

THE WIZARD OF OZ

Directed by Victor Fleming
Produced by Mervyn LeRoy
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Released in 1939

With equal parts dumb-luck naivete and gritty determination, Dorothy Gale, an unassuming girl-woman from a bland and blighted Kansas so forlorn that it's lost all trace of color, is transported—Over the Rainbow, as it were—to a magical land. Before she quits it, she has contributed to the deaths of two witches, conspired with another, and deposed the benign dictator of its pre-eminent city. Instead of seizing the throne, herself, she acquiesces to this sudden power vacuum being filled by three good-natured freaks. They swing wildly between delusions of grandeur and crippling self-doubt. (Whether their adventures with Dorothy reveal dormant capabilities, or whether the Wizard has just given them glorified participation trophies, remains to be seen.) It's all rather strange. But generations of children have adored this puzzling movie (a trend that seems to have been arrested in recent years).

Once Dorothy—using newly realized occult powers—transports herself home, matters take a turn for the worse. The end rankles, and prevents *The Wizard of Oz* from maintaining its undeserved position as one of the best movies ever. Four elements gall.

One, nothing has changed except Dorothy's perspective. She is just as loved as she ever was. But now she is cognizant of it. Toto, the reason Dorothy ran away to begin with, the reason she couldn't take shelter underground from the tornado, is still destined to be "destroyed." If, in the final scene, Uncle Henry could swallow hard and tell Dorothy that Miss Gulch died during the tornado, then her adventures in Oz would become less abstract and her real goal—not to get home, but to save Toto—would be accomplished. In fact, her quest to take the broom of the Wicked Witch—to kill her, in effect—can be seen as the working out of a subconscious desire to be done with her tormentor Miss Gulch once and for all.

Two, it was all a dream. It's really not up for discussion. Sure, in the book Dorothy is caught up with the house in the tornado. But she returns without the house, which is, somehow, standing stolidly and inexplicably intact. She does not get hit on the head. At the film's end, if the house really flew to Oz, what sense does it make for Uncle Henry to remark that Dorothy almost died? Where has she been lying all this time if not in her room, in the farmhouse, in Kansas? This tacked-on fantasy element minimizes her struggles and lets us down. Girls identify with Dorothy. It's important for them to be able to think, If Dorothy can handle all that, I can handle my problem, too. Now they can't: Dorothy did nothing.

Three, wouldn't it be a great twist if Dorothy woke up, we maintained a lingering close up on her gentle face, then the camera slowly pulled back to reveal a bank of Technicolor-infused pink petunias outside her bedroom window? Why cannot Kansas have its curse lifted? Indeed, if There's No Place Like Home, why not show its drabness was all in her mind?

Four, where's the doctor? What if she had a skull fracture? We can't be sure Dorothy won't succumb to a brain bleed in a few minutes. Whether today's kids (who are subject to

every medical intervention at the anxious behest of helicopter parents) actually consider this possibility is unclear.

Sometimes things are better than they seem. And sometimes they're worse. It's important for us to be able to make that distinction. Children need to know when to be thankful and patient, and when to get to work with righteous indignation. *The Wizard of Oz* can't be bothered with such details. All it's concerned with are whimsical flights of fancy that allow the imagination to soar. And for all its disappointments, what it gets right it gets wonderfully right. But we yearn for the spectacular at our peril. In this brief life there's only so much time to spare on frivolities and diversions. Indeed, while our heroine says she never had to go, that everything she wants/needs is right there in her room, the audience is unconvinced, longing for the dazzling sights of Oz. It's like a man giving his testimony about coming to know Jesus Christ as his savior, but devoting 90% of his account to the errant wickedness (and excitement) of his former life as he wooed women, cultivated a taste for drugs, and reveled in his ill-gotten gains.

The real lessons imparted by this film are not very helpful, and may prove dangerous to a self-indulgent society bent on chasing its dreams Over the Rainbow...and into an early grave.