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The “Ozification” of American Children’s Fantasy Films: The Blue Bird, Alice in Wonderland, and Jumanji
by Joel D. Chaston

Recently a national touring company presented a stage version of L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900) at the Juanita K. Hammons Center for the Performing Arts in Springfield, Missouri, where I live, a surprising event since the town’s major community theater had performed the same play a few months before. Despite a long-standing interest in Baum’s novel, however, I did not go to either production. I had already attended the play a couple of years before in Toronto. More to the point, since all of these productions were based on the script of the 1939 MGM film version of The Wizard of Oz, I had seen it done better on television virtually every year since I was a child.1

That new dramatizations of The Wizard of Oz should be inspired by the MGM film instead of Baum’s book will not surprise anyone who has ever tried to teach the latter. Students often mistakenly refer to the film as the “original” text and think of the novel as the “adaptation.” The popularity of the film, which Jonathan Fricke suggests is “the most widely seen and most familiar film in history,” has, for many viewers, eclipsed the work that inspired it (241). Indeed, Carol Billman’s article on The Wizard of Oz, “I’ve Seen the Movie,” argues that the film “transcends its original in American popular culture,” producing a vision that “overlays and conditions readers’ responses to L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz” (100).

As a result, many subsequent literary sequels and film adaptations draw on the 1939 film. While The Wonderful Wizard of Oz has inspired a multitude of sequels, several recent novels about Oz, including Geoff Ryman’s Was (1992), Thomas L. Tedrow’s Dorothy: Return to Oz (1993), and Gregory Maguire’s Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West (1995), incorporate elements of the MGM film into their vision of Oz.2 Filmation’s Journey Back to Oz (1971), ABC’s television series The Wizard of Oz (1990-91, recently rebroadcast on cable by Home Box Office), and Disney’s Return to Oz (1985) are, in reality, sequels to the MGM film and not the novel.3 On 22 November 1995, the movie script and its songs were reincarnated as Turner Network Television’s The Wizard of Oz in Concert: Dreams Can Come True (directed by Louis J. Horvitz and featuring Jewel as Dorothy, Joel Grey as the Wizard, and Natalie Cole as Glinda), and in 1996 the film metamorphosed into CBS’s The Wizard of Oz on Ice, with Olympic gold medalists Oksana Baiul as Dorothy and Victor Petrenko as the Scarecrow.4

Perhaps the greatest influence of the film version of The Wizard of Oz has been on other non-Oz motion pictures. In Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America (1991), Paul Nathanson notes some of the many allusions to MGM’s Oz in films as diverse as Labyrinth (1986), Good Morning, Vietnam (1987), and Made in Heaven (1987), to which one could add more recent references in Wild at Heart (1990), Freddy’s Dead: The Final Nightmare (1991), My Own Private Idaho (1991), Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice (1993), Rockadoodle (1994), and Twister (1996). As Alan C. Elms has noted in a 1983 article in The Baum Bugle, a number of science fiction films, in particular, seem to have borrowed their plots from MGM’s Oz, including Star Wars (1977), Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977), Time Bandits (1981), and E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial (1982).5

The overpowering impact of The Wizard of Oz on film adaptations of other children’s fantasy novels, however, has only been treated superficially. Since the 1939 release of the MGM film, a number of filmmakers have attempted to recreate its popularity (and eventual monetary success) when adapting other works of fantasy to the screen. In creating these adaptations, Hollywood has recast sometimes very different literary fantasies as new versions of The Wizard of Oz. In general, these adaptations, based on stories that were groundbreaking and highly original, have been artistic failures.

Some consideration of the differences between film and literature as media may explain this phenomenon. The conventions and logic of Hollywood storytelling mandate goal-oriented protagonists, psychological realism, and a conception of narrative causality that rejects coincidence and unmotivated actions (Bordwell 14-18). Children’s literary fantasies such as Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, however, frequently delight in subverting precisely these conventions. The mismatch between the formal elements of film narration at the level of story design and the aims of children’s fantasy need not result in bankrupt works of art. Nonetheless, in a number of examples discussed in this paper, namely The Blue Bird (Fox 1940), Alice in Wonderland (Disney 1951 and CBS 1986), and Jumanji (Tristar 1995), the “Ozification” of these films has resulted in schizophrenic productions with competing and contradictory subtexts. In borrowing specific elements and conventions from The Wizard of Oz, the producers of these films have necessarily overlaid the narrative features of Hollywood motion pictures onto disparate children’s texts. More importantly, through their Ozification, those aspects of the original stories that empower child protagonists, especially girls, and that seem to critique the adult world are transformed into a sentimental message that “there is no place like home,” encouraging young viewers to conform to adult expectations.

