her imagination as a creative, transforming force and to accept the journey, and Oz as a real place full of hope over the rainbow, where the child could escape ordinary life. Baum believed in the power of the imagination in the child. Oz really existed if only we believed it did.

After reading *The Wizard of Oz*, I was completely intrigued by the book as I was by the movie. It was like revisiting an old friend. Oddly however, for several years the book was considered controversial and was banned from the shelves of various libraries across the country because librarians felt it did not qualify as important juvenile literature, a sentiment that has been refuted over time. It has been criticized for its simple language and themes and was no doubt written stylistically for a child to comprehend. However, as in most fairy tales, there is room for the reader to interpret beyond the black and white on the page. What is it about *The Wizard of Oz* that makes it so special, so enduring? I guess MGM couldn't have said it any better, "Time has been powerless to put its kindly philosophy out of fashion." 1

Do we know who stands behind this classic and how it came to be? Have we ever heard of L. Frank Baum or his life story? As one might expect, L. Frank Baum was a fascinating person who had a wonderfully interesting life; an intricate journey of twists and turns, some good and some bad, perhaps metaphorically similar to his characters' journey through Oz. *The Wizard of Oz* has been one of my all time favorite movies, to which I believe I am not alone. With this impetus, I wanted to discover who was "The Wizard of OZ," the man behind the curtain, by shedding some light on the shadow cast upon L. Frank Baum by the film his work inspired.

Born Lyman Frank Baum in 1856, just east of Syracuse in Chittenango, NY. He never used his first name since he preferred Frank. A rather sickly child who was both timid and shy, he kept to himself and made up imaginary places and playmates since he had to refrain from any kind of

strenuous exercise due to his faulty, weak heart. Throughout Frank's life, his health was a constant impediment, which became a looming presence and a major controlling factor. Although, it never impeded his creativity, drive and talent.

When Frank was about 5 years old, his father, Benjamin Baum, struck it rich in the oil business, and the family moved to Rose Lawn Estate, a country home near Chittenango. Rose Lawn was an idyllic place for young Frank to grow up. He was very happy there except for the constant reminder of his heart condition. It is possible that young Frank developed his creative side more than most since he was not allowed to play physically like other children his age. It is reasonable to assume that the foundations for his storytelling sensibilities were laid and nurtured during this time. Frank read fairy tales and British writers voraciously, and he especially enjoyed Dickens. But even at his young age, he criticized the fairy tales that were frightening and horrifying, "I demanded fairy stories when I was a youngster...and I was a critical reader too. One thing I never liked then, and that was the introduction of witches and goblins into the story. I didn't like the little dwarfs in the woods bobbing up with their horrors."² These fairy stories contributed to his nightmares or perhaps it was his overly active imagination. Frank made the decision that he would write a different kind of fairy tale.

Because of Frank's dreamer-like qualities, his parents sent him away to a strict military school to rid him of his fanciful demeanor. This decision was not a wise one, for it did not curb his whimsical nature but instead resulted in his suffering a heart attack or a nervous breakdown (it is not clear which). Frank had always been home schooled prior to this experience. He did not like Peekskill Military School at all and it is understandable since he was not accustomed to such strict, regimented schedules and physical punishment. His parents finally allowed Frank to withdraw from Peekskill after they realized the negative effect it had on him and his health. His parents then began to nurture Frank's creative interests.

Frank's initial attempt at writing and publishing was in his own small newspaper called *The Rose Lawn Home Journal*. His father bought him a small printing press after he showed an interest in a larger, more commercial one. He was fifteen years old when he began this paper with his younger brother Harry, and he took his writing abilities seriously. The newspaper contained articles, editorials, fiction, poetry, and word games. *The Rose Lawn Home Journal* did well and some of the local stores bought advertisement space for their services. In 1873, Frank started a new paper called *The Empire* as well as *The Stamp Collector*, a magazine not surprisingly for stamp collectors.

Early on Frank demonstrated his resourcefulness, drive and creativity. Throughout his life, he was always productive with his time and energy and was never idle. Frank always had many interests and one of them was tending chickens. With the help of his father and brother Harry, he began to breed Hamburgs, small colorful birds which were popular at the time and they soon won awards. Frank then began a new magazine called *The Poultry Record*. Frank's first book was published in 1886 and was called *The Book of Hamburgs, A Brief Treatise upon the Mating, Rearing, and Management of the Different Varieties of Hamburgs*.

