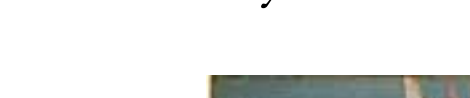


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# December 8th, 2008

## In the Land of Oziana

by



*Bloomsbury Auctions, New York City*

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Bloomsbury Auctions

The week of the Wall Street crash was not the best of times for an auction of anything, but Bloomsbury did just fine with Oziana. Even with a buy-in rate of more than 45%, the Oz material contributed far more than its expected share to the results of the bibliophile sale on September 17 and 18 featuring the Fred M. Meyer collection of L. Frank Baum and related Oziana with additional owners.

According to book department administrator Charles Millet, the sale was estimated to achieve \$840,000/1,200,000. The 240 Oz lots went up first, fetching \$187,440. The rest of the sale's 560 lots, which were bought in at about the same rate as the Oz items, brought only \$275,280.

"Considering that it was right after the crash, I think we did very well [on the Oziana]," said Michael Patrick Hearn, an Oz expert who joined Bloomsbury as a consultant in December 2007. "We made some records. I was quite astonished at the prices of certain things."

Prices for copies of Oz books with their dust jackets, being difficult to find, were particularly strong. Their scarcity is because of the nature of children. "My theory is that children look at dust jackets the way they look at gift wrapping-to be torn off immediately to reveal the treasure beneath," said Paul R. Bienvenue of El Segundo, California, who owns March Hare Books, a used and rare book service with special emphasis on Oz.

Bienvenue, for his part, submitted \$11,000 worth of absentee bids ("admittedly wishful ones"). He won a single item for \$288 (includes buyer's premium).

"I think the majority did go to Oz collectors rather than dealers-they aren't people who are buying for investment," said Hearn. "No matter what was happening on Wall Street, they would buy."

These are collectors whose passions go far beyond movie props like ruby slippers. "MGM would never have made *The Wizard of Oz* if there had not been this already established interest in Oz," said Hearn. "The book has been an enormous influence on children's literature around the world. It was so popular in the Soviet Union that when copies wore out, children would hand write them and pass them around."

Many readers may not realize just how vast the Oz literature is. Baum's first Oz book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, published in 1900, spawned a series. In all, Baum produced 14 full-length works about Oz. After his death in 1919, five authorized successors published 26 more Oz books.

That number does not include what Hearn calls "The Apocrypha of Oz"—unauthorized material issued after *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* went into the public domain in 1956. Baum's non-Oz books, many of which were published under pseudonyms, provide collectors with yet more titles to seek. As Edith Van Dyne, for example, Baum wrote a series of girls' books called *Aunt Jane's Nieces*. "A feminist friend of mine believes Baum was probably the first important American male writer to use a female pseudonym," said Hearn.

Kansas is the place that Dorothy leaves by way of a tornado, but the Baum family was not from Kansas, nor did Baum ever live there after having been born near Syracuse, New York, in 1856. Nor are all of the Oz books set in America's heartland.

"Baum spent his winters from 1904 to 1909 in California, with one break in 1906, when he was abroad," said Hearn. "The Hotel del Coronado [in San Diego County's Coronado] was his favorite place to work. Baum wrote a lot of his books there, beginning with *The Land of Oz* through *The Road to Oz*. As the series developed, the way he describes the Emerald City sounds very much like Coronado."

Is there anyone who knows more about Baum than Hearn? In 1973 at age 23, he published *The Annotated Wizard of Oz* (revised in 2000 for the 100th anniversary of the classic's publication). For the past 20 years he has been at work on the definitive biography of the author.

What is more significant to this auction, Hearn began a friendship with Fred M. Meyer in 1961. It was largely because of that friendship that Meyer's collection found its way to Bloomsbury.

Hearn was ten when he began to correspond with Meyer, a middle school social studies teacher in Escanaba, Michigan, who had been collecting Oziana since his own childhood in the 1930's.

Meyer's sister, Nancy Petrasko of Appleton, Wisconsin, described to us her brother's introduction to Oz. "Fred received a copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1933 for his seventh birthday from one of our aunts. And then of course the MGM movie came out in 1939 when he was thirteen, and I think that just solidified things for him. There was a lot of stuff out at that time to take advantage of the movie, and that really started his lifetime of collecting."