The Wizard of Oz is a rich film that has been explored in many different ways by a host of critics (see, for example,
Rushdie, Earle, and Gilman). In the minds of later filmmakers, it has apparently been boiled down to a brief set of conventions, several of which differ markedly from Baum's original book. As incarnated in film, Oz is the story of an adolescent, Dorothy Gale, yearning for a place "Over the Rainbow," a place "far, far away . . . / Behind the moon / Beyond the rain" where "troubles melt like lemon drops" (Langley 39). Dorothy is whisked away from her sepia-toned existence to a Technicolor land where she spends her entire time wishing she were back home. Her new world is, however, not that different from her old one—several of the characters introduced in Kansas reappear in Oz in disguise. During Dorothy's sojourn as a stranger in a strange land, she is pursued relentlessly by an evil parental figure whom she must defeat, the Wicked Witch of the West. In addition, she learns that the ruler of her paradise is a humbug. Ultimately, she discovers that she had within her the ability to return home all along and does so, only to be told that her entire experience was a dream.6

This simplified outline of The Wizard of Oz clearly follows the plot of the typical Hollywood motion picture. In The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960, David Bordwell argues that Hollywood films invariably adopt a "classical" approach to storytelling in which plot construction foregrounds "causality, consequence, psychological motivations, the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals" (13). That The Wizard of Oz is so overtly goal-oriented, with its heroine coping with a series of setbacks to achieve ultimate happiness, is one of the reasons for its success. Moreover, inasmuch as character consistency and well-defined motivation are important features of the classical film, Dorothy's wish to return home represents a way of unifying and controlling the fantasy elements that might otherwise subvert the film's progress toward the accomplishment of her goal. Her unswerving desire to go home provides a frame of reference for interpreting the otherwise disparate characters and adventures she meets while in Oz.

Another consequence of melding classical Hollywood narration and children's fantasy manifests itself in the apparently limited goals available to child protagonists. Adult heroes participate in stories whose narrative progress ranges from a restoration of the status quo ante to the development of a completely new order of things, frequently coupled with a second plot trajectory that works toward the fulfillment of heterosexual romance. The options available to child protagonists are necessarily more limited, since love-romance may seem inappropriate for them, and certain conceptions of psychological realism appear to dictate a desire to return to a more familiar and manageable environment such as home.

Certainly, Oz's producers were conscious of the Hollywood formula and its narrative consequences. Arthur Freed, who worked under producer Mervyn LeRoy on the film, felt that Noel Langley's early script lacked "a solid and dramatic drive for Dorothy's adventures and purposes that will keep the audience rooting for her." Freed explains, "Dorothy is only motivated by one object in Oz; that is, to get back home to her Aunt Em, and every situation should be related to this main drive" (qtd. in Hearn, "Introduction" 12). According to Mark West, in following Freed's edict and tightening Baum's plot, Dorothy is "transformed into a much weaker and meeker character," one who is less heroic than her literary counterpart (125).

While The Wizard of Oz initially lost the studio a million dollars, the film was popular during its first release and, over the years, has made millions through television and videocassette sales (see Harmetz 288). As soon as the MGM film appeared, competing studios began to imitate Oz. Fox's The Blue Bird, an adaptation of the popular 1909 children's play by Belgian playwright and Nobel laureate Maurice Maeterlinck, was released the year after The Wizard of Oz. Since the original play has elements in common with Baum's book, there are some natural similarities between the film adaptations, in particular their young protagonists' quests, their nonhuman companions, and their ultimate return home—for Maeterlinck, like Baum, suggests that "happiness is to be found at home" (Halls 85).