Throughout his life, Frank's interests were varied and he did well at most things he attempted. His most influential interest was the theatre, which he developed in his teens and loved and

supported throughout his life. He took acting seriously and viewed it as an art. "When he went to plays, he studied actor's techniques. He memorized passages from Shakespeare, and then, with money from his father, he formed a Shakespearean troupe."³ As a young man, he entertained the thought that his career was to be an actor. He finally got a taste of the stage with Albert M. Palmer's Union Square Theater in New York. Frank took the pen names of Louis F. Baum and George Brooks. Benjamin Baum, his father, who owned a string of opera houses in New York and Pennsylvania, must have seen his son's enthusiasm and love of the theatre, for he made him the manager of them in 1880 and eventually they were given to him after he proved himself worthy. After whetting his thirst for the theatre and seeing what delighted the audiences, Frank set to work on writing original plays. His play *The Maid of Arran* immediately became a success, "The script, music, and lyrics were all from the name that the playwright now used for theatrical purposes. It was based on a novel, *A Princess of Thule*, by the Scottish novelist, William Black."⁴ Frank was the leading man and the manager of the company for *The Maid of Arran*. This was Baum's first major literary work. Overall, the reviews were very positive and this spark ignited the flame of passion for the theatre.

It was while Frank was home on holiday that he met the other love of his life, Maud Gage. Through his sister Harriet's persistence, Frank agreed to meet Maud at a party. She was still at Cornell University while Frank was with The Maid of Arran Company. After the holiday season came to a close, Maud left to go back to school to the admiration of other male suitors and Frank stayed with the Company. Maud came from a prosperous family who lived in Fayetteville, NY. Maud's mother, Matilda Joslyn Gage, was a nationally known feminist and her father was a dry-goods merchant. It is interesting to note, that Matilda worked with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in her later years. It was in the Gage home that these three women wrote *History of Woman Suffrage* published in four volumes from 1881 to 1902.

Baum later recalled his feelings after meeting Maud, "...my show had some free time between bookings. At every opportunity I returned to Syracuse, borrowed a horse and buggy from father, and drove the eight miles to Fayetteville."⁵ Frank began courting Maud soon after meeting her. Frank did not thrill Maud's mother for he seemed rather flighty, a dreamer type and she thought him an unstable match for her daughter. However, against the wishes of her mother Maud and Frank were married on November 9th, 1882. Maud went along with Frank and the Company on tour with *The Maid of Arran*. They lived a nomadic existence while touring. However, when Maud became pregnant with their first child, they settled down and rented a home in Syracuse.

Baum found a new leading man to take his place and trained a new company manager. Maud soon took over the family finances and the role of disciplinarian, for it was known that these were not Frank's strong suits. In many respects, Frank and Maud were exact opposites. She was headstrong, strong willed and temperamental. Frank, on the other hand, was low key, optimistic, even-tempered and whimsical. For Baum, "Years of living in the shadow of a heart ailment had taught him to avoid upsets that might bring on an attack."⁶ Maud was raised in a much stricter environment and appeared to have had her way with her parents, and was spoiled in a certain respect. "Maud Baum often mentioned that peace and harmony had always graced her home, but those who knew the family best felt that this was true only because Frank, from the time of their marriage until his death thirty seven years later, allowed her to have her own way with the household, the children, and the family purse."⁷ Whatever their secret formula was to a happy

marriage, it seemed their opposite natures were a good combination.

