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Baum, Bakhtin, and Broadway: A Centennial Look at the Carnival of Oz

Joel Chaston

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Joel D. Chaston

I

A few years ago, I was invited to speak at the first annual L. Frank Baum/Oz Festival in Aberdeen, South Dakota, where L. Frank Baum and his family lived from 1888-1891. My lecture took place in a circus tent in Wylie Park where I found myself competing with an ice cream social next door and vendors outside selling Oz merchandise such as books, toys, ceramic figurines, and tee-shirts. High school students dressed as characters from Baum's books wandered through the audience, and the town's band was tuning up for a concert. The scene before me conjured up descriptions of the medieval carnival square, the subject of several essays I had read by Mikhail Bakhtin; and, despite the fact that it was hard to make myself heard, I decided that this scene would have pleased Baum, whose stories are filled with chaotic parties and banquets.

The Aberdeen festival is only one of many annual celebrations of Baum and/or Oz. Each year, Chittenango, New York (Baum's birthplace) hosts a birthday celebration and parade and the International Wizard of Oz Club sponsors several conventions. An obsession with Baum and his writings, however, is not limited to organized festivals. Partly because of the continued popularity of the 1939 MGM film, there are numerous Oz gift shops around the country and more Oz merchandise than is imaginable (although Baum's characters have graced peanut butter and jelly jars, desert mix packages, valentines, board games, and posters ever since their creation).¹ Oz allusions appear regularly in political cartoons and comic strips and on the covers of magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone*.² *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has also inspired countless imitations and sequels, parodies, and pastiches (including around 150 Oz novels according to Dick Rutter's 1995 bibliography).³ **[End Page 128]** Indeed, it is hard to imagine any other twentieth-century American children's book with as much impact on popular culture.⁴ Even during Baum's life, the Oz books were so popular that, upon his death in 1919, the *New York Times* suggested that "the children have suffered a loss they do not know" ("Fairy Tales" 1).

The reception of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and its sequels in the scholarly and literary community has been much more mixed. In spite of the phenomenal success of Baum's fourteen Oz books, from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1900 to the posthumous publication of *Glinda of Oz* in 1920, the series has been intermittently attacked or ignored by librarians and critics.⁵ The books were removed from the Detroit Public Library in 1957 because, in the words of the library's director, "there is nothing uplifting or elevating about the Baum series" (qtd. in Hearn, *Annotated* 75). In 1962, responding to similar attacks, Martin Gardner posited reasons why Oz has not found favor with librarians: a negative attitude toward "series books"; Baum's publisher, Reilly & Britton (later Reilly & Lee), had a reputation for "second-rate" books; sloppy editing that allowed contradictory details; and a lack of appreciation for fantasy.⁶

Until recently, histories of children's literature have tended to skip completely over Baum and his fantasy lands or only grudgingly mention his popularity.⁷ In 1985, the Children's Literature Association, an international scholarly organization, produced a list of "Touchstone" books, "the best works for children of all time," and left Baum completely off its list. In an essay about this list, widely regarded critic Perry Nodelman acknowledges his own childhood love of the Oz books, conjecturing that Baum's works were probably excluded because they are "stylistically undistinguished" (8).

Those who criticize the Oz books have often voiced decidedly formalistic concerns, some of which were

summed up by James Thurber in 1934. "The fatal trouble with the later books . . . is that they become whimsical rather than fantastic...



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