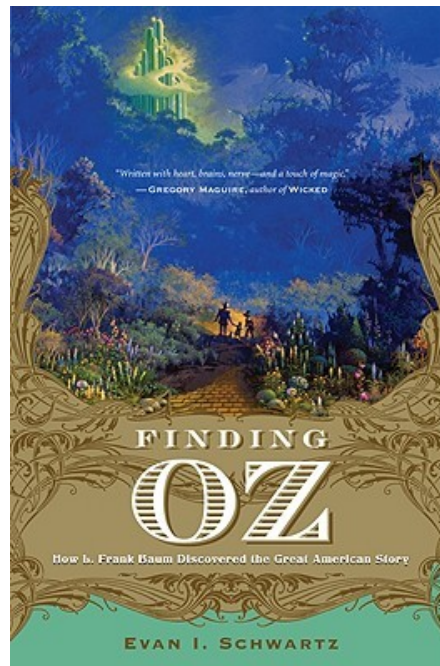




Finding Oz: How L. Frank Baum Discovered the Great American Story

Evan I. Schwartz

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A groundbreaking new look at an American icon, The Wizard of Oz.

Finding Oz tells the remarkable tale behind one of the world's most enduring and best loved stories. Offering profound new insights into the true origins and meaning of L. Frank Baum's 1900 masterwork, it delves into the personal turmoil and spiritual transformation that fueled Baum's fantastical parable of the American Dream.

Prior to becoming an impresario of children's adventure tales—the J. K. Rowling of his age—Baum failed at a series of careers and nearly lost his soul before setting out on a journey of discovery that would lead to the Land of Oz. Drawing on original research, Evan Schwartz debunks popular misconceptions and shows how the people, places, and events in Baum's life gave birth to his unforgettable images and characters. The Yellow Brick Road was real, the Emerald City evoked the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, and Baum's mother-in-law, the radical women's rights leader Matilda Joselyn Gage, inspired his dual view of witches—as good and wicked.

A narrative that sweeps across late nineteenth-century America, *Finding Oz* ultimately reveals how failure and heartbreak can sometimes lead to redemption and bliss, and how one individual can ignite the imagination of the entire world.

Finding Oz: How L. Frank Baum Discovered the Great American Story Details

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Erin says

Did not finish. I was expecting a more scholarly look at how Baum found and used some of his source material for The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, but I got a biography of L. Frank Baum instead that attempted to draw parallels between his life and his books as side-notes. Most of these were a little too far-fetched, in my opinion (look! he has a powerful mother-in-law! Maybe he used her to model the Witches of Oz!) although a few were interesting, like the fact that his military school was housed in a town with a yellow brick road. Still, it wasn't enough to keep me interested, and I have a long list of other books I actually want to read, so back to the library this goes.

Christopher Newton says

Pretty cool book. Schwartz throws in every influence that Frank Baum got buzzed by on the way to Oz: Sitting Bull, Madame Blavatsky, the Peerskill Military Academy, and his amazing mother-in-law, Mildred Gage. What a woman! I have to find out everything about her. She was the wizard behind the wizard. Schwartz seasons the story with big splashes of Joseph Campbell, which turns out to be just the right prism we need to see what was going on beneath Frank's hubba-hubba, turn of the 20th century go-getter persona. All in all, a very successful sort of biography.

Emily says

I picked up this book for two real reasons. One being that the author was speaking at my local Booksmith, and two--we both went to the same college. Go Union! Being a huge fan of biography, I really wanted to love this. I've always wondered the true meaning behind the Wizard of Oz--as it always seems that fiction of yore compared to modern day fiction has several allusions and allegories built in. To me, the book read like a college thesis. The parallels between L. Frank Baum's life and the actual Wizard of Oz seemed so far fetched to me, to the point it just got ridiculous. I also felt that the author projected way too much into what he believed the people in Baum's life thought and felt. There were several interesting sections on the history of Chicago, early women's rights movements and the establishment of the American frontier which were pretty interesting and well researched. Overall a unique and thoughtful background into one of the most beloved children's books of all times.

Morgan says

Well I enjoyed this book at least. I love the fact it goes into theology and philosophy and the contentions with that and Oz. Something I would never make connections with myself unless someone explained things to me like this book does. I also like the fact that I learned things from this; I was expecting reading this for fun already knowing a bit about L. Frank Baum. I learned he and Susan B. Anthony have a connection other

then being feminist. Baum's mother-in-law was close friends with and part of the suffragette movement with Anthony. Anthony was even invited to Baum's wedding but couldn't make it. Another cool fact (or I thought it was interesting at least) was that Baum was a chicken farmer, hence Billina's character in later books and the Nomes weakness.