In its original form as a stage play, The Blue Bird is a pageant in the tradition of European pantomimes. Indeed, Maeterlinck was directly influenced by J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan (1904). The Blue Bird is also a philosophical play that, as W. D. Halls explains, explores Maeterlinck's personal beliefs, including the notions that "the dead live in our memories," "simple pleasures are best," and humanity is "gradually conquering disease" and will eventually "subdue the forces of Nature" (85). The play's protagonists, a woodcutter's son named Tyltyl and his younger sister, Mytyl, are sent by a good fairy on a dream-quest to find the Blue Bird of happiness. They are accompanied by talking animals and by objects that have come to life, such as Bread, Sugar, Fire, Water, and Light. Along the way, they are impeded by an antagonist in the form of a malevolent Cat, and they travel to the palace of Night, which might double for the castle of the Wicked Witch of the West. Unlike MGM's Dorothy, the children of Maeterlinck's play are relatively content with their own home life before they embark on their journey, and they are never really in much danger. Similarly, while the Cat is unsuccessful in his attempt to stop the children from finding the Blue Bird, he is not destroyed, and his duplicity is never fully recognized by others.

While one might argue that The Blue Bird derives its obsession with finding happiness at home both from Maeterlinck and from the goal-oriented Hollywood formula, its direct allusions to and quotation of The Wizard of Oz suggest that the MGM film is the source of most of its changes. One of the strongest impacts of the film's Ozification is on the personality and quest of the protagonists. In the film, Tyltyl (Johnny Russell), the play's protagonist, is subordinated to a now older Mytyl (Shirley Temple, MGM's first choice to play
Dorothy Gale). Indeed, Tyltyl has very few lines—he is merely a foil for Mytyl, not unlike Dorothy’s dog, Toto. Mytyl is now an unhappy child who wishes she could escape her dreary existence. Both Mytyl and Tyltyl, who in the play are gently taught about the past, present, and future, become the whispering victims of adult machinations. They are lied to by their dead grandparents, the selfish Mr. and Mrs. Luxury, the ancient tree-spirits, and the evil Tylette, and are nearly killed in the process. Clearly the world outside their home is a dangerous place. Indeed, they do not have the power to save themselves and must be rescued by Light and TyIo the dog.

Like Oz, the movie begins in black and white and turns to color with the arrival of the fairy Bérylune, who, like Glinda, sends the children on their quest. A number of characters from the play disappear, including all of the children’s companions except for Tylo (Eddie Collins, whose mannerisms resemble those of Bert Lahr, MGM’s Cowardly Lion), the now-female cat Tylty (Gale Sondergaard, MGM’s original choice for the role of the Wicked Witch of the West), and Light (Helen Ericson, yet another version of Oz’s Glinda).9 The story’s focus is now on Mytyl’s struggle with an evil mother-figure, Tylette, who, like Dorothy’s Wicked Witch, is accidentally killed, this time by fire instead of water—although she seems to have been resurrected when the children return home. At the end of the film, Mytyl learns that safety and true happiness lie only in staying home, where she should joyfully accept her family’s poverty and treat her parents with more kindness. Just as Dorothy comes to appreciate her Aunt Em while locked in the witch’s tower, Mytyl gains new respect for her own mother while a prisoner of Mrs. Luxury and while listening to the songs of the mothers awaiting their unborn children in the Kingdom of the Future.

The children’s new-found love for their own home is reinforced by the movie’s last lines. The original play concludes with Tylo giving the Blue Bird to his neighbor’s young daughter. When the bird escapes, Tylo addresses the audience, saying: “If any of you should find him, would you be so kind as to give him back to us? We need him for our happiness later on” (241). Unlike the play, in which the Blue Bird symbolizes the future happiness of Tyltyl, who, it is suggested, will one day marry his neighbor’s daughter and thus leave his home (an idea reiterated in The Betrothal, Maeterlinck’s 1922 sequel), happiness comes when Mytyl resigns herself to her family and home. The film version of The Blue Bird ends with Mytyl, like Dorothy, suggesting that if she ever goes looking for her heart’s desire she “won’t look any further than [her] own backyard” (Langley 128). Mytyl pronounces that she and her neighbor’s daughter will find the Blue Bird again “Because now we know where to look for it—don’t we.” It is literally in their own back yard. Luckily, in a subplot present only in the film, Mytyl’s father will not have to go off to war and can stay home, too.

