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## EARLIEST MEMORIES

I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED COLORS. ALL COLORS. TO ME THE ability to see colors is one of God's great blessings. (Yes, Virginia, there is a God. In my final chapter I explain why I call myself a philosophical theist.) Searching my brain for the earliest event I can recall, the best I can come up with is a memory involving colors while I was being carried in my father's arms on a fine autumn day in Tulsa. The ground was covered with dead maple leaves. I pointed to a leaf and somehow indicated I wanted it. My dad picked it up and handed it to me. It was gorgeously blazing with reds and browns and yellows.

My mother, too, was fond of colors. When she was a kindergarten teacher in Lexington, Kentucky, trained in the Montessori Method, she liked to teach her children the names of colors. I remember when she made for me six balls of yarn, three bright with the primary colors, three with the secondary colors. She would point to objects in a room and ask me to name their color. Late in life, when she studied art under Adah Robinson, at Tulsa University, she reveled in the colors of dozens of still lifes she painted.

Miss Robinson was well known in Tulsa as designer of the Boston Avenue Methodist Church, which we

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attended. She also designed the interior of Tulsa's First Church of Christ, Scientist. Her oil portrait of my mother is owned by Tulsa's Gilcrease Museum.

I remember one day, when I was a child in bed with some illness, my mother brought a box of watercolors to the bed and on a sheet of paper painted a picture of a sunset. I can still vividly recall its glowing colors.

Hanging in our large house at 2187 South Owasso Street, Tulsa, were several watercolors by the Kentucky artist Paul Sawyer, a painter my mother greatly admired. Many years later I sold to a gallery in Frankfort, Kentucky, reproduction rights to a Sawyer picture of a covered bridge. He is Kentucky's most famous artist. There is a room devoted to his work in Frankfort's capitol building. You can buy a huge volume about his paintings.

An indication of my mother's love of colors was her enormous delight in seeing a rainbow. She always looked for one if there was a shower accompanied by sunshine, especially from a sun low in the sky. She would rush outside to look for a bow. If there was one, she would hurry to the phone and call a dozen friends, urging them to go outside to see the bow. To paraphrase a familiar couplet by Wordsworth:

Her heart leaps up when she beholds  
A rainbow in the sky.

Now that I am an old man, my heart still leaps up when I, too, see a rainbow. It made a high leap one morning when I saw a secondary bow. The wonderful thing about a rainbow is that it is not something "out there" in the sky. It exists only on the retinas of eyes or on photographic film. Your image in a mirror is

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similar. It's not a thing behind the looking glass. By the way, what does a mirror look like when there's no one in the room? And why does a mirror reverse left and right but not up and down?

Over the living room's fireplace, in our Owasso Street home, was an oil painting by a famous Dutch artist, Bernard Pothast (1882–1966). It showed a mother and child blowing bubbles. I remember admiring the shifting colors of bubbles blown by me and my mother, and trying to catch them. One of Mother's favorite songs was "I'm forever blowing bubbles, pretty bubbles in the air. They fly so high, they nearly reach the sky, then like my dreams they fade and die. Fortune's always hiding, I've looked everywhere. I'm forever blowing bubbles. Pretty bubbles in the air." I have also not forgotten the tune, which I enjoy playing on my musical saw.

Yes, I play the saw. One of G. K. Chesterton's familiar aphorisms is that if anything is worth doing, it is worth doing badly. I play the saw badly. Like Sherlock Holmes and his violin, when I have nothing better to do, I take down my saw from a wall hook, along with a felt-tipped wooden mallet, and relax for half an hour tapping out familiar tunes. There are of course hundreds to pick from, including gospel golden oldies with crude lyrics I have been unable to forget.

Bouncing a left leg adds vibrato to the saw's pure tones. I have yet to advance, perhaps never will, to using a cello bow instead of a mallet to keep the saw vibrating. I doubt if many readers know that Marlene Dietrich was a saw virtuoso. She even gave concerts! In my crazy novel *Visitors from Oz*, I have Dorothy playing the saw on an Oprah Winfrey show, having

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learned how to play it from Kansas farmhands. The Tin Woodman provides bass by thumping his hollow chest with his tin fists.

