

Wonderful Wizard
of Oz Illustrations by
W.W. Denslow

LOUIS STOREY

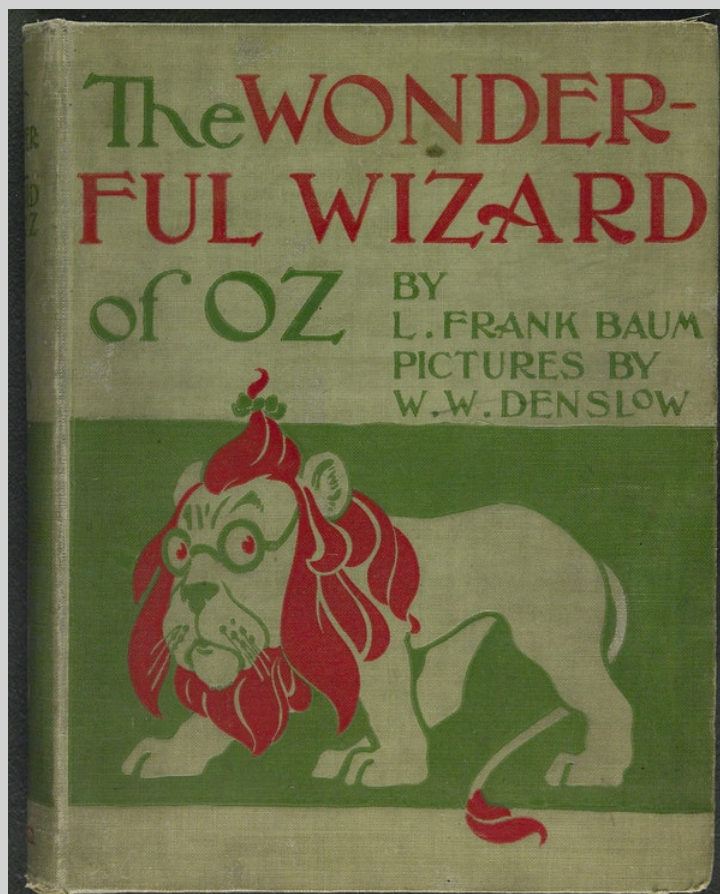
The Wonderful Wizard of Oz was L. Frank Baum's first book in what would become a fourteen-volume series. It sold nearly 15,000 copies within a month of its publication in September 1900. It remains the most popular of the Oz books. It's the only one illustrated by W. W. Denslow, whose depictions of Dorothy, Toto, and all the other creatures and landscapes of Oz have become so iconic as to be inseparable from Baum's story.

Denslow was not just a hired hand. Before they collaborated on *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, they had worked together on other projects, like *Father Goose: His Book*, which became the bestselling children's book of 1899. Their insistence on including full-color illustrations in *Father Goose* turned out to be crucial to its success, but it also meant they agreed to pay all printing costs.

This was the case with *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* also, which, was even more lavishly illustrated. Denslow worked side by side with Baum to create pictures of characters and landscapes that were not described in the text. He was truly a co-creator. As Denslow said, he had to “work out and invent characters, costumes, and a multitude of other details for which there is no data — and there never can be in original fairy tales.”

William Wallace Denslow was born in Philadelphia in 1856. He started drawing early in life. In the words of Michael Patrick Hearn:

"He soon developed into an extraordinarily adaptable designer and went wherever the work was. He roamed the countryside drawing lithographs for county atlases in New York and Pennsylvania. He designed theater posters and other advertising in Philadelphia and New York City. When the daily press started using pictures, he went from paper from New York to Chicago to Denver to San Francisco and back to Chicago.... He supplemented [his] income by designing dozens of book covers for Rand McNally and supplying hundreds of little pictures for Montgomery Ward's mail order catalogues. In almost every design could be found his totem – a tiny seahorse".



ADenslow, after 1900, was rather rich. He and Baum held joint copyright for most of the books they worked on together, as well as the Broadway musical *The Wizard of Oz*, it debuted in 1902. Breaking permanently with Baum when they quarreled over royalty shares for this musical, Denslow, supposedly “used the profits he made illustrating L. Frank Baum’s classic Oz book to buy Bluck’s Island in the Great Sound, building himself a turreted castle-like house, and proclaim himself King Denslow I.” “A delightful old reprobate who looked like a walrus”, as the poet Eunice Tietjens once quipped, Denslow was not exactly a modest man.

Musicals and money were not Denslow’s strong point. He invested considerable amount in the ill-fated 1905 Broadway production of *The Pearl and the Pumpkin*. It was a children’s book he and Paul West created in 1904. Denslow was broke by 1908. Moving to Buffalo, New York, he worked for the Niagara Lithograph Company; then on to New York City, where he worked for an agency, earning a salary of \$25 per week. Plus years of alcohol abuse had taken their toll. “In 1915, [Denslow] unexpectedly sold a cover to the popular humor weekly *Life*,” Hearn writes, “went on a bender with the money, caught pneumonia, and died. He was only 58 years old.”

Looking at Denslow’s illustrations today, we can see how essential and important they were to the cultural legacy of *The Wizard of Oz* on page, stage, and screen.