The Blue Bird was generally both a financial and artistic failure—it was nicknamed “Dead Pigeon” by some studio executives. The film has also been blamed for ending Temple’s career (Harmetz 112). The “Ozification” of the film turned the production into a melodramatic, humorless, dull, schizophrenic piece, as is evident especially in the contrast between the most adventure-oriented section of the film, that showing the attack of the trees and the fire in the forest, and the section closest to the original play, the more saccharine, quasi-intellectual journey to the Kingdom of the Future. The divided nature of this film is the subject of several contemporary reviews. Time magazine finds that much of this film is at odds with elements that remain from Maeterlinck’s play and cynically suggests that “Hollywood hardened children, who like their fantasy lavish and solid” may go for the “skulls, owls, ravens, blazing lightning, flaming forest and crashing trees the producers have got together to scare the daylight out of them” (“New Pictures” 61). Philip Hartung, writing in Commonweal, is even more directly critical of this “unimaginative production,” noting its “incongruously modern lines,” the new role of Mytyl in the play, and the “Maxfield Parrish” quality of the unborn-children scene, an interesting comment since the famed American illustrator did the drawings for one of Baum’s earliest children’s books, Mother Goose in Prose (1899).

The fatal effect of Ozifying film adaptations of fantasy films can be seen even more clearly in two popular American versions of Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and Through the Looking-Glass (1872). As in The Blue Bird, there are already similarities between the literary adventures of the protagonists of Baum’s and Carroll’s books, in that both young girls find themselves propelled into other worlds where they encounter fantastic characters and adventures, only to return safely home. Baum himself noted Carroll’s influence on his own creation of Dorothy Gale, writing that Alice “was a real child, and any normal child could sympathize with her all through her adventures” (qtd. in Hearn, Wizard 91). Nevertheless, there are important differences between the books, attributable in part to Baum’s more conventional taste. While praising Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland as “one of the best and perhaps the most famous of modern fairy tales,” Baum also notes that it “is bound to bewilder us, having neither plot nor motive in its relation” and that it is “rambling and incoherent” (qtd. in Hearn, Wizard 91).

Like Baum, American adapters of Alice want Carroll’s literary journeys to seem more orderly and to have a specific quest in mind. Again, it is through direct imitation of The Wizard of Oz that both volumes of Alice are transformed into stories with more classical structures. Ironically, while some writers have suggested that Carroll’s Alice probably inspired Oz scriptwriters to turn Dorothy’s journey into a dream (see Harmetz 36; Hearn, “Introduction” 10), these films turn Alice into Oz.

In 1951, Walt Disney’s Alice in Wonderland, the best-known American adaptation of Carroll’s books, was released. Leonard Mosely writes that Disney himself never understood
“the subtle Englishness of the book and the fact that it was not one of those stories to which he could add his brilliant but quintessentially American touches of Disney imagination” (213). Apparently, Disney initially wanted to liven up the book by using the March Hare “as a running character who would keep popping up at unexpected moments all through the film . . . and getting [Alice] out of scrapes” (Mosely 213). Disney’s Alice, which mixes elements from both of Carroll’s Alice books, has some visually brilliant moments (I must admit to being partial to the “Walrus and the Carpenter” sequence). Nevertheless, the film, which filters out most of Carroll’s complexity and much of the book’s humor and pathos, becomes yet another melodramatic Oz wannabe.

Again, the Ozification of a children’s classic creates an odd mix; bits and pieces of Carroll’s humor and nonsense verse jar against the sentimentality and home-worship that Oz seems to have inspired. At the beginning of the film, Alice sings a derivative “Over-the-Rainbow”-like ballad, “In a World of My Own,” in which she wishes she could find her own “wonderland.” “There’d be new birds, lots of nice and friendly how-de-do birds,” Alice (the voice of Kathryn Beaumont) sings. “Everyone would have a dozen blue birds,” she continues, more likely alluding to the blue birds mentioned in “Over the Rainbow” than to Maeterlinck’s play.

Moreover, when Alice arrives in Wonderland, she is clearly much weaker than Carroll’s heroine. Disney’s Alice is a whiny version of Judy Garland, constantly moaning that she will never make it back home, a concern that Carroll’s Alice rarely voices; however, her complaints keep the ostensible goal clearly in sight. While Carroll’s Alice, to be sure, cries enough tears to create a pool, Disney’s heroine could produce several such pools. Late in the film, Alice sings a self-pitying song, “I Give Myself Good Advice But Seldom Ever Take It,” because she thinks she will be lost forever in the dark woods (which are replete with warning signs like the one on the way to the Witch’s castle in Oz) and will thus never return home.