Some of the parts are interesting, but I wondered if they were more of the authors input. I do love all the connections Oz has with other things that were happening at that time. To me, Oz is Americana. Something I think people should read at once. Some of the stuff are dated, but works if you know about the time period. Of course most people only know about the classic movie, it a good movie, but that's not the whole Oz story.

My only two complaints I had were this was one briefly covering the other Oz books. I still want to know what made Baum decided to make Tip and Ozma the same character making it kind of odder reading the book today with the transgender movement. My other complaint is he referenced the movie too many times. I think once or twice is good, but he didn't even talk about Return to Oz which actually follows the books over other movies. He should had just stuck with the books maybe and briefly talked about the movie.

If you are a fan of not just the books but the history of the books and L. Frank Baum's life then I recommenced this book to you. Maybe if you like the movie too, but I would read the books before reading this. I would also recommend to read some Joseph Campbell too before reading this because he quotes that man a lot too (which is perfect). This book covers a lot and I'm not going into all of it, but like I said I enjoyed this book.

Stephanie says

Update: Upon giving this book to the Librarian to review for consideration for the Biography section, the book has been reassigned to Biography, I have now added it to my Library Biography shelf. Library Biography #22

Random pick for me, surprisingly not included in the Biography section at my library. I wasn't expecting this book to thrill me. But it did.

This narrative reads similar to a college thesis or essay - and I loved that. To me, this made the book easier to understand and comprehensive. Schwartz begins with a biography of Baum & his wife's younger years and then transforms into Baum's life of trials and tribulations. He relates all of Baum's life ordeals to specific parts of "The Wizard of Oz." Part of me wonders if the author inferred this on his own while constructing the biography of Baum, or if these relationships have been confirmed.

The author also gives very detailed accounts of Baum's mother-in-law, which, to me was an added treat. She was obviously very influential on Baum and became parts of his story as well. I also feel like this is the most information one is going to get on Matilda Gage, as I could not locate a formal biography on her. It is sad that such a strong and influential woman has almost been lost to history.

This book should appeal to anyone who is a Wizard of Oz freak, a biography lover, or literary nerd.

Margie says

Quick, what do Hinduism, Susan B. Anthony, John D. Rockefeller, and the Columbian Exposition (Chicago

World's Fair) have in common? All were influences on L. Frank Baum's story of Dorothy and her little dog, too.

Over the years many people have tried to unearth a deeper meaning behind "The Wizard of Oz," including, notably, a Populist allegory. Evan Schwartz attempts in this book to discover the real sources of the images and themes Baum used. There will always be some conjecture involved in interpreting the work of an author who died years ago, but Schwartz seems to have done his homework as best he could, reading through family papers and interviewing family members.

Some readers may not like the inferences that Schwartz presents, but I found this book made for fascinating reading. Baum led an interesting life (which in itself makes a good story), and I really enjoyed picking up all the tidbits along his life's path which eventually made it into "The Wizard of Oz."

If the idea of Dorothy's trip to Oz being a projection onto the astral plane turns you off, you won't enjoy this book. But if you're open to a new and interesting way of understanding the story, I think you'll really enjoy it.

Alyson says

If you are a fan of The Wizard of Oz (or even if you are not) this is a fascinating book about the author of the Wizard of Oz, Frank L. Baum. The author proposes that The Wizard of Oz is heavily influenced by Frank Baum's life. I did not necessarily agree with every example that the author gave but it was obvious his life did influence his writing.

I was particularly interested in learning about Frank's mother-in-law, Matilda Joslyn Gage. She was heavily involved with Women's Suffrage and I believe should be as famous as Susan B. Anthony. Learning about the family's time in Alberdeen, South Dakota and the early colonization of the area led me to look up the town to see if it still existed. It does. I found I admire Frank L. Baum's passion for each of his pursuits. He didn't have a lot of success but I felt that he really put his heart into them, even if he wasn't always wise in doing so.

Reading the book helped me to appreciate The Wizard of Oz more. I found the details about making the movie at the very end of the book interesting as well.

I have to put a shout out for my book club too. Our discussions about the books we read add so much to my enjoyment of the book. We had a great discussion and yummy treats representing each character in the book. Highlights were Pop Rock truffles for the lion, divinity for the good witch, blueberry truffles for Dorothy . . . what a great night!

Carol Littlejohn says

A fascinating look at the author of the "Wizard of Oz" series, including his failed attempts as a chicken farmer, actor, and marketer of petroleum products. Instead he put all of his failures into his 15-book series and created a classic. His mother-in-law, Matilda Joslyn Gage, was a fascinating feminist, working with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The author also links Baum's series to Theosophy, a mixture of neo-Platonism, Buddhism and Hinduism. I would have given this one five stars, but it lacks photographs or drawings that would have added to the text.

