Massachi, Dina Schiff, editor. *The Characters of Oz: Essays on Their Adaptation and Transformation*. McFarland, 2023.

https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/the-characters-of-oz/?srsltid=AfmBOorRhD-SwAi5VhlXuEty24wxv7Tvl1R1k8fqFpV6tQ2BAEj1aL80

When people think of "Oz," they tend to think of the 1900 novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* or the 1939 MGM film *The Wizard of Oz*. But the Oz franchise is larger than those two works. It is so large, in fact, that a specialized term is required to fully appreciate its mass and the concepts pulled into its orbit. In the introduction to their essay collection *Third Person*, Patrick Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin establish a list of five qualities and claim that a text should satisfy at least one to qualify as what they call a "vast narrative" (2). Two of these are closely connected to new digital media forms (vastness through procedural potential or multiplayer interaction) and another involves a sharp deviation from expected form (vastness narrative extent). The remaining two traits are vastness through world and character continuity, and vastness through cross-media universes. Beginning with the 1900 novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and extending to this very day, then, L. Frank Baum's Land of Oz is doubly vast, first through its ever-expanding cast and adventures in Baum's fourteen-book original series and through its multitudes of retellings and adaptations, ranging from the early plays to the 1939 MGM classic film to the upcoming 2024 film release of *Wicked*, still two months away as I write this review.

The vastness of Oz, the enduring appeal of its characters, and its continuous variation over its many adaptations, makes it a series and franchise worth studying. In *The Characters of Oz: Essays on Their Adaptation and Transformation*, editor Dina Schiff Massachi presents a collection that focuses on the characters of the series and their changes through multiple iterations, aiming to "follow Baum's archetypal characters as they've changed over time in order to examine what those

changes mean in relation to Oz, American culture, and basic human truths" (1). This study is accomplished through thirteen essays, each looking at a different character in Oz over multiple adaptations, with an afterword by Baum's great-great grandson Robert that fictionalizes Baum and turns him into a sort of Oz character himself—a rather appropriate gesture, as Baum often framed himself as Oz's chronicler rather than its author when addressing his child audience. The collection begins with chapters on Dorothy and her close companions—the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion—then shifts through other well-known characters, including the Winged Monkeys and the Wicked Witch(es). The last third of the book addresses lesser-known characters that vary across adaptations, such as the Nome King and the Patchwork Girl. An image of the character accompanies each chapter, either a Denslow illustration from the original *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* or, if the character does not appear in the first book, an illustration by long-time series artist John R. Neill. The images help set the stage for each character, providing a look into their original depictions that helps ground the discussion of their future adaptations. While the essays vary somewhat in approach and quality, in sum, they make up a collection that will be rewarding for scholars investigating American-originating modern fantasy yet accessible enough for general fans of Oz as well.

A focus on character allows for an informed examination of change over time, but it also means that there is some repetition across the essays, in terms of Baum's own background (such as the repeated investigation of his mother-in-law, suffragist Matilda Gage, as a source of influence), the plots of frequently mentioned adaptations (particularly the 1995 *Wicked* novel and the 2007 science fiction miniseries *Tin Man*), and scholars referenced and established, such as Tison Pugh and his work on queer readings of the series. Granted, this repetition has its benefits: for example, it clearly emphasizes Pugh's importance as an Oz scholar, and the importance of

queerness to studies of the series, and it also means that each essay can be read independently from the others. It is a book that encourages the reader to play favorites, flipping through to find the chapter corresponding to their character of preference. It does mean, however, that when read as a whole, the collection feels as if it moves slowly. In a similar vein, some of the essays get bogged down in a catalogue of adaptations, but for the most part, each keeps a clear focus on its character, and grants a lively discussion of its evolution over time.

