

Yellow brick road still takes children to Oz

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TAMPA

Roger S. Baum believes there's no place like Oz. "Oz is such a big land. It has so many wonderful characters in it and so many places to see," said the great-grandson of L. Frank Baum, author of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz."

"The land hasn't been completely explored yet. So your imagination just goes wild, because you get to interact with — thank goodness — not just the old Oz characters, but some new ones."

Roger Baum, 35, introduced his literary explorations of Oz during an afternoon autograph session earlier this week at Dillard's in University Mall. He also marketed his books through appearances at other Dillard's stores in Tampa, Clearwater and St. Petersburg this week.

Among his fans were Gene Paredes, who asked Baum to sign a book for his granddaughter, Julia, 7, who lives in Washington, a native of Mexico.

Paredes, 61, moved to the United States as a child and remembers first seeing "The Wizard of Oz" movie at age 18.

"My favorite character is the Tin Man," said the Tampa resident. "We watch it, my wife, Dorothy, and I, once a year."

As her 10-month-old daughter, Justin, napped in a stroller, Meg Shuttler also stood in line to meet Baum.

"I loved 'The Wizard of Oz' growing up. And I think it's really neat that there are more books. And having the author sign the books I think will be a treasured keepsake for (Justin) and something that might be worth some money someday," Shuttler said.

Baum's books continue the story line of the 33-year-old original Oz tale, transporting Dorothy and Toto back to the land of the yellow brick road.

Dorothy, friends return

"A very familiar voice whispered, 'Hello, Dorothy, it's good to see you,'" Baum wrote in the first one, "Dorothy of Oz," published in 1989 by William and Morrow Company Inc. in New York.

"Dorothy rubbed her eyes. There before her stood Glinda, the Good Witch of the South of Oz... Glinda's deep-blue eyes sparkled as she said, 'Dorothy, you must return to Oz. The Tin Woodman, the Scarecrow, and the Lion need you. They are in grave trouble and only you can save them.'"

Writing that first adventure — which has been followed by "The Revolt of Oz" and a trilogy titled "The SillyOZies of Oz," "The SillyOZies of Oz and Toto" and "The SillyOZies of Oz and the Magic Merry-Go-Round" — was not his idea, Baum said.

At the time, Baum, a resident of Westlake, Calif., was a consultant with Great Western Bank.

He had penned short stories, and his first children's book, "Long Ears and Tailgates," about a flying dog and its kind buddies, was published in 1983 by Exposition Press. But Baum approached writing as a weekend hobby.

Then a friend, who is a member of the Wizard of Oz Club International, convinced Baum to write what became "Dorothy of Oz."

"I was a little taken aback and I thought, 'My golly, how presumptuous can you be?' And yet, at the same time I thought, 'No one had to see it. When you write something, no one has to see it until you're ready to show it to somebody,'" Baum recalled.

"And one chapter just led to another. I don't know if you believe in these things or not, but it seemed like Great-Grandma was looking over my shoulder. I hope he was. I like to think he was."

Baum never met his great-grandfather, who died in 1918.

Memories of Grandma

But he remembers his great-grandmother, Maud Gage Baum. "Fortunately, Great-Grandmother lived into her 90s and I had a

Oz holds more tales

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chance to know her," Baum said.

"I think I was about 3 years old and I remember Great-Grandma musing because my priority as a youngster was the fact that I got to meet Toto. Of course, all their dogs were named Toto."

His great-grandmother also gave Baum his favorite keepsake, a copy of the first edition of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," which she autographed with the dedication: "Roger Stanton Baum, this book was written by your great-grandfather."

The popularity of his great-grandfather's classic can be attributed to "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" being part in this country's literary heritage, Baum said.

"It's probably America's greatest story tale, when you think that it was written by an American author and it takes place right in the heartland of America, Kansas," he said.

"And Dorothy, of course, being a little farm girl who goes to this wonderful, marvelous land. We can all dream — and there's so much room

Who is Baum's favorite character from the land of Oz?

"No fair. Ah, no. How else am I going to answer that," replied the bearded and bespectacled Baum, who suspiciously resembles the Cowardly Lion.

"OK, if I had a favorite character and I could get away with murder by saying..." he hedged. "Each character has his own separate quality and personality. So you might like one character as a kid and as you get older you like one character for heart or one character for courage or one character for wisdom."

"But I like Toto."



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TOGG L. CHAPPEL/Tribune photos
Roger S. Baum displays the books he has written about the Oz characters of his great-grandfather, L. Frank Baum.