During this time, Frank's health was less than perfect, Baum had suffered one heart attack shortly before his marriage, and in the summer of 1883, his uncertain health was indicated by nausea and dizzy spells. Once settled in Syracuse, Baum worked in sales for the family business. In 1884, trouble hit with full force, Frank's Uncle who was the manager of the theatrical establishment, became quite ill and a bookkeeper was hired to replace his absence. There was major mismanagement of the funds and by the time Frank's Uncle was ready to go back to work, the bookkeeping was so illegible that it was impossible for them to make an audit. During the time of the investigation, the bookkeeper conveniently disappeared. Everything suffered but again Frank managed to stay afloat by working as head salesman in the family Castorine Business. Shortly after Frank's father died, the family fortune began to wane. During this time, Frank was preoccupied with his own fragile health and hectic sales schedule, Maud having their second son, and the failing health of Uncle Doc who handled the business finances. The business was left in the hands of a clerk. Ironically and sadly, again their money was swindled from them, gambled away while the bills went unpaid and they lost everything. "In the spring of 1888 Baum returned to Syracuse early one morning from a sales trip and went directly to the office. He unlocked the door, entered, and was stunned to find the clerk sprawled across the desk—dead. The revolver with which he had shot himself was still in hand."⁸ Forced to sell the business, Frank and Maud decided (at Maud's suggestion) to move out West to the Dakota territory where "Western Fever" was the talk of the day. Many families were migrating and Maud's relatives were no different. This may have been another factor in their decision besides the hope of economic possibilities. In Aberdeen, Frank operated a general store that he named "Baum's Bazaar" which he rented for a few years. The store opened on October 1, 1888 and it sold a variety of goods from tableware, household goods, tin ware, and lamps to toys and candy. There were always plenty of children around the store for they liked to listen to Frank tell them stories of faraway places and enchanted lands. "The Bazaar always was crowded with youngsters after school. Some bought a penny's worth of candy or ice cream...many came to hear stories...that Baum could be persuaded to tell."⁹ Unfortunately, due to the terrible drought in 1888 the customers had no money to buy anything, and because of Baum's friendly demeanor and compassion for his neighbors, he couldn't deny them their necessities and as a result, the Baum's were nearly bankrupt. In 1890, the bank foreclosed on "Baum's Bazaar." Frank never lost hope and never relinquished his creativity and resourcefulness. Soon after, he began a new position managing a weekly newspaper called *The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*. He sold advertisements, set the type, ran the press, and wrote. It seemed the skills he acquired as a boy came in handy. In the paper he wrote about all sorts of social events. Unfortunately however, and to his discredit, it also included editorials that had disparaging racial comments and illustrated an intolerant attitude towards Native American Indians during their conflicts with the government. Nonetheless, it was a well-liked paper but the scarce Dakota years got the best of him and in 1891 Frank lost the *Pioneer* to bankruptcy. He reportedly responded by saying, "I decided the sheriff wanted the paper more than I."¹⁰

Throughout his lifetime, Frank genuinely loved children and they adored him. He never stopped believing in the creative powers of the imagination. While working at the paper, he would see his truly faithful story listeners, "Often, as Baum would walk down the streets of Aberdeen on his rounds for news and advertising, he would be stopped by children demanding a story. He would

sit down on the edge of the dusty wooden sidewalk...and spin one of his yarns of magic countries.”¹¹ These children forecasted his future; they saw the genius of a storyteller he would become.

Baum’s future was in the Midwest (at least for a while) and he decided that moving onward a second time was the smartest choice...and he was right. Through these tough economic years, Baum remained optimistic, which could not have been easy at the time. In 1893, Chicago had the World Columbian Exposition so it seemed a logical place to try to find employment. Frank first took a position as a reporter for the *Evening Post* but the pay was so slight he instead he worked as a traveling salesman for a China company, Pitkin and Brooks. During the weeks that Maud and Frank were apart, Maud’s mother, Matilda, would stay with her and help out. On several occasions, Matilda would over hear her son-in-law telling the children stories and though she wasn’t always thrilled by Frank, she always admired and encouraged his storytelling abilities. She told him that he should write these stories down and publish them. Whenever Frank was home with the family, “he would recite to the boys favorite Mother Goose Rhymes... They would ask him, for instance, how blackbirds baked in a pie could later come out and sing and got what Harry remembered as a satisfactory answer. Often neighborhood friends of the older boys would drop in for the storytelling hour.”¹² Storytelling was a natural gift Baum possessed. He had the ability to capture the imagination of children and to create worlds of timelessness in his stories. Baum states in the introduction to *The Lost Princess of Oz*, “Imagination has given us the steam engine, the telephone, the talking-machine, and the automobile, for these things had to be dreamed of before they became realities. So I believe that dreams -day dreams...with your eyes wide open...are likely to lead to the betterment of the world. The imaginative child will become the imaginative man or woman most apt to create, to invent, and therefore to foster civilization. A prominent educator tells me that fairy tales are of untold value in developing imagination in the young. I believe it.”¹³ While traveling, Frank would never ignore his creative muse but instead would continue to write while in hotel rooms on the backs of scrap paper or anything available.

While in Chicago, Baum kept in contact with the Chicago Press Club of his former newspaper days and mentioned to a popular novelist, Opie Read, about his writings on Mother Goose stories and that he was looking for a publisher. Through Opie Read, he met Chancey L. Williams of Way & Williams Publishing. With illustrator Maxfield Parrish, Baum’s Mother Goose Stories became *Mother Goose in Prose* in 1897. Also during this time, Frank’s health began to fail and he had nasal hemorrhages, and terrible chest pains. He saw a heart specialist who advised him to find a more sedentary job, rather than a traveling lifestyle. His vice of smoking cigars, throughout his life, probably didn’t help his fragile health but he did not relinquish them.