Alice soon finds her way into the garden of the Queen of Hearts, who is much more of a real threat than in Carroll’s book and actually seems committed to carrying out her threat to chop off Alice’s head. It is Alice who is put on trial, not the Knave of Hearts. At the conclusion of this sequence, Alice’s declaration that the Queen’s guards are nothing but a pack of playing cards does not destroy Wonderland. Instead, Alice is pursued by those same guards through a maze and across Wonderland in a scene that is visually reminiscent of the Wicked Witch’s pursuit of Dorothy through the castle. Unlike Carroll’s protagonist, this Alice must then be told by the talking doorknob how to rescue herself and is literally awakened by her older sister, who is here portrayed as an adult. Any power or strength that Carroll gives Alice is stripped away. When she ultimately returns home, we are relieved. She is safe from the dangers that proliferate outside the home. It is unlikely that Alice’s sister, who refuses to hear a word about her adventures, will, as in Carroll’s book, dream about the child’s story and imagine Alice retelling it to future children. That the film version of Alice exaggerates the threats to the heroine latent in the novel may again derive from The Wizard of Oz, a film that also changes comparatively trivial menaces to death threats. (Baum’s Witch menaces Dorothy in childlike fashion by tripping her up so that the Witch may gain control of one of the Silver Shoes; her filmic counterpart plans to kill both her and Toto.) In both films, increasing the stakes for the heroine has a number of important consequences: her antagonists have more power than in the original text, her goals are made more urgent and intelligible because of the menace, and the dangerous nature of the adventures further justifies her desire to return home.

But despite its many similarities to The Wizard of Oz, Disney’s Alice, like The Blue Bird, was a costly flop, losing a million dollars, although it has undoubtedly made money in later years through re-release in theaters and on video and through Disney merchandising (Thomas 221). Contemporary reviews were generally critical, often noting the uneven tone created through subtle changes in some aspects of Carroll’s books. A scathing attack in The New Yorker argues that Disney does not understand that “a literary masterwork cannot be improved by the introduction of shiny little tunes, and touches more suited to a flea circus than to a major imaginative effort” (McCarten 61). Hollis Alpert, writing in the Saturday Review of Literature, notes that “the peculiar magic atmosphere inherent in the book” is missing in this adaptation and that it alternates between moments that are superb and others that are awful (32). He also correctly criticizes the main character as “a pale and insipid sister to Snow White” (31). More recently, Leonard Maltin, in his mostly laudatory study The Disney Films (1995), suggests that while the movie has some visually exciting moments, it lacks warmth and can easily be dismissed, in part because of the characterization of Alice (103).

Virtually the same mistakes were made (perhaps even to a greater degree) by the live-action CBS mini-series Alice in Wonderland, which was first broadcast in 1986 and later released on videocassette. The film’s producer, Irwin Allen, and its scriptwriter, young-adult novelist Paul Zindel, again were clearly influenced by The Wizard of Oz. In fact, in a New York Times article about the project before it was completed, Allen suggests that the mini-series has the potential of becoming another Oz. “This is a program that could play every year for the next 20 years,” Allen gushes. “If we’re half as fortunate as ‘The Wizard of Oz,’ we’ll be in gravy” (Farber C23).

Unlike Carroll’s creation, Allen and Zindel’s Alice (Natalie Gregory) is unhappy at home, not merely bored—she feels displaced from her family and longs to be all grown up. Once down the rabbit hole, Alice, like MGM’s Dorothy, wants nothing more than to return home, a desire that further casts her in the role of victim. When she finds the doorway into the
garden, she wishes to go through it because it might lead her home. She also tells the caterpillar (Sammy Davis Jr.) that she is afraid she will never find her way home. A malicious Cheshire Cat (Telly Savalas) taunts Alice by singing a song, "There's No Way Home," and Alice tells the Queen of Hearts (Jayne Meadows) to let the Knave of Hearts go free because he just wants to go home and his family probably misses him. This concern with going home continues in the second half of the mini-series (based on Through the Looking-Glass) as Alice, unlike Carroll's heroine, works to make it across the chessboard primarily because she will then be able to return home. Alice tries to escape a musical rendition of "The Lion and the Unicorn," performed by the White King (Harvey Korman) and his Anglo-Saxon messenger (John Stamos), by saying that she only wants to go home. She moans, "Mother, Father, will I ever see you again?" as the Red and White Queens (Ann Jillian and Carol Channing) fall asleep in her lap.