Meichler says

This book wasn't exactly what I was expecting - but that's not a bad thing, I actually found it to be more interesting than a straight up biography of a storyteller. Rather than just telling the story of Frank Baum, it was more of a history book of the late 1800's - going into women's suffrage, Sitting Bull and the Wild West, the Chicago World Fair, the financial depression; with Frank Baum's life intertwined into it. In this way, it reminded me of *The Devil in the White City*. The writing of the *Wizard of Oz* is a constant theme, with details of Baum's life highlighted to show where they may have appeared in the story and how he came up with the details (such as why he chose Kansas as Dorothy's home state - which was amusing), who the wizard was modeled after, and what the characters represented, as well as Oz representing the Chicago World Fair (who knew? not me!). The actual writing of the *Wizard of Oz* didn't take place until the last chapter of the book. I recommend it for people who enjoy reading American history - and if you liked *Devil in the White City* - I think you'd like this one as well. It did drag in parts, I would give it 3.5 stars if I could - but it veered more toward the 4 stars than the 3 stars, in my opinion.

Courtney says

I love Baum, he's a really cool dude. There are many things about his life that were beyond intriguing to me. He was such an amazing failure at so many things, so creative, but so not good with "making money". It seems like if you're creative, the money will just flow, but not so much for Baum. It was really interesting.

Biographies sometimes take a while to get through-- we're talking late 1800s early 1900s here, the most excitement was the Chicago World's Fair. But don't get me wrong, that darn fair, along with pretty much all other world's fairs intrigued me. I love how Schwartz placed me firmly in time with everything going on in the world. Good stuff.

Charles Matthews says

Everybody loves the 1939 MGM *Wizard of Oz*, but for some aficionados of L. Frank Baum's works, the film that better captures the essence of Baum's vision is the 1985 Disney-produced *Return to Oz*. Directed by Oscar-winning sound and film editor Walter Murch, it was a critical and commercial flop, perhaps because it doesn't stint on the dark and scary. Any kid who was freaked out by the witch and the flying monkeys of the MGM movie will be traumatized by the genuine weirdness of the Disney version, which begins with Dorothy consigned to a mental hospital because she can't stop talking about this place she calls Oz.

The truth is, Baum's Oz was always a weird and scary place, but what Murch's film gets particularly right is the author's very American ambivalence toward technology. Production designer Norman Reynolds nails it brilliantly with some steampunk-inspired creations: on the one hand such late-Victorian horrors as the gruesome electroshock machine with which Dorothy is threatened in the hospital, and on the other the lovable mechanical man Tik-Tok. The film underscores what Evan I. Schwartz suggests in his new book on the life and times of L. Frank Baum, that the road to the Emerald City began in the White City: the lathe-and-plaster facades of the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, behind which such technological innovations as electric light, the phonograph and motion pictures mingled with carnival humbug. And that among the prototypes for Baum's *Wizard of Oz* were both the *Wizard of Menlo Park*, Thomas A. Edison,

and the master of conning the suckers, P.T. Barnum.

Baum was 44 when he published the story that made him rich and famous. He had been a chicken farmer, an actor and playwright, a marketer of petroleum products, a shopkeeper, a newspaperman and a traveling salesman. He restlessly moved his family from Syracuse, New York, to the Dakota Territory, to Chicago and – after the success of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* – to the place where restless Americans usually wind up: California. And in all of these places he encountered things that would work their way out of his memories and into his fiction. As Schwartz says, “Things he had seen in his life and had filed away for some later use were now rushing back and coming out on scraps of paper,” from the yellow brick road that led to the military school he attended (and hated) as a boy, to the fragile porcelain dishes and figurines he lugged about in his suitcase as a salesman, the inspiration for the first Oz book's Dainty China Country.

Schwartz does a fine job of unearthing the origins of Oz, and of portraying Baum as very much a man of his times – the era of the vanishing frontier and the uneasy transition from Victorianism into modernity. Among the major influences Schwartz singles out is Baum's mother-in-law, Matilda Joslyn Gage, an ardent proponent of women's rights. Although Baum fathered four sons and no daughters, he gave his first Oz book a heroine, and the hero of his second Oz book, the boy Tip, turns out to be the princess Ozma, the victim of a sex-change spell. Matilda Gage was also a devotee of Theosophy, the belief system that Helena Petrovna Blavatsky synthesized out of elements of neo-Platonism, Buddhism and Hinduism. Baum was intrigued by Theosophy and by the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, who made a sensational appearance at the Columbian Exposition.

Schwartz observes that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* “is less a coming-of-age story ... and more a transformation-of-consciousness story. Like the Buddha, Dorothy attains enlightenment.” Still, he maybe lays it on a bit thick by describing Dorothy's travels as “a journey guided by Eastern philosophy” or suggesting that Oz exists on Theosophy's “Astral Plane”: “To embark on her journey, the girl would have her own samadhi moment, projecting herself through the eye of the cyclone into the mystical realm.” Schwartz is better at dealing with the physical world than the spiritual one, as was Baum: “Frank understood from the start that the entire premise was absurd, which is why he presented the goal of his main character with humor, the real lessons of the journey to be learned from encounters with comedic characters.”