It was not easy to find Oz books in those years, said Hearn. They were banned from most libraries into the 1940's. Why? "There's never any real sense in censorship. Usually somebody complains, and everybody picks up on it. It's like a prairie fire. But in this case, I think it was because they were American fairy tales. American librarians at the time had one foot in the East River and one in the Thames. Their view was that all literature came from England, and all the great literature for children had already been written and nothing new was of any consequence. It was a very prejudicial period."

That the Oz books were a series was another perceived drawback. "The argument has been that once children get hooked on one particular author, they will shun anything else," said Hearn, adding that, ironically, Baum tried to abandon the series early on. "*The Emerald City of Oz* [1910] was going to be the last book, but Baum went bankrupt the next year and was forced to return to Oz in 1913, because the two books he wrote in the meantime, *The Sea Fairies* and *Sky Island*, did not sell as well as the Oz books."

Like Arthur Conan Doyle, among other series writers, Baum was entrapped by his own success, said Hearn. "Doyle tried to kill off Sherlock Holmes and then had to revive him."

Meyer and Hearn began writing to each other while Meyer was corresponding secretary of the International Wizard of Oz Club, a post he held for 40 years. On behalf of the club as well as himself, Meyer typed single-spaced letters to correspondents all over the world. "Many of his most intense friendships over the years were epistolary," Hearn wrote in *The Baum Bugle*, the club's newsletter, after Meyer's 2004 death.

Justin G. Schiller founded the Oz club, with Meyer's help, in 1957. Schiller was 13. Today Schiller is a specialist in rare and collectible children's books, handling the top rare juveniles from all countries and time periods. According to his Web site ([www.childlit.com](http://www.childlit.com)), he became a dealer when he was 15, and he incorporated ten years later. By his reckoning, that makes Justin G. Schiller Ltd. the oldest continuously operated book firm of its kind in the country.

The auction of Schiller's Oziana at Swann Galleries on November 2, 1978, was another benchmark. Fifteen years later, on December 9, 1993, the Oziana collection of two brothers, Douglas G. Greene and David L. Greene, was sold at Swann. "They had been collecting for essentially their entire lives," Bienvenue said of the twins, born in 1944, who were early members of the Oz club. "That was a significant sale, but the one that set the standard, which still hasn't been exceeded, was the Schiller sale."

About that long-ago event Schiller himself wrote us in an e-mail: "My Oz sale was the first of its kind and included nearly all the books by Frank Baum, W.W. Denslow [illustrator of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*], Ruth Plumly Thompson, Jack Snow [both of whom were authors of authorized Oz books published after Baum's death], etcetera, along with original artwork, including Maxfield Parrish's only signed limited edition—one of 27 portfolios with 14 signed proofs illustrating Frank Baum's *Mother Goose in Prose*, which was also the first book illustrated by Parrish...The sale was the first time Swann used color on its catalogue covers, and the two sessions totaled nearly one hundred thousand dollars—quite remarkable for thirty years ago. It is often credited that this sale started the serious inclusion of Frank Baum as a modern first-edition collectible."

Schiller also wrote to us about his friendship with Meyer: "Fred was a close friend, and even during times when we may not have agreed with one another on the direction the club was taking, it never interfered with our friendship. After I sold my collection, some club members considered me a heretic and traitor, but Fred's friendship always remained solid. He was also both a sponsor as well as a supporter of the Oz club, often using his own money to give gift memberships to young people around the world...He was unique as Oz itself and is sadly missed by those who knew him best."

Meyer's sister retained all the Oz books inscribed to Meyer. The rest she was happy to send to auction. "My brother's wish was to have these things in the hands of people who really want them," she said. "He didn't want to give them to an institution, where he thought they would languish."

Considering his lifelong devotion to Oz, it's no surprise to learn that there is still lots more Meyer Oziana. "But it's not necessarily everything," said Hearn. "And the truth is, we haven't yet gone through auctionable." Besides the things in the house (where he lived with his sister from 1994 until his death), he had two storage units.

As a collector, Meyer, by all accounts, didn't overly concern himself with condition. The books with dust jackets aside, what was particularly remarkable about the sale's offerings was its unique items, including original artworks.

