

L. FRANK BAUM

*The Wonderful
Creator of Oz*



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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For a child on the Dakota Plains, life in the 1880s was little more than hard work. The flat bleakness of the prairie cried out for a fantasy to take a boy or girl far away. So all the children in Aberdeen knew the tall, dapper gentleman who strode through town each day, stopping to tell them stories. His tales were filled with whimsy, dreams, and colorful characters. So when Mr. Baum walked down the street in his finely tailored suit, children clamored in his wake.

If he had time, Mr. Baum sat on the edge of the dusty wooden sidewalk and gathered children around him, taking one or two into his lap. Fingering his cigar, he looked above the wooden storefronts and into the big sky as if searching for a setting. Then, with smile and a twinkle in his eye, he began his story. Unlike tales told by parents, Mr. Baum's were not lectures in disguise. Instead he made everyday objects – scarecrows, pumpkins, rag dolls – come alive. His stories glittered with color; whole fields were shaded blue, green, or pink. As he went on, Mr. Baum seemed to lose himself in the telling. Gone were his chronic failures; gone, too his chronic chest pains. For as long as he could tell it, all that mattered was the story that let Mr. Baum be a child again. Years later, his mother-in-law, who had overheard his stories, urged him to write them down, yet, while living in Aberdeen, he was content to please a child or two.

Several years later, when Lyman Frank Baum finally set pencil to paper, stories poured forth. In a career of just two decades, he wrote more than 70 books. Many were forgettable fluff, but one was called *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. It's about a girl from Kansas who meets a scarecrow, a tin woodsman, and a cowardly – well, perhaps you know the story. But you may not know that Oz is more than a single book that inspired one of Hollywood's greatest movies. Long before television staked its claim to children's fantasies, Oz was mapped in the imagination of countless children. Going on beyond the wizard, Baum wrote 13 other Oz books. After he died, his successors churned out 26 more. Between 1913 and 1942, a new Oz book came out every Christmas. Oz Reading Clubs devoured each one. An Oz who's who charted the kingdom's colorful characters, including The Patchwork Girl, The Tik-Tok Man, Princess Ozma, and some 300 more. These days, the ubiquitous MGM movie overshadows the books, but readers who choose to go there still find Oz so much more than lions, tigers, and bears, oh my. Baum's fairyland is a place of childish dreams and fears, a kingdom ruled by love but haunted by fear of sudden death. It's a land where adults are as helpless as children and children are as strong as adults. Peppered with puns and wordplay, Oz is charming, childlike, and altogether ambivalent about the benefits of age. In short, it's much like its creator, L. Frank Baum, the "Royal Historian of Oz."

In April of 1900, Harry Baum received a letter from his brother Frank in Chicago. "The boys are growing wonderfully," Frank wrote, "and I sometimes think I must be a kid no longer, when I behold the stalwarts around me and hear them call me 'Dad.' There's a mistake somewhere, for I have failed to grow up – and we're just five boys together." The following fall, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was published. The book was an instant bestseller. Suddenly at 46, Baum realized the dream of his turn-of-the-century peer, Peter Pan. He would never have to grow up.