

The Wonderful Eyeflash of Oz, part 2

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 01 Feb 1999

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William H. Ansley — 01 Feb 1999, 00:02

This is the second of my postings about Oz references in Gene Wolfe's story "The Eyeflash Miracles." Although I don't really think it is necessary to warn about Wolfe spoilers in postings on this list, I will warn everyone that there will be some *Oz* spoilers in this message and those that follow.

In my previous posting I said:

I don't intend on doing a detailed summary of the whole plot of "The Eyeflash Miracles" because it would take too long; I am going to concentrate on the parts with Oz references.

But I am also going to single out the places in the text where miracles seem to occur. The miracles often, but not always, seem to be linked with Oz references.

George Tibbs, usually referred to as Little Tib in the story (his father is Big Tib), is a homeless blind boy living in a (probably[3]) future version of the United States where everyone is identified by their retinal patterns. Since Little Tib's retinas were destroyed he has no official identity or existence and he has completely fallen through the cracks in the system.

At the beginning of the story he meets two homeless men, Mr. Parker, a white man who is a former school superintendent, and Nitty, a black man who was a custodian at the same school[4]. They are both hoboes, travelling the country on freight trains and by hitch hiking. They lost their jobs when the school where they worked became totally automated. Mr. Parker has occasional delusions that he is still a school superintendent and outbreaks of violent temper so Nitty has taken it upon himself to follow Mr. Parker around and take care of him. Mr. Parker has a plan to get Nitty and himself their old jobs back; it involves reprogramming the computer at the school where they used to work.

Little Tib meets them while he is walking along a set of train tracks. Nitty and Mr. Parker befriend Little Tib. Mr. Parker says he will be able to help Little Tib when he carries out his plan and is in a position of authority again. That night Little Tib stays with Nitty and Mr. Parker and has two dreams. We learn that Little Tib can see while he is dreaming. The first seems to rehash events from his earlier life in a distorted way, probably the events which resulted in his blindness.

The second dream contains the first Oz references. It starts out with Little Tib walking through a field of sunflowers which can see him and turn to look at him. When he is not looking at them, they whirl around and around. This is a distorted but recognizable reference to a scene in the twelfth chapter of *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, entitled "Mr. H. M. Woggle-Bug, T. E." Here, the Tin Woodman, the Scarecrow and Tip (of whom more later) are trying to get back to the Emerald City and are blocked by an enchantment that makes them see a field of sunflowers. These sunflowers whirl when they look at them and dazzle their vision and mystify them so they don't know which way to go. When the Tin Woodman tries to cut them down, they stop spinning and a girl's face appears at the center of each. The Woodman is too tender hearted to try to cut

the flowers down after this, but they finally realize that the flowers are an illusion and by shutting their eyes they are able to pass beyond the field.

In the next part of Little Tib's dream a city floats down like a cloud and settles on the ground in front of him. I think there may be floating cities in later Oz books[5] beyond the six I have re-read, but I am not sure. However, the description of the city is definitely that of the Emerald City as it appears in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. The Emerald City was never a floating city in any Oz book as far as I can recall.

Next Little Tib appears before the gates of the city which again are as in the movie with a window in them and a gate keeper (Little Tib calls him a gate-man) who looks through it. When Little Tib says he wants to see the king, the gate-man reaches through the window and pulls him through. One inside the gates, the gate-man hands Little Tib a pair of toy glasses and tells him he must wear them. But when Little Tib puts them on they turn into lines drawn on his face, two circles around his eyes connected by a line across his nose. Little Tib can see this because the gate-man shows him his face in a mirror.

This bit is taken from the book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and others. Whenever anyone is allowed into the Emerald City he is made to put on a pair of spectacles with green-tinted lenses which lock so they cannot be taken off. This is by order of the Wizard of Oz. The reason given is that the dazzling array of emeralds and other gems that are embedded in the walls and sidewalks of the Emerald City will blind anyone who's eyes are not protected. The real reason is that the Wizard decided that it would be more impressive if *everything* in the Emerald City looked green. By making everyone wear these tinted spectacles, he achieves this aim[6]. Why Little Tib's toy glasses become lines on his face, I have no idea.

Then Little Tib is walking through the city. The houses have sideways gardens on their walls. I am sure this is described in a book late in the series, but I can't remember which. It is definitely not in the first six.

Little Tib comes to the palace. It has walls of "trees holding hands", a "gate of bowing elephants" and a long stairway that seems to extend into the clouds. I don't remember any of this being in any Oz book. Little Tib explains the stairway by recalling that the whole city was originally in the clouds. Down the stairway is coming the king. "She was a beautiful woman, and although she did not look at all like her, Little Tib knew that she was his mother." [7] This is Ozma, the ruler of Oz. Aside from the confusion inherent in dreams, there is a reason why Little Tib may refer to her as a king which I will get to before I am done.

That was the end of Little Tib's dream and the end of this posting. This is the pattern of the Oz references in this story. They are often distorted and mixed with other things. Wolfe combines Oz references with other references whenever he can. But I think all the references I mention are too strong to be dismissed as coincidence and some of the later ones are inarguable. If you feel that it will be much too tedious to continue with me on this journey through Oz references in *The Eyeflash Miracles*, I don't blame you.

William Ansley

[3] I don't have any reason to think otherwise, but with Wolfe, you never know. [4] I mention their race even though it isn't terribly important to the story because one of the things Wolfe seems to be doing in "The Eyeflash Miracles" is commenting on race relations. [5] There were well over two dozen Oz books written altogether, the majority by people other than Baum (although authorized by him or his estate). The most prolific of these other authors was Ruth Plumly Thompson. I read at least 20 of the Oz long ago, from a set owned by my mother. [6]

Baum is very inconsistent about color in the Oz books. In later books, everything in the Emerald City really is green. [7] Shades of Silk's vision in mainframe in The Book of the Long Sun.