Finding Oz is underpinned by solid research, although there are times when Schwartz's sleuthing into the things Baum “had filed away for some later use” leads him into some strained conclusions. For example, he posits some kind of imaginative link between the field of lethal red poppies Dorothy encounters on the way to the Emerald City and the killing fields of Little Big Horn and Wounded Knee. And perhaps his assessment of Baum's achievement is a shade on the hyperbolic side: “Certainly no one on any list of American luminaries has ignited the imagination of the world quite like L. Frank Baum.”

If we put Baum in the company of such “luminaries” as Washington and Lincoln, Edison and the Wright Brothers and Henry Ford, Mark Twain and Walt Disney, he may not seem like as much a standout as Schwartz thinks. But the fact remains that, 109 years later, Oz continues to inspire sequels and prequels on page and stage, and the traces of Baum's fantasy can be discerned in everything from the *Star Wars* movies to the *Harry Potter* books. As Schwartz's book informs us, Baum's strange and essential gift was to see the outlines of myth within the machinery of the modern world.

Alissa says

This was an interesting look into L. Frank Baum's life. I learned so much about him. I had no idea that the

author of one of America's most beloved stories had had so much failure in his life. He showed dedication to his responsibilities and perseverance in trying to find the right occupation for him. Thank goodness he finally found his passion. The author also spent a lot of time giving background on the woman's suffrage movement and Baum's mother-in-law, Mathilda Gage, who had a huge presence in that movement, along with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, which unfortunately has been long forgotten.

Sarah says

Schwartz did a great job of making this a readable book, although he tries to smooth over many of Baum's shortcomings. People are people, we all have faults...just because someone is an American Icon does not mean they are immune to poor choices and judgment. However, Schwartz presented a really interesting view into the life and experiences of L. Frank Baum. I definitely enjoyed reading this one and recommend it for lovers of Oz who want to learn more about how that wonderful world may have been created.

Gnarly Authenticity . says

I really wanted to love this, since it seemed to combine two of my favorite things: the history of the Gilded Age, and the story of the Oz books.

Like many imaginative youths, I had my psyche permanently altered by L. Frank Baum's world in combination with John R. Neill's Art Nouveau illustrations of Oz and its terrifying inhabitants; which I was fortunate to have in early hardcover edition--a hand-me-down from my grandmother.

But within the first 30 pages, Schwartz employed the phrase "thought leader" in reference to some personages of the nineteenth century and my experience of his book never managed to recover from the intrusion of that god-awful bit of TED talkery. What competent editor could have let that one through? Publishing is dead, they say.

After that, I wasn't able to give Schwarz the benefit of the doubt any more, and although much of his research is interesting and thought-provoking, I became more and more annoyed with his use of the "conditional pluperfect" tense to shoehorn suppositions and undocumented speculations about what Baum and friends "might have been" doing 100 years ago into the standard pop-history narrative form that all these books seem to follow. "Frank and Matilda might have sung popular songs of the day as they took tea in Mrs. Gage's front parlor..." etc. A little of this goes a long, long way, and seeing that construction popping up on every page, sometimes more than once, quickly became unbearable.

Even the gleaning of interesting knowledge, such as the fact that Baum's mother-in-law, who probably provided the model for several of the Ozian Witches, was both a feminist of historical rank and a Theosophist, was not enough to keep me reading this book after Schwartz begins blathering on about the teachings of Joseph Cambell. On page 76 he uses the word "bliss" in the "follow your..." sense, and I laid his book down never to resume. I have too many overdue Garry Wills books out from the library to spend any more time on this stuff.

Candy says

"Finding Oz" is a delight for anyone, who like me, is a bit of a nut about the movie Wizard of Oz. I actually met the author when he was promoting the book in Chicago and speaking before a screening of the film. I was happy to pick up this book because I enjoy a lot of things with references to Oz...but I really didn't expect to enjoy reading this book as much as I did.

The author takes us to family history of both Frank L. Baum's family and his wife's family. This is of interest because several layers of where Baum grew up seem to have influenced his vision for the novel. A great section of the book talks about his wife's mother who was an original suffragette and peers/friends with Susan B. Anthony. One of Baum's mother-in-laws projects was public speaking on feminism and getting the vote for women. Her speeches often covered the history of witch-burning...which of course relates to the witches in Oz. I would recommend this book for anyone who loved Aljean Harmetz book "The Making of Wizard of Oz" and who likes behind the scenes research and biography of what the author, Evan Swartz calls "the Great American Story".