The Show Window, a monthly trade magazine that Baum started five years after leaving Pitkin and Brooks, was the next of Baum’s creative ventures that actually did very well and which he kept until 1902 when it was sold. His days with the “Baum Bazaar” and his time at Pitkin and Brooks as a salesman had given him a keen eye for window design. As boring and as flat as window trimming and decorating may sound to some, Baum was able to liven it up, “by publishing short stories by Stanley Waterloo and Gardner C. Teall, and by writing himself about the values of window advertising in specific trades.”¹⁴ Being an editor of a magazine now gave Baum more time to frequent the Press Club than when he was a traveling salesman. Through his

friend Opie Read, he met William W. Denslow or “Den” and from then on his life would never be the same. Denslow was described as being serious and gruff, quite the opposite of Baum and years later their contradictory personalities were, in many respects, the downfall of their relationship. Denslow sported a large walrus moustache and was known to wear a beautiful red vest that he liked to show off while at the Baum home. Denslow and Baum worked together often and Denslow would visit Baum at his home drawing pictures to fit the verse. Their first official venture together was *Father Goose, His Book*, published in 1899, and it was an immediate success, becoming the bestselling children's book of the year. The *Tribune* reported in June, 1900, that “*Father Goose, His Book* last year achieved the record of having the largest sale of any juvenile in America.”¹⁵ Baum had finally hit it just right and all the previous experiences of his many professions made it all the sweeter. But the best news was when Pitkin, whom Baum had worked for, stated, “that fellow Baum who worked for us is the author of a book that is selling like hot cakes.”¹⁶ It was so popular, that it spurred the *Songs of Father Goose*, in which some of the verses were put to music. The combination of Baum’s verses and Denslow’s illustrations were the perfect mixture to please a child, which was Baum’s original purpose. The Baums were able to spend several summers at Macatawa Park, Michigan, a resort along the shore of Lake Michigan, because of the proceeds of *Father Goose, His Book*. They bought a summer cottage that Frank named “The Sign of the Goose.” Inside the cottage Frank made all the furniture by hand: large rocking chairs, a grandfather’s clock, a small bookcase, as well as other creations. Baum was so much a part of his work and his work so much a part of him that he engraved and stenciled geese into some of the woodwork, as well as into a stained glass window. This was a hobby he took up after recovering from an attack of facial paralysis. Interestingly, later Baum would name their dog Toto and their home in California Ozcot, after his most notable work *The Wizard of Oz*.

Baum also did some writing there, as well as relaxing. But he was certainly never without something to do, for he was very involved in the community social life as well. Frank wrote a book about Macatawa in 1907, entitled *Tamawaca Folks A Summer Comedy* which was considered an unfavorable account by some.

The Baum Denslow team would produce the most lasting and popular piece of work, *The Wizard of Oz*. The most worthy and notable of Baum’s creations was the story of Dorothy and the Scarecrow and the other inhabitants of Oz, which not surprisingly, began as a story told to some of the young children in the neighborhood, as well as to his own children. Baum’s moment of inspiration came when he broke up the storytelling hour so he could write down the magical story he knew he must note for safe keeping. He wrote out the story longhand and attached the pencil he used to the draft itself that was titled, “The Emerald City.” It was only because of the negative reaction he received from his publisher, the Hill Company, that the title was eventually changed, for they had some superstitious notion against a book with a jewel in its title and they would not publish it. So after some reworking, after several titles lacking the vitality that Baum wanted to capture, he finally came up with *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Baum early on had wanted to write a new kind of fairy tale because of the frightening themes he remembered as a child. “Before Baum there were few fairy tales written by Americans. There were, of course, the fairy tales of Howard Pyle and Frank Stockton... The American child had to look to Great Britain for his tales of fantasy...”¹⁷ It has been suggested that Baum never totally

created a purely American fairy tale for he did borrow ideas from the European tradition of using witches, and wizards and magical shoes etc. It is interesting to note that he used to have a recurrent nightmare about a scarecrow who chased him, yet he used the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* as a friendly companion of Dorothy's.¹⁸

The Baum and Denslow team were to work together on a few more books and projects and only for a few years following their success from *The Wizard of Oz*. In 1902, they collaborated with Paul Tietjens and Julien Mitchell to produce an adult version of *The Wizard of Oz* as a musical stage play. It became a major success and toured the nation. It has been suggested that Denslow wanted his share of the royalties of the play and threatened a law suit even though he had nothing to do with it. It is not certain why Baum and Denslow split up but it has been suggested that there were several possible reasons, one being that neither Baum nor Denslow needed the other to prosper, now that each was known in their own right. Another reason is that there was also considerable rivalry about who was most responsible for the success of their books and they had large disagreements on this subject. Also, the failure of the Hill company made it logical for them to split as well. They were mainly just business partners; there was no loyalty to friendship, since they were very different people and had very different lifestyles. "They had different friends, different habits, and different ways of living. Denslow was quixotic and extroverted...his sense of humor was upside down. He would carp and complain and grumble...The bohemian atmosphere of his studio, where his cronies gathered, was the center of his life. Baum, on the other hand, was quiet and spent most of his evenings at home."²⁰ As a result, their relationship did not end on good terms.

