CHILDREN'S BOOKS; AMERICA AS FAIRYLAND

By CATHLEEN SCHINE JULY 7, 1985

NEVER having read the Oz books as a child, I recently picked them up and began the 14-book journey through L. Frank Baum's queer country wondering what all the fuss was about. Because there is, of course, a fuss. An enormous, frenzied fuss that has existed since the first Oz book appeared 85 years ago. Pinch-lipped librarians patrolling their domains in a mysterious national campaign against scarecrows and tin men; novelists and distinguished academics combing the Oz texts for echoes of Hawthorne and Stephen Crane; 26 more sequels by six writers; collectors auctioning off scraps of Ozabilia; an International Wizard of Oz Club with thousands of members; a new movie, "Return to Oz," and most important, I suppose, all these people, adult people, sitting around daydreaming of the times they sat around daydreaming, as children, looking up from yellowed pages describing the wonderful Land of Oz.

I suspect I would have hated the Oz books as a child, having preferred heroic collies. And it is probably an indication of my lingering antifantasy prejudice that my

favorite passages in all the Oz books are the very first: "Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies, with Uncle Henry, who was a farmer, and Aunt Em, who was the farmer's wife. Their house was small, for the lumber to build it had to be carried by wagon many miles. There were four walls, a floor and a roof, which made one room; and this room contained a rusty looking cooking stove, a cupboard for the dishes, a table, three or four chairs, and the beds. . . . Once the house had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and gray as everything else." Slap. A bleak, flat slap across the flushed cheek of children's literature. "When Dorothy, who was an orphan, first came to her, Aunt Em had been so startled by the child's laughter that she would scream and press her hand upon her heart whenever Dorothy's merry voice reached her ears." The desolation of a woman so astonished by laughter is the last we see of Baum's flat, frightening superrealism. He and Dorothy leave it far behind for the Land of Oz - a place of blue and yellow and purple and sparkling emerald green; of hills and mountains and rivers and towering cities; of witches and fairies and chattering, opinionated beasts.

I did not welcome Dorothy's departure from sad Kansas, but it is an indication of Baum's greatness as a fantasist that even I, a fantasy philistine, read on. And on. And on. Because, like any great fantasist, Baum has given us a land that is so strangely reminiscent of the real world, that is so complicated, and he is so ambivalent about so much of it, that the preposterous place and its creatures become as superrealistic as Kansas itself.

I certainly don't mean to imply that L. Frank Baum is in the same class as a brilliant social satirist like Gogol. The Ozites hate to hear this, but here goes: the style of the books is wildly uneven, sometimes powerful and swift but often sentimental and slack; the author increasingly resorts to cheap, convenient magical plot devices; there are uninspired repetitions and astonishing discrepancies (although many former children I spoke to cited the discrepancies as one of the most compelling aspects of the Oz books - Baum's illogic made them think).

When Baum is at his best, Marius Bewley writes in his wonderful essay "The Land of Oz: America's Great Good Place," his "prose reflects themes and tensions that characterize the central tradition of American literature. . . . He wished to create in Oz a specifically American fairyland." The first book, "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," was written in 1900, not so long after Cornelius Vanderbilt said, "Law! What do

I care about law? Hain't I got the power?" Industrialism and war were still somewhat romantic undertakings, still adventures. It was also the boisterous time of muckraking, the progressive movement, Populism, Theodore Roosevelt. Does it seem a bit much to compare little Dorothy in her bonnet to galloping Teddy Roosevelt? I don't think so. Dorothy, particularly in the early books, is sublimely bold, a relentless pilgrim, a daredevil and a thoroughly ordinary little girl. She has the arrogance of innocence; she speaks softly and carries a big stick.
Extraordinary as it is, Oz is also a familiar land of earnest self-sacrifice, sheer will, Populism, imperialism, money worship and simplicity. It is an improvised edifice, held together by misfits and oddballs, a land made by the self-made.

" 'Thank you very much,' said the Scarecrow, when he had been set down on the ground. 'I feel like a new man.' " The Tin Woodman actually is a new man - crafted, bit by bit. As an enchanted ax slices off his legs, his arms, his head, he replaces each fallen piece with a tin facsimile until the original man is gone, leaving a tin one.

These magical creatures create themselves, improve themselves, seeking hearts or brains, the proper head, a stronger hickory-stick leg. The Tin Woodman lovingly polishes his gleaming parts in an endless battle against dents and rust; the Scarecrow periodically requires fresh straw stuffing. (During an accidental visit to the United States, the Scarecrow winds up stuffed with greenbacks - literally a moneybags, a self-made man, in the land of opportunity.) Jack Pumpkinhead has a body made of branches with a pumpkin on top. Brought to life by a magic powder, even he, a simpleton, must eventually make his own way: he becomes an enterprising pumpkin farmer, growing large replacements for his chronically rotting heads. These characters are creatures of ingenuity and awesome will - entrepreneurs of the self. Americans.

An awful lot goes on in Oz, what with pompous educational reformers and revolutionary armies of girls (Baum's mother-in-law was a well-known suffragette). And Baum does not forget the issues of a newly affluent middle class, most prominent among them being servant problems. Just look at the Patchwork Girl, a rag doll brought to life to do the housework. Too much cleverness is accidentally sprinkled into her brain, and she arrives in the world a fun-loving but entirely unsuitable domestic. And like Mark Twain and Henry James before him, Baum is fascinated with the provincial bourgeois American abroad. Aunt Em is quite funny, sniffing in mingled awe and disgust at the "ways" of extravagant Oz.

The language is American, too - often refreshingly colloquial and plain, while the magical environment it describes is prosaic, homey, with lunch pails growing on the trees. And the characters themselves possess the refined irritability of the prominent members of a small Middle Western town -they are endearingly vain, bossy, protective of their little privileges. But they are also fiercely tolerant of the outlandish, respecting, cherishing such rickety, sagging, unlikely colleagues as the Frogman, the Shaggy Man and Prof. H. M. Wogglebug, T.E. - a community of eccentrics. In Oz, they belong. Z, an increasingly rich and varied land as the books go on, is blessed with smooth, utopian Populism - all those contented Munchkins tilling their bountiful blue fields - and with woolly frontier anarchy. Baum's is a kind of balanced American pastoral vision. And yet many of the most important characters are technological wonders - like Tik-Tok, "Smith and Tinker's Patent Double-Action, Extra-Responsive, Thought-Creating, Perfect-Talking Mechanical Man, Fitted With Our Special Clock-Work Attachment." And as Mr. Bewley points out in his essay, magic itself in Oz is considered a sort of science or technology, powerful and sometimes dangerous, requiring strict controls. A lot of time is spent losing and recovering magic aprons and dishpans.

The rest of the time is spent trying to recover one's original form: with the exhilaration of individualism comes the nagging fear of its loss. The heroes are constantly being turned into green monkeys or given braying donkey's heads. Even the Tin Woodman eventually journeys back to the woods to find his severed self. And the biggest threat any villain has to offer, aside from forced housework, is turning the heroes into bric-a-brac.

Doing chores, being turned into an ornament and losing one's proper head are equally horrible in the Land of Oz. No wonder children can't tear themselves away from these books. Their appeal is obvious and basic. Unlike "Alice in Wonderland," a little girl's eloquent, logical, witty nightmare, Baum's Oz books are about a child's daydreams. They are about independence and power, about affable, funny-looking creatures who triumph, square pegs who turn themselves into kings.

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