Throughout her adventures, Alice is pursued by Wicked-Witch-like adversaries. The Queen of Hearts and her guards chase Alice through the woods, and, in the Looking-Glass world, Alice is stalked by a dragonlike Jabberwocky, who melts in a cloud of steam when she finally confronts it. It is this same Jabberwocky who knocks Humpty Dumpty (Jonathan Winters) off the wall. Alice makes it back home, gaining new status by being invited to have tea with the grown-ups, who now include an aunt named Dorothy. Produced by the king of the disaster-movie genre, this adaptation of Alice is itself a catastrophe, largely because of the imposition of Oz elements onto Carroll's story. Again, the child protagonist is relieved to return home and receive acceptance as part of the adult world. In light of her harrowing experiences in Wonderland and the Looking-Glass world, it is inexplicable that this Alice smiles lovingly when she sees the characters from her dream in a mirror at the end of the film.19

The trend toward "Ozifying" children's films has certainly continued, as illustrated by the screen adaptation of Chris Van Allsburg's Caldecott Award-winning picture book Jumanji (1981), which was released at the end of 1995. Other than the protagonists' encounter with fantastic events (and the fact that one of them, Judy, resembles a pigtailed Judy Garland costumed for Oz), Jumanji the picture book has little in common with either the literary or film versions of The Wizard of Oz. Natalie Babbitt has suggested that Van Allsburg's book is actually more like Dr. Seuss's The Cat in the Hat (1957), where "something, or someone, comes into the life of a child or two left alone by adults for a few hours, and causes unbelievable havoc, all of which miraculously vanishes before the adults return" (6). John Gardner, who also connects the book to The Cat in the Hat, suggests that Jumanji's story asks one question: "What if disobedience had consequences?" (49).

The film version of Jumanji, however, is full of references and borrowings from Oz, some superficial and others more subtle. The casual viewer will catch a moment in the movie when a gang of demonic monkeys riding motorcycles attacks an appliance store where one of the televisions is playing a clip from The Wizard of Oz of the winged monkeys pursuing Dorothy. The movie's entire script, however, can be read as an updating of the MGM film. The film's writers (Van Allsburg is credited as a co-writer for the "screen story") invent a new character, Alan Parrish, a young boy living in 1969 New Hampshire. Alan is an upscale version of Dorothy, a wealthy and wimpy boy who, instead of being harassed by the bicycle-riding Miss Gulch, is plagued by a whole band of bullies on bicycles.

Like Dorothy, Alan plans to run away from home—although instead of fearing that his dog will be taken away, Alan is worried about being sent to boarding school. When Alan is about to leave home, he is stopped by drumbeats coming from the magical board game, "Jumanji," which he has recently found. Inscribed on the side of the game are the words, "Jumanji—a game for those who seek to find a way to leave their world behind," an unconscious echo of the words Dorothy sings when she contemplates running away: "Some day I'll wish upon a star and wake up where the clouds are far behind me, where troubles melt like lemon drops" (Langley 39). Shortly thereafter, a tornado-shaped cloud sucks Alan into the game itself. When he reappears twenty-six years later in 1995 (in the form of Robin Williams), Alan is now an adult and an orphan in a community of orphans. In the world of 1995, he encounters another Dorothy-like figure, Judy (Kirsten Dunst), replete with Garlandesque pigtails as in the picture book, and her younger brother, Peter (Bradley Pierce), perhaps a counterpart to Toto—after all, he does get turned into an animal, albeit a monkey. Unlike their picture-book counterparts, Judy and Peter have recently become orphans like Dorothy and have been taken in by their aunt. Alan wishes to return home but, on his arrival in 1995, discovers his house is now only an empty shell, not unlike Dorothy's after it fell out of the sky into Oz.