Baum went onto produce seventeen sequels to the Oz books since the reception of the first was so incredible. The first was *The Marvelous Land of Oz*. Children would send him letters constantly telling him how enjoyable *The Wizard of Oz* was and how they were delighted he wrote such a great story and would beg him to write more of them. But the Oz stories appealed to both young and old and he received fan mail from both. Baum stated, "My books are intended for all those whose hearts are young, no matter what their ages may be."²¹ It seems that Baum did not want to write as many sequels as he did, for he wanted to write other kinds of children's books but the children's requests were incessant. He wrote other kinds of books under several different pen names mainly because he wanted to be remembered as the American author of fairy tales, this way he could try other facets and not worry about their success and profit. There Frank could explore all sorts of themes, not just the happy place of Oz. There were several that claimed success but none would repeat the amount that *The Wizard of Oz* had. *Aunt Jane's Nieces* became a very popular teenage series for girls that Baum wrote under the pen name of Edith Van Dyne. Baum always looked for ways to boost his income in those days. Financial success gave him not only a reputation but the comforts of life and the pleasures of traveling that he and Maud enjoyed so much.

Baum became known as the "Royal Historian of Oz" until his death when Ruth Plumly Thompson was chosen to take on this title and continue the tradition. In 1905, people could not get enough of Oz and a small newspaper called *The Ozmapolitan* was issued.

In 1908, Baum produced a traveling film show called the "Fairylogue and Radio Plays," which did not achieve commercial success. Baum had left a great amount of debt to accumulate

primarily as a result of the “Radio Plays.” Frank and Maud decided to leave Chicago and move to California to a home they called Ozcot. California was much more compatible with his failing health. Here Frank was very contented, writing constantly, and tending his garden. “At Ozcot, Baum, for the first time in his life could fall into a congenial monotony of routine.”²² He ate breakfast at a certain time, went to his garden to tend his blooms, wrote and revised in the afternoons, yet he also enjoyed golf and played the game on a consistent basis for a while, as well as playing the piano or a game in the evenings after dinner. Like most anything Baum ever ventured he succeeded at, and his garden was no different. “Baum soon made a name for himself as a grower and exhibitor of prize dahlias and chrysanthemums. His blooms won so many awards in strong competition in that land of flowers that he was often described as the champion amateur horticulturist of Southern California.”²³

Baum courageously went on in the face of adversity. He never gave up easily and his horizon always seemed within his grasp. In a letter he wrote to one of his sons who was in WWI, “...for I have lived long enough to learn that in life nothing adverse lasts very long. And it is true that as years pass, and we look back on something which, at that time, seemed unbelievably discouraging and unfair... The eventual outcome was, we discover, by far the best solution for us...”²⁵ Bedridden and in constant pain, he continued to write, propped up with pillows. Baum had to stop his beloved gardening, answering letters from devoted fans and basking in the California sunshine that proved it was not the magical elixir it was thought to be, like it might have been in a fairy tale he told; nothing could extend Baum’s fragile years. Like California, Oz was the seemingly perfect place. *Glinda of Oz* was the last of the Oz sequels and was published posthumously in 1920. On May 5th 1919, Frank lapsed into unconsciousness and spoke to Maud with his last thoughts. He wished for her to live in their home when he was gone where they had been so happy all those years. The next day, while in a semi-comatose state, just before he died, Frank’s breathing became very erratic and unsteady and as he slipped from one world into the next, he managed to whisper to Maud, “Now we can cross the Shifting Sands.”

His health had begun to fade, it had become quite a restriction and he soon was left immobile, restricted to minor tasks throughout the day. The pressure and strain of his health contributed to his attacks of angina pectoris, as well as the unpredictable, gall bladder problems, excruciating sharp pain jabs across his face of tic douloureux which were like seizures. “Although few traces of agony are detectable in his work, there were many times when the tears would stream from his eyes and wet the paper as he wrote.”²⁴

His humble tombstone reads only, “L. Frank Baum 1856-1919” yet there was so much between those dates that children and adults still discover and rediscover when they open their hearts to the magic of imagination which was Baum’s pilot. With mixed emotions, I watched *The Wizard of Oz* again and wished that Baum could have known the impact his book had upon the world.

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