Three essays in particular stand out. Dina Schiff Massachi's "Witch's Familiars or Winged Warriors?: Liberating the Winged Monkeys" argues that the winged monkeys that serve as the Wicked Witch of the West's unwilling lackeys should not be subjected to a single interpretation:

> When one looks at not only Baum's Winged Monkeys but also MGM's Flying Monkeys, *The Wiz*'s Winged Warriors, *Tin Man*'s Moats, *Wicked*'s Chistrey, *Oz the Great and Powerful*'s Finley, and *Dorothy Must Die*'s Lulu, Ollie, and Maude, the Winged Monkeys move beyond a reading that may symbolize a specific moment in history and, instead, become a discussion about America's complex relationship with disenfranchised groups, the power structures that accompany the disenfranchisement, and who has the agency to liberate. (79)

Like many fantastic stories and creatures, the Winged Monkeys are not a perfect allegory for any one historical moment, but through their frequent subordinate roles to other characters, they demonstrate a continual engagement with equality and exclusion.

In "A Living Thing: The Very American Invention of Jack Pumpkinhead," Paige Gray writes a weird, wonderful essay about a "weird wonderful *thing*" (122), juxtaposing thing-ness, American idealism towards the pastoral, and the trickster figure to discuss Jack Pumpkinhead. Jack Pumpkinhead is an assembly of sticks for limbs and a pumpkin head on his shoulders, assembled by the character Tip and brought to life by Magic Powder in the novel *The Marvelous Land of* Oz

(1904). Unlike the functionally immortal Scarecrow, another object turned into a person, Jack is more cyclical in his existence, as his pumpkin head rots and must be replaced. This pumpkin-ness, Gray argues, ties him to American agriculture, in both its "nostalgia for small farms and rural countrysides and its dependence on urban mass production" (131). It also, she emphasizes, draws out his absurdism—Jack serves his own guests pumpkin pie, but refuses himself, claiming to partake would be cannibalism (132). The claim is simultaneously ridiculous and intriguing—can a pumpkin man be human enough for a concept such as cannibalism to apply? Through this passage and others, Gray is particularly successful in drawing out both the playfulness and the intellectual engagement that Baum's creations and their adaptations often inspire, and in injecting it into her own writing as well; it is a *fun* essay—something I wish I could say more often about academic work.

Finally, in Gita Dorothy Morena's "Piecing Together the Patchwork Girl of Oz," she constructs a sort of auto-genealogy, exploring the Patchwork Girl both in the character itself and in her role in Morena's family, as Morena is the great-granddaughter of Baum himself. In an essay that is both uniquely personal and academic, Morena uses the metaphor of the patchwork and scrap composition of the Patchwork Girl to examine her memories of her family and the adaptations of the Patchwork Girl over time, from the original Baum to Shelley Jackson's 1995 *The Patchwork Girl* hypertext. It serves as a strong final essay to the book, touching on themes echoed in many of the characters: liberty, performing with and against gender, fledgling and failing feminisms, and the influences that L. Frank Baum drew upon.

A minor complaint of the book would be that the net of adaptations could have been cast a little wider. There are comics that would speak well to how the franchise's characters turn up outside of Oz settings, such as Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's sexually explicit interpretation

of Dorothy in *Lost Girls* (2006), or the *Oz/Wonderland War* (1985), which has the characters teaming up with animal superheroes and Wonderland to fight the Nome King. It would also be interesting to see discussion of Oz-based manga and anime, such as *Captive Hearts of Oz* (2017-2018) and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1986), or the use of games where players take the roles of Oz characters, from the 1985 *Wizard of Oz* for the Apple II to the 2009 *Emerald City Confidential*, which reinterprets Oz through the lens of film noir.

These complaints, however, speak more to personal taste than to a serious flaw with the collection. In fact, they demonstrate the power of these essays to prompt further reflection on the vast narratives of Oz. The authors are to be commended for the range of works that are considered here, from familiar works such as the MGM film and *Wicked* to more obscure choices, including the made-for-television *Muppets' Wizard of Oz* (2005) and the visual album *Straight Outta Oz* (2016) by Torrick Hall. Through its variety of characters, Oz explores issues of gender performativity, queerness, feminism, and liberty, both in Baum's original contexts and in the reverberations that have echoed through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As a whole, the collection is an impressive and endearing piece of scholarship, easily recommended to Oz and fantasy scholars, as well as the dedicated Oz fan who wants to delve a little bit deeper into their favorite characters.

Work Cited

Harrigan, Pat, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. "Introduction." *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, The MIT Press, 2009, pp. 1-10.

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