L. Frank Baum, who created Oz, is one of my literary heroes. He was so fond of colors that he divided Oz into five regions, each with a dominant color. On the east is Munchkin territory where the color is blue. To the west is Winkie country where the dominant color is yellow. Purple tinges the wild northern region of Oz, and red dominates the southern Quadling country where Glinda lives. In the center of Oz is the green Emerald City. (If I ever write another Oz book, I'll introduce Orangeville where the dominant color is orange.) I persuaded my parents to buy all of Baum's fourteen Oz books as well as all his non-Oz fantasies, some of which—*Sky Island*, for example—I consider better written than many of his Oz books.

When I was a boy, I was so fond of green that my mother had my bedroom walls papered green. To this day when I see a small girl dressed in blue, I think of her as a munchkin. If I'm served bright green Jell-O, I can't help momentarily imagining I'm in the Emerald City.

As an adult I had the immense pleasure of joining Jack Snow, author of two Oz books and *Who's Who in Oz*, and Justin Schiller in founding the International Wizard of Oz Club. (See the chapter on "How the Oz Club Started" in my book *The Jinn from Hyperspace*.) It was Justin who at age fourteen started what he called the *Baum Bugle*. It consisted then of several mimeographed sheets stapled together. On its masthead I'm listed as Chairman of the Board of Directors! Today the Oz Club holds four annual conventions in four

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American cities and publishes a handsome scholarly quarterly still called the *Baum Bugle*.

At about the time the Oz Club got underway, and hundreds of members of all ages suddenly discovered they were not alone in their love of the Oz books, American critics and librarians had almost no interest in Baum. One woman scholar wrote a book of more than four hundred pages on the history of juvenile literature. It contained not a single mention of Baum! While the Judy Garland movie was introducing millions of children to Oz, the head of Detroit's libraries proudly announced that he considered the Oz books so unsuitable for children that he did not allow such books in any city library! This so infuriated a Detroit newspaper that it serialized *The Wizard of Oz*, heading each episode with a statement that this is the book your child can't get in any Detroit library. After a raft of articles about Baum began to appear in prestigious journals, the librarians began to change their minds. A turning point came when Columbia University's library, headed by Roland Baughman, a Baum enthusiast, sponsored an exhibit of first editions of all of Baum's books. The catalog of that exhibit is now a rare collector's item.

Only a few years before Columbia's exhibit I had published in *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, edited by Oz buff Anthony Boucher, a two-part biography of Baum. It listed for the first time a fairly complete bibliography of all of Baum's books. This included books published under various pseudonyms, such as his series of books for girls written under the name of Edith Van Dyne. Before my biography ran, I visited a used bookstore in New Jersey where I bought all the Van

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Dyne books for twenty-five cents each. After my biography appeared, book dealers who had never realized they had Baum books in stock, jumped the prices to twenty dollars.

I learned to read by looking over my mother's shoulder while she read aloud *The Wizard of Oz*. I simply followed the words as she spoke. This created a problem for me in the first grade. A teacher would hold up cards with words such as *dog* and *cat*, and I would be the first to call them out. The teacher forced me to keep quiet while she worked with other children. Of course this meant I had to sit in silent boredom.

As an adult I wrote introductions to six Dover paperbacks of Baum's best fantasies about enchanted lands other than Oz. Finally I wrote an Oz book myself, *Visitors from Oz*. It is not for children, but aimed at adults familiar with the Oz books. It tells of the adventures of Dorothy, Scarecrow, and Tin Woodman in the Gillikin region of Oz, followed by their visit to New York City to publicize a new musical about Oz. I reveal for the first time that Lewis Carroll's Wonderland is actually underground in Oz, that Mary Poppins lives in Oz, and that the exiled Greek gods have found a home on a small Mount Olympus in Oz. The *New York Times* called my book "a poor thing of a novel," but to my surprise (because Baum is little known in England) the London *Times Literary Supplement* gave the novel a long and favorable review.