One of the artworks was the sale's top lot. Sold for \$15,600 (est. \$12,000/15,000), it was a pen and ink and gouache by John R. Neill, who illustrated all of Baum's Oz books except *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Neill also illustrated Oz books of his own as well as books by other authors.

This particular illustration was from Carl H. Grabo's *Peter and the Princess* (1920). Although it wasn't Oz, it still was "very Fred," said collector and Meyer friend Jane Albright of Kansas City, Missouri. That's because it was a gift to Meyer from Frank J. O'Donnell of Chicago's Reilly & Lee, an Oz book publisher.

"Fred was known for visiting publishers' offices and managing to get access to some incredibly fine archival material," said Hearn. Sometimes those meetings grew into friendships such as the case with Meyer and O'Donnell.

Albright, whose own friendship with Meyer began in 1970, through correspondence, when she was 12, bought the second-to-top lot, another original artwork by Neill. Not from the Meyer collection, it was one of the additional consignments. For the large original pen-and-ink drawing published in Neill's *The Wonder City of Oz* (1940), Albright paid \$10,412.50 (est. \$4000/6000) via Live Auctioneers.

The Neill illustration, which will take its place alongside the approximately 10,000 other objects of Oziana in Albright's collection, was her most expensive purchase, but not the one she coveted most going into the sale. What she described as "the hill that I was prepared to die on—that I wasn't going to leave this auction without," was Meyer's copy of Maud Gage Baum's *In Other Lands Than Ours: Letters from Abroad*. Bidding on the Internet, she paid her extra premium. Still, it was well within estimate at \$2695.

Privately printed, it is a compilation of Baum's wife's correspondence written while the couple was on a grand tour of Europe and the Middle East in 1906. "His wife wrote it, but he edited it considerably, and his own photography is used to illustrate it," said Albright. "Very few copies were ever distributed, and those only to family and friends. I have never, since I have been collecting, had the opportunity to buy this book before."

Hearn said he could think of only four copies that have been offered publicly, including the one in the Schiller sale.

Schiller, who attended the sale in person, bought another of the rarities. "On behalf of two private clients, an institutional library, and myself we spent about thirty thousand dollars on nine items," he stated in an e-mail. Those purchases included six composition books of notes and sketches in pencil that became Neill's 1941 *Lucky Bucky in Oz*. Estimated at \$5000/7500, they were sold to Schiller in a single lot for \$5400. The books had come to Meyer directly from the Neill estate.

The auction failed to find buyers for a few other rare pieces. One was a detached leaf from a copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* that was inscribed at length by Baum to an unidentified little boy. "Few inscribed copies have survived, and that one was more like a letter," said Hearn. "It's the most detailed inscription I've ever seen for that book." Nonetheless, the consignor had read it aloud to a convention of Ozianians recently, rendering it less than a discovery. Its aggressive estimate, \$40,000/60,000, didn't help the cause. The item was bought in at \$32,000.

Meyer's first edition of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* without a dust jacket was another no-sale (est. \$5000/7500). The record for the title remains at \$152,500, achieved at Christie's in New York City on October 11, 2002, for a fine jacketed copy inscribed in verse by Baum to a close family friend.

A couple of letters written to Baum were bought by Baum's great-grandson, Robert A. Baum of Los Angeles. Bidding by phone, he paid \$2400 (est. \$700/1000). "Many items that were in the family collection have made their way out over time," the Baum descendant, who is active in the Oz club and at conventions, wrote us in an e-mail. "I have been lucky enough to rebuy a number of them."

