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THE MAGIC OF OZ LIVES ON

Book signings

Roger Baum will be in Kansas City for autograph sessions this week at Dillard's stores. He will be at Ward Parkway today, Independence Center on Friday and Bannister Mall on Saturday. At each location he will appear from noon to 3 p.m. and 7 to 9 p.m.

Author follows in forefather's footsteps on yellow brick road

Roger Baum has been to the land of Oz and back again, but he'd never been to Kansas.

"I keep looking over my shoulder thinking I might see Dorothy right there, or Toto running alongside," says Baum, his blue-gray eyes closing to half slits and an "aw shucks" chortle reminiscent of the Cowardly Lion punctuating his sentences.

"As we were driving (to Kansas City) from St. Louis, I was looking for that tornado. We could end up in Oz. Who knows?"

If anybody should know about Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, the Cowardly Lion and the other magical characters who live somewhere over the rainbow, it is this jolly fellow.

Baum is the great-grandson of L. Frank Baum, creator of the Oz series. He grew up reading and listening to the classic stories and, in the spirit of the original, he has written four new Oz adventures. A fifth is to be released in September.

Baum will be in Kansas City through Saturday autographing copies of his books.

A friend and Oz fan encouraged Baum, a 54-year-old banking consultant in Westlake Village, Calif., to write his first Oz book. Baum wrote children's stories as a hobby and already had one published book, *Long Ears and Tailspin's Adventures in Candyland*.

"To tell you the truth, at first I thought it was very presumptuous to even attempt to write one. Period. But later I figured, you can always write one and no one ever has to see it. You know, just the four walls of your den," Baum recalls. "But I'll be doggone if one chapter didn't just follow another. It almost seemed — I don't know if you believe in this or not — that Great-Granddad was looking over my shoulder."

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His first book, *Dorothy of Oz*, was published by William Morrow & Co. in 1989. It is a 176-page story illustrated by Elizabeth Miles, whose credits include versions of such classics as *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *Puss in Boots*.

Several picture books for younger children followed, including *The Rewolf of Oz* (Green Tiger Press) and a trilogy illustrated by Lisa Mertins. The trilogy, which is being published by Simon & Schuster, includes *The Silly OZbuls of Oz*, *The Silly OZbuls of Oz and Toto* and *The Silly OZbuls and the Magic Merry-Go-Round*.

Baum reveals that the final story in his Oz trilogy will be set in 1900 in Omaha, Neb., where a merry-go-round will transport two children and several Oz characters back to the land of enchantment.

Baum's great-grandfather wrote 14 Oz novels. The first was *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1900. The last was *Glinda of Oz*, published after his death in 1919.

Although Ruth Plumley Thompson wrote 19 more Oz books after L. Frank died and many other authors have written sequels, adding to the Oz legacy is

something Roger Baum takes seriously. Each new book must have a certain Oz quality that can stand on its own.

Baum never knew his great-grandfather. But when the younger Baum was born in 1938, L. Frank's widow autographed a copy of the first edition of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* for her great-grandson when he was just 9 months old.

In addition to reading the Oz stories, Baum never tires of watching the 1939 film version of *The Wizard of Oz*. And he gives high marks to the 1990 NBC special "The Dreamer of Oz," starring John Ritter as L. Frank Baum.

"I think Great-Granddad had a tremendous amount of imagination and creativity and he had a love of writing and entertaining. He always wanted to be an actor,"

Baum says. "Instead he created what most people say is America's greatest fairy tale."

Six months ago Baum quit his banking job to devote his energy and imagination to writing and promoting his books. At book signings he takes extra time to write short stories or what he calls "extended dedications" to the children.

Earlier this week Shelly Kern, 9, waited patiently to have her book signed by Baum. The Overland Park third-grader had her hair in "Dorothy" braids and carried a tiny black stuffed dog she found at a garage sale that she calls Toto.

Her mother, Debbie, started reading the Oz tales to her daughter several years ago.

"She has quite an imagination, and I think that's why she likes them," Debbie Kern said.

Of course, actually living in Kansas helps Shelly identify with Dorothy. Last year, during a trip to Disney World, Shelly overheard visitors joking, "We're not in Kansas anymore." It wasn't long before she told them she was, indeed, from Kansas.

When asked about this famous one-liner, the diminutive Baum laughs, leans forward in his chair and props his elbows on his knees.

"You know, Great-Granddad never did go to Kansas. But don't know if we want to mention that," Baum says. "There's probably some mystique about him having been there. Maybe he did in some way, go there and we didn't know about it."