'Finding Oz' explores origins of a favorite fairy tale

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In 1900, 44-year-old L. Frank Baum, a failed actor, retailer and newspaperman, didn't have enough money to buy Christmas presents for his four children. But then he received the first royalty check for "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," which was well on its way to becoming the best-selling book in America. For the rest of Baum's days, like the Tin Woodman, "everyone loved him, he loved everyone, and he was therefore as happy as the day was long."

Evan Schwartz, a former editor at BusinessWeek, investigates the origins of America's greatest fairy tale. Neither "random nonsense" nor a "parable of populism," he argues, Oz was inspired by Baum's personal turmoil, spiritual odyssey, and the people, places and events in his life.

Schwartz identifies many "real life" models for the characters in Oz. The Wizard was designed to resemble John D. Rockefeller — who was afflicted in mid-life with alopecia (a disease accompanied by loss of hair all over the body) — and "The Wizard of Menlo Park," Thomas Alva Edison.

Baum's treatment of Wicked Witches as a metaphor for irrational fears, Schwartz suggests, was, to some extent, a defense of his mother-in-law. A warrior for women's rights, Mathilda Gage had been pilloried in the press, even though she was, actually, a "lightning rod of liberty, able to transmit her goodness to others, as if by magical thought energy."

Unfortunately, Schwartz's narrative is marred by several factual errors. Nathaniel Hawthorne was not a Transcendentalist. Chicago's nickname, "The Windy City," did not originate with a reporter's account of politicians and businessmen "spewing hot hair" in the battle with New York City to host the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Nor is it quite right to say that during the Gilded Age the masses demanded that the government abandon the gold standard.

More importantly, Schwartz's reinterpretations of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," embroidered with quotations from mythologist Joseph Campbell and psychologist Carl Jung, are pretentious. Citing editorials in the Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer, which branded Indians "whining curs who lick the hand that smites them," and called on the white "masters of the continent" to "wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth," for example, Schwartz argues that Baum atoned for "his small role in the great American tragedy," by having Dorothy fall asleep in a field of red poppies, "a mythical field of blood" that is a "powerful symbol" of sadness at the slaughter of Native Americans and their buffalo.

Schwartz is far more persuasive when he writes that, like P.T. Barnum, Baum yearned for a "world in which a hero pulls back the veil on fraudulent leaders and their self-deceived followers." That's what "The Wizard of Oz" is really about: a wizard who humbugs ordinary men and women until they realize that they "already possess what they most want."

Embedded in a story designed for children and adults holding on to their childhood innocence, this smart and simple theme was — and is — more than enough.

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Associate Images:
Finding Oz
How L. Frank Baum Discovered The
Great American Story
Evan I. Schwartz
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