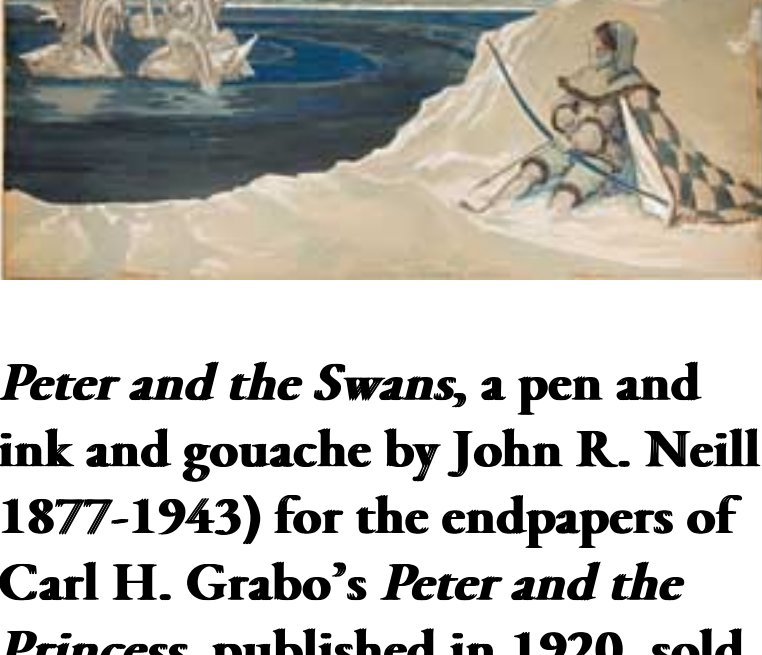
One of the letters was written by Mrs. Joseph C. Phelan of Lynn, Massachusetts. Dated February 15, 1920, it is about her deceased son. "Day and night in his sickness, he begged for the Oz Stories and nothing else would do....," she wrote. "The last morning we read the rainbow story and I felt he soon would know what was at the other end, for the first time, he seemed to be wandering. He murmured 'Princess of Oz, Princess of Oz' and died as he had lived, in fairyland." Mrs. Phelan included a photo of her son and his brother.

The other letter, dated December 10, 1921, was from Roger S. Cowles of Dedham, Massachusetts. "Those who have drunk deep of the magic of Oz have felt, no matter what their creed, a great and splendid thankfulness for the incomparable gift of imagination that filled the beloved 'Historian of Oz'....," he wrote. "As for me, I have read the books all my life, and shall continue to do so to the end of my days. The characters are more real than any other in literature, and I cherish for them a love that would seem ridiculous to one who did not understand."

For more information, contact Bloomsbury Auctions at (212) 719-1000 or visit the Web site ([www.bloomsburyauctions.com](http://www.bloomsburyauctions.com)).

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***Peter and the Swans*, a pen and ink and gouache by John R. Neill 1877-1943) for the endpapers of Carl H. Grabo's *Peter and the Princess*, published in 1920, sold for \$15,600 (est. \$12,000/15,000). According to the catalog, it is the only known work of art for *Peter and the Princess* owned outside of the Neill family. It was also a rarity for being a Neill original in color rather than in black and white, said Hearn.**



***Grampa in Oz* by Ruth Plumly Thompson, published in 1924, sold in its dust jacket to a collector for \$1920 (est. \$1000/1500).**



**Even for its collectors, Oziana can be a difficult subject to master. *The Book Collector's Guide to L. Frank Baum & Oz* by Paul R. Bienvenue, with Robert E. Schmidt, is described as "a comprehensive yet user-friendly reference guide" to the many books by Baum and his five official successors. Bienvenue lists these authors as the quintet of canonical mantle bearers: Ruth Plumly Thompson, who published 19 Oz books from 1921 to 1939; John R. Neill, who published three Oz books from 1940 to 1942; Jack Snow, who published two Oz books in 1946 and 1949, respectively, plus *Who's Who in Oz* in 1954; Rachel Cosgrove, whose single Oz book was published in 1951; and the team of Eloise Jarvis McGraw and Lauren McGraw Wagner, who published a single Oz volume in 1963. "All of these writers except Snow had one or more additional Oz books published in more recent times by 'non-official' publishers, either from old and previously unpublished manuscripts or from newly commissioned stories," said Bienvenue. Featuring 412 pages and over 430 photos, most in full color, Bienvenue's hardcover guide is priced at \$75. Ordering information will soon be posted on his Web site ([www.marchharebooks.com](http://www.marchharebooks.com)); inquiries may be sent to [<info@marchharebooks.com>](mailto:info@marchharebooks.com).**



**Fred M. Meyer (1926-2004) in 1964 at an Oz club convention. For more information about the club, see its Web site ([www.ozclub.org](http://www.ozclub.org)). Photo by Jim Brown, courtesy Peter E. Hanff.**



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