Alan is joined by three companions, Judy, Peter, and his childhood friend Sarah (Bonnie Hunt), who has grown up to become a fake psychic, "Madam Serena" (like Dorothy's Professor Marvel). They are all thrust into an Oz-like journey precipitated by their attempt to end the game of Jumanji and return home. They encounter various characters whom Alan knew as a child and they face an antagonist, a mad hunter named Van Pelt (Jonathan Hyde, who also takes the role of Alan’s father, Sam Parrish—shades of Miss Gulch and the Wicked Witch of the West). Like Dorothy's witch, this evil parental figure pursues Alan relentlessly, trying to destroy him. As the game ends, Van Pelt literally melts away, sucked back into the game.

During the course of the film, the game-players face other dangers as well. As already mentioned, Alan and company are threatened by malevolent monkeys. They also fight off giant insects, which parallel the Jitterbugs that attack Dorothy and
her friends in a song cut from the MGM film. In fact, in Jumanji, the lens in the center of the board game warns that a "tiny bite" from these insects "can make you itch, make you sneeze, make you twitch," just as the Jitterbug "injects a jitter" that "starts you dancing on a thousand toes" (Langley 155). The game-players in Jumanji fight off twisting vines reminiscent of Oz's fighting apple trees, and a beautiful purple flower shoots out a poisonous dart that puts Judy to sleep in a reprise of the effect that Oz's poppy fields have on Dorothy. Alan's old house is even destroyed by a natural disaster—an earthquake instead of a tornado.

Ultimately, the game of Jumanji ends. The mess created by charging rhinos, earthquakes, and giant spiders disappears and, unlike the picture book, Alan and Sarah are transported back to the past, a maneuver that turns the entire adventure into a dream. Alan's parents are no longer dead, nor are those of Peter and Judy. Only Alan and Sarah have any sense of what is supposed to have happened. In a now-altered present, Judy and Peter never find the game and do not know who Alan is when they meet him again. In a scene apparently cut from the final film but referred to in two book adaptations of the screenplay, A. L. Singer's Jumanji: A Story Book (1995) and Todd Strasser's Jumanji: A Novelization (1995), Alan gives Peter and Judy a gift of special new athletic shoes called "Jumanjis" (a variation on Dorothy's ruby slippers?), which are being marketed by Parrish Shoe Company. As in MGM's Oz, the film's protagonists all find their way safely home and are reunited with their families.

Admittedly, a picture book does not generally provide enough plot to sustain a full-length motion picture. Yet in the expanded and Ozified Jumanji, the elements from the MGM film are at odds with the simplicity of the original book. The triumph of defeating the game is taken away from the children and put into the hands of the (admittedly childlike) adults, Alan and Sarah. Whereas Van Allsburg's children solve their problems without adult help, Judy and Peter no longer have the ability to save themselves. It is an adult male figure, not Judy, who shakes the dice at the end of the movie and rescues them. The reality of the experience created through Van Allsburg's illustrations is now undercut by the fact that, at the end of the movie, none of the events of the game have happened and the children are not even allowed to remember their adventures. Once again, a popular children's story is rewritten, inevitably, in the Hollywood idiom, to satisfy the classical film's need for goal-oriented plots. The search for home, however, is a goal that has next to nothing to do with Van Allsburg's original book, and, as in the other films discussed, can be traced back to Oz.¹¹

