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The Book That Made Me: A Girl

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The book that made me: a girl

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The Book That Made Me is a series reflecting on the books that have changed our lives. In this latest installment, a professor of English and of Gender Studies reflects on the freedom he received—to become a whole other person, in a whole other place—from an unexpected source.

When I was four, I would only respond to the name Dorothy. My grandpa had given me a new hardcover edition of The Wizard of Oz, lushly illustrated by Michael Hague, which my parents read to me at bedtime. Every night, I journeyed down the yellow brick road. And when I woke up, I was Dorothy.

The glorious MGM musical also figured in my childhood imagination. My family watched it every year when it was shown on television. In fact, we got our first color TV on the day of the broadcast. That evening, as Judy Garland opened her door onto the dreamy greens and blues of Technicolor Munchkinland, I could finally see that we weren’t in black-and-white Kansas anymore.
Dorothy visits Glinda the Good Witch, in a spread from the author’s copy of Baum and Hague’s edition of The Wizard of Oz.

But unlike the movie, L. Frank Baum’s fairy tale wasn’t a dream narrative, a projection of Dorothy’s desire to escape home and liquidate a witchy neighbor. No apple-cheeked ingénue, Baum’s Dorothy was a windswept prairie gal out of Willa Cather (especially in Hague’s pictures), plucky, compassionate, undaunted by the adventures she and her entourage faced on the way to the Emerald City. Many of these episodic encounters were wisely cut on screen—does anyone miss Dainty China Country?—but I loved to reenact Dorothy’s escape from the Kalidahs (tiger heads, bear bodies) and the Hammer-Head Quadlings. I tried playing a Kalidah, and I had a brief stint as Glinda the Good Witch, thanks to a pink mask that I fastened over my face with an elastic band. I knew, though, that I was really Dorothy.

I didn’t just identify with Dorothy; I identified as Dorothy. That’s what I wanted to be called. I read all fourteen books in Baum’s series. My favorites were Ozma of Oz, where Dorothy leaves Kansas for good to rule by her friend Ozma’s side, and The Lost Princess of Oz, where Dorothy rescues Ozma from imprisonment inside an enchanted peach pit. It was around this time that I asked my mom if I could wear a pair of her clip-on earrings to school. She said that was fine with her, but she warned that other kids might laugh at me. When the girl next door pointed and hooted, I ripped off the earrings and never put them on again. In Oz, however, I could be a princess.

IN OZ, HOWEVER, I COULD BE A PRINCESS.

Dorothy was the first of my fantasy heroines. Then came Alice, Lucy Pevensie, Matilda, and later Elizabeth Bennett, Maggie Tulliver, Margaret Schlegel. They were curious, empathetic, indignant, more likely to fight with words than with swords. As I imagined myself
in their stories, I never thought about them occupying particular bodies or social positions. No doubt it was a function of my relative comfort—as the child of progressive teachers in Portland—that I didn’t have to. I could try on different roles with no graver consequences than a neighbor’s laughter; I could close the books or take off the earrings and go back to being Daniel. Girls are often required to identify with male characters in order to read their way through an assigned canon. I got to choose my imagined selves.

As I grew up, I was surprised and intrigued to learn that my personal identification held coded meanings for other groups, too. Why did Cher’s pals in Clueless tell her that her boy crush was gay by calling him a “Friend of Dorothy”? Was Baum’s 1900 novel really a populist allegory for the gold standard, as my college roommate knowingly informed me? Why did Salman Rushdie cast Indira Gandhi as the green-skinned Wicked Witch in Midnight’s Children? When Diana Ross sang “Everybody Rejoice” in The Wiz after the witch died, what kind of freedom was she celebrating? I felt a twinge of recognition when I read that the artist Taylor Mac prefers the pronoun “judy,” as in Garland, but he performs a far more fabulous range of identities than I ever dreamed.

“*The Wizard of Oz* didn’t make you a girl,” my dad told me recently. “It made you a pain in the ass.” He was probably right. I thought about my own son’s demands when he was four. After my wife and I took him to a cousin’s wedding, he announced that he was Lexie, the bride. He would don a white towel as a veil and walk the seven circles of the Jewish marriage ceremony with whichever parent was available, enlisting his one-year-old sister to preside as “the little rabbi.” When we called him by his name, he would insist, “No, I’m Lexie. I’m a
girl.” A preschool evaluation form posed the question: “If you asked your child whether he or she was a boy or a girl, would your child answer correctly?” We weren’t quite sure what that meant. Lately, he’s been putting on productions of *The Wizard of Oz* in the playroom with his sister. They tend to swap roles.

The other day, I ran into one of my preschool teachers at the grocery store. She greeted me tentatively. “Daniel?” she said. “Is it alright if I call you Daniel now, or are you still Dorothy?” It was a fair question. She could see me, 33 years later, in a jacket and jeans, nearing middle age, a privileged professorial schlump. I’d begun to wonder if Dorothy was just a phase, a dream. But even though my teacher was summoning a prior self, her question made it feel more real. She remembered me as Dorothy. Being Dorothy for me was never about a gingham dress or pigtails or physical yearning. It wasn’t about choosing a different third-person pronoun, either; none of them seemed especially personal. It was an imaginative freedom—freedom from an expected masculine role, freedom to journey in unexpected company, a freedom born of reading but not bound by books. It was about choosing a more fluid first-person. And when I open my childhood copy of *The Wizard of Oz* to read the first chapter to my daughter, who’s four herself, I’m Dorothy again.

#children #gender #identity #literature #masculinity

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**ON THE TABLE**

*The Wizard of Oz*
L. Frank Baum, illustrated by Michael Hague
Holt, 2000