Another of my literary heroes who was fond of colors is Gilbert Chesterton. One of his best short stories, "The Coloured Lands," first appeared in a posthumous book by the same name. In an introduction for a Dover reprint, I summarized the story this way:

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“The Coloured Lands” is a short tale about a strange young man who lets a boy named Tommy look through four spectacles with colored glass that turn everything into blue, red, yellow, or green. The man tells Tommy that when he was a child he had been fascinated by colored glasses, but soon tired of seeing the world in single colors. In a rose-red city, he explains, you can’t see the color of a rose because everything is red. At the suggestion of a powerful wizard, the man was told to paint the scenery any way he liked:

“So I set to work very carefully; first blocking in a great deal of blue, because I thought it would throw up a sort of square of white in the middle; and then I thought a fringe of a sort of dead gold would look well along the top of the white; and I spilt some green at the bottom of it. As for red, I had already found out the secret about red. You have to have a very little of it to make a lot of it. So I just made a row of little blobs of bright red on the white just above the green; and as I went on working at the details, I slowly discovered what I was doing; which is what very few people ever discover in this world. I found I had put back, bit by bit, the whole of that picture over there in front of us. I had made that white cottage with the thatch and that summer sky behind it and that green lawn below; and the row of the red flowers just as you see them now. That is how they come to be there. I thought you might be interested to know it.”

Chesterton’s fiction glows with color words. There are beautiful descriptions of sunrises and sunsets. He liked to put red hair on the women in his novels, even occasionally on men. Trained at a commercial

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art school—G. K. never went to college—he loved to draw with colored chalk on brown paper. You’ll find some of his color sketches in *The Coloured Lands*. One of his finest essays, “The Glory of Gray,” is about how gray backgrounds enhance the brilliance of any color. I have always regretted that G. K. never read an Oz book. I think the colors of Oz would have delighted him as much as they delighted me.

Only a few other memories of my very early years float to mind as worth telling. My parents’ first house, on the north side of Tulsa, was a tiny one. I remember nothing about it except that it had an outdoor pump at which my mother drew water. Tulsa then was a small village without running water. My only memory of the house is of a cook killing a chicken in the backyard by snapping off its head, and how the poor bird flapped headlessly about the grass for several minutes.

Our second and larger house was on North Denver and is still there. I have only dim memories of it, such as standing on a top step and touching the ceiling with a hand. I remember falling off a sofa and breaking my left wrist. I recall being in a hospital for circumcision, the reason for which puzzled me at the time. And I can remember having my tonsils removed, and enjoying ice cream for several days.

I can’t resist including an amusing incident that occurred before I was old enough to remember it. I know of it only because I later heard my father tell it. My parents and I were visiting my father’s brother, Uncle Emmett, in Louisville, Kentucky. He was one of the state’s earliest psychiatrists, with a practice so successful that he founded and ran the city’s first mental hospital. He was a tall, handsome man with red



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hair and a curious tongue that was crisscrossed with deep furrows. Like my father he had a great sense of humor. He enjoyed hearing and telling jokes about psychiatrists and their patients. For example, a patient told his psychiatrist he couldn't sleep at night because of the smell of a goat he kept in his bedroom with all windows closed.

"Why don't you open a window?" the psychiatrist asked.

"And let all my pigeons out?"

One day Uncle Emmett started to tell me a riddle about a duck in front of two ducks, a duck behind two ducks, and a duck in the middle of two ducks. How many ducks were there? Emmett forgot to withhold the answer. He began by saying, "There were three ducks"; then he caught his mistake and broke into loud guffaws.

That, however, is not the event my dad liked to tell. One night on our visit to Louisville I shared a bed with my uncle. During the night I awoke with a strong urge to urinate. Uncle Emmett, half asleep, took an empty glass off a bedside table and held it while I relieved myself. He put the glass back on the table and we both went back to sleep. In the morning we found the bed soaked. The glass was upside down!

Emmett, I should add, was far ahead of his time in his low opinion of Freud. I once asked him what he thought about the then popular books by an American psychoanalyst, Karen Horney. He had never heard of her!