The Ozification of films such as The Blue Bird, Alice in Wonderland, and Jumanji seems proof of the apparent Hollywood adage that if a film is successful, just remake it, again and again. To paraphrase MGM's Dorothy Gale, "If I ever go looking for a movie plot, I won't look any farther than my own backyard." Unfortunately, in these films, reinterpreting Oz appears to require wrestling power away from strong child protagonists, especially girls, and suggesting that all problems may best be solved by retreating to one's home. What the producers of these films fail to realize is that one children's fantasy is not interchangeable with another. In addition to creating lackluster movies, they do The Wizard of Oz a disservice by reducing it to a neat little formula that can be replayed again and again. In a discussion of a variety of adaptations of The Secret Garden (1911), Margaret Mackey suggests that subtle changes in Burnett's novel "contribute to an overall effect of homogeneity in fiction that is the opposite of what literature should offer the reader" (11). While, given Hollywood's predilection for the classical plot structure, some of the elements that make the films I have discussed "homogenous" might have occurred naturally, their further homogenizing through Ozification prevents any real individuality or innovation, limiting the kinds of stories available to children. Consequently, distinctive texts such as The Blue Bird, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass, and Jumanji lose their own identities when Hollywood tackles them. The charm of these works lies in their originality and depth, qualities lost in their adaptations. Thus it is important to distinguish between those aspects of "Ozification" that result from the demands of film as a medium (such as goal-oriented protagonists and psychological realism) and those apparently more trivial details that not only create similar narratives but also duplicate tropes, metaphors, and characters. The repetition of these details, which are not intrinsic to classical film narration, demonstrates the extent to which Oz has become the Ur-text for children's film fantasy. Moreover, these details, as much as the larger structural factors, work to limit the variety of narrative available within this genre of film. Apparently, filmmakers will continue to milk Oz as long as possible. Note, for example, the slightly Ozified 1996 Disney film version of James and the Giant Peach (1961), in which, unlike Roald Dahl's book, James actively searches for an Emerald City-like Utopia, New York City, while chased by his witchlike aunts (who had originally been destroyed before he ever left home). The Oz-inspired films that have been most successful, Star Wars and E.T., are original film stories whose Ozian elements are an organic part of their vision. Perhaps those who adapt children's fantasy stories to film will eventually realize that children ought to be given more than a single story, retold again and again. To paraphrase Dorothy Gale again, the idea that "There's no film like Oz" is, like the Wizard himself, a "humbug."

NOTES
¹¹Each of these versions is based on the 1987 musical version of The Wizard of Oz produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, which adapted the film script and songs, including "The Jitterbug," which had been cut from the final print.
²²Dick Rutter's bibliography "Oz Pastiches and Parodies" on the
International *Wizard of Oz* Home Page lists over one hundred Oz-related books, not including the forty “official” “Oz” stories published by Reilly & Britton (later Reilly & Lee) and authored by Baum, Ruth Plumly Thompson, John R. Neill, Jack Snow, Rachel R. Cosgrove, and Eloise Jarvis McGraw and Lauren McGraw Wagner. Two of the interwined stories of War deal with characters involved in or obsessed with the film version of the novel. In *Dorothy: Return to Oz*, it is “ruby” and not silver shoes that take Dorothy’s granddaughter away from the MGM influence when he visited him in London in December 1909, where "fatal damage to Baum’s most original value of home."

The Ozification of American Children’s Fantasy Films

*For discussions of Sondergaard’s initial casting as the Wicked Witch of the West, see Fricke 61, Harmetz 122-23, and McClelland 55.*

*Unsurprisingly, this version of Alice did not become the television classic that its producer hoped it would. It was almost universally panned, despite costumes, sets, musical numbers, and allusions to *The Wizard of Oz*. Lee Margulies of the Los Angeles Times brands it “Alice in Dullsville” and suggests that its music has been “borrowed from *The Love Boat*” and that its sets “look like they were left over from ‘Fantasy Island’” (VI-8). John J. O’Connor lambasts the Jabberwocky that stalks Alice and compares the production to the “labored costume sketches on a Bob Hope special” (C22). Nevertheless, Zindel apparently did not learn his lesson; in his adaptation of Victor Herbert’s 1903 operetta *Babes in Toyland* for a 1986 TV movie, he invents a Dorothy-like protagonist, Lisa Piper (played by Drew Barrymore), who is sent to Toyland by hitting her head on a tree during a natural disaster (a blizzard). There she encounters people from her world as fantasy characters, while singing and moaning about wanting to return home—in this case to Cincinnati. In this version, the events in Toyland turn out to be only a dream.

While *Jumanji*’s visual effects made it popular enough at the box office, the film was widely criticized by several early reviewers, some of whom relate it to *The Wizard of Oz*. Jack Garner notes that the film incorporates aspects of the MGM film, including “youngsters on an odyssey to find strength and courage, while discovering ‘there’s no place like home’” (n.p.). Janet Maslin also identifies Ozian elements in the film, focusing on Judy’s appearance, Peter’s transformation, and the marauding monkeys. And writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Jack Mathews notes that “something bad happened on the way from the book to the movie.” Van Allsburg’s “fanciful story” has become “a continuing series of harrowing, noisy adventures with real children in seeming peril” (F1).

WORKS CITED


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