You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Every year, that's one movie trailer that I know is going to debut during The Super Bowl, and I'm really excited for it. This year it was a teaser trailer for the movie adaptation of Wicked.

CLIP: WICKED TRAILER

The movie is adapted from the musical Wicked, which was adapted from a novel by Gregory Maguire. The story imagined what if The Wicked Witch of the West was a misunderstood and marginalized political renegade. That story isn't true to the original source material. The Wicked Witch of the West is usually a villain. But it may be true of the real source material for The Wizard of Oz – the person who inspired a lot of what's in the Oz books.

Now most people know The Wizard of Oz from the 1939 film with Judy Garland. But it started with a children's book in 1900 by L. Frank Baum. He wrote over a dozen books that take place in Oz. He also produced silent movies and theatrical shows about Oz. People just connected to this world from day one.

But the real wizard behind the curtain, the person who may have sparked this entire franchise was Baum's mother-in-law. Her name was Matilda Joslyn Gage. Like The Wicked in the musical Wicked, she was a misunderstood and marginalized -- apolitical renegade. And learning about her made me completely rethink the world of Oz.

Dina Massachi is an American studies professor at UNC Charlotte.

DINA: Matilda Gage is one of the most interesting historical figures that most people have never heard of. She hung out with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. They wrote together, they protested together, they bailed each other out of jail. They were in pretty deep together.

Until 1893.

DINA: Matilda Gage wrote this book, Woman Church and State, and Anthony and Stanton said she can't go after the church because they would never get the right to vote. And Gage chose to anyway, and that was really one of the major pieces that led to not only them sort of breaking up, but also Gage being written out of the history books.

And so, if you Google The Matilda Effect, this is now the term we use for when someone has disappeared from history.

But Gage kept on fighting. That's how she was raised. Going back to her childhood, her family was part of the abolitionist movement, and the underground railroad. She advocated for the rights of Native Americans. Sally Roesch Wagner is one the leading experts on Matilda Joslyn Gage.

SALLY: Susan B. Anthony said about Matilda Joslyn Gage, that Gage had the best legal mind of anyone she had ever known.

She also had five children. Her youngest child, Maud, was headstrong, just like her mother. And Maud was part of the first generation of women to attend Cornell.

SALLY: Maud is going to finish at Cornell. And then she's talking about going to law school. This is a daughter that is living out Matilda's dream.

But when Maud was in college, she fell in love with L. Frank Baum. This was almost two decades before The Wonderful Wizard of Oz was published. Back then, his career prospects didn't look great. He was not a college student. He was trying to be an actor. Today that would be a challenge. People might say, do you have a fallback career? But back then Dina says:

DINA: She thought her daughter was throwing away her life to be with an actor. This would be like someone running off with a circus performer today. You know, just kind of shocking and not at all what a parent wishes for their child.

This is also a century before dual income families were a regular thing. Maud was going to drop out of college to have a family with Frank.

And we have almost a firsthand account of what happened next. Sally Roesch Wagner grew up in Aberdeen, South Dakota. The Baum family lived there for a while. Sally knew Matilda Joslyn Gage's granddaughter, Matilda Jewel Gage. This is the story which has been passed down for generations.

Maud and Frank were in the Gage family home. Matilda was working in the back parlor.

SALLY: So, Maud opens the doors, comes in, closes the doors presumably, and tells her mother that she is going to drop out of college and marry an actor, L. Frank Baum.

Matilda goes into a rage and hollers, no daughter of mine will marry an itinerant actor. And Maud says, well then Mother, we shall elope. She realizes looking at her daughter, that she has raised her daughter. Well, this is a woman who has a mind of her own. And Matilda immediately switches and starts laughing and the two of them are laughing, and Frank is probably just totally confused. The doors open. Matilda welcomes him into the family.

According to the family lore, Matilda embraced her new son-in-law quickly. But Dina wonders if it may have taken more time. And he had plenty of time to win her over because after Matilda's husband died, she went to live with Frank and Maud every winter. She saw firsthand that he was a different kind of husband and a father.

DINA: L. Frank Baum believed in sort of non-traditional gender roles. He wrote this into his books quite a lot. And so, in many ways, Maud got to quote unquote wear the pants in the family more often than certainly I think many of her contemporaries and their marriages would have, you know, she was really the one in charge of the finances. She was really the one who took on a lot of the male roles.

Maud took control of the family's finances because Frank couldn't really do it. He bankrupted himself more than once.

DINA: He was not a very practical thinker, and I think he had lots and lots of grandiose ideas with terrible execution, so he emphatically and decidedly needed someone else to be in charge of the finances. And by all counts, they truly were in love with each other, which also is rather remarkable for the time.

But there was one thing Baum was good at: telling stories. He made up all these tales to entertain his children. Matilda was listening and observing.

SALLY: She a published author. She was at that point. She said to her son-in-law, you know, Frank those stories that you tell your boys, you know, there's a market for those. You need to write them down.

We don't know if those early stories were The Wizard of Oz. It's probably more likely he was telling stories that ended up in his book Mother Goose in Prose. Matilda got to see that book published in 1897, but she didn't live much longer.

SALLY: Six months before her death, she writes to one of her grandsons, Harry, and she says, we are more alive in death than ever we were in life. We come back. She says death is just a passage.

Remember, Sally got a lot of information from Matilda Joslyn Gage's granddaughter, Matilda Jewel gage. She was 12 when her grandmother died. She went to the funeral.

SALLY: She said that she walked by the room where Matilda's body was lying in state. Maud was weeping over the coffin and said, mother, I don't know how I can live without you.

Maud went through another loss that year. It started with a sense of disappointment.

SALLY: Maud longed for a daughter. Her mother was so important to her, and that female companionship was so important to her.

Frank and Maud only had sons. Then Maud became smitten with her newborn niece.

SALLY: Maud wrote to her sister, "Dorothy was the most beautiful child I have ever seen. I could have loved her as my own."

Yes, the baby's name was Dorothy.

SALLY: She was a beautiful child, and she was not a healthy child. She lived only, I think six months. Maud was so traumatized by the death of Dorothy that I think she had to be under doctor's care. Matilda Jewel Gage, one time when we were visiting and I was taping her, she said, turn the tape recorder off. because I don't know about this. I don't, I don't know that this is true. She said, I, I sometimes wonder if Uncle Frank named Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz after my sister who died.

Dorothy Gale from The Wizard of Oz is one letter away from Dorothy Gage. The real Dorothy died as a baby. The character Dorothy is an older child with a strong personality that Sally thinks is a combination of Maud and Matilda.

SALLY: And I thought about Matilda writing that letter to her grandson, we are more alive in death than ever we were in life. Sometimes we come back. Frank dedicates The Wizard, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz to my friend and comrade, Maud Gage Baum.

What if Frank released the spirit of Matilda Joslyn Gage into the world with giving Maud her Dorothy?

But the influence of Matilda Joslyn Gage doesn't stop there. Even though she died before the book came out, posthumously, she continued to have an influence on the Oz books, and the way the story developed.

BREAK

When I would mention to people that I was working on this episode, I was surprised how many of them said to me, "Did you know The Wizard of Oz is actually about the 1896 presidential election? The whole story is an allegory for the debate about the gold standard." And then I told them, yeah I've heard that theory -- a lot of people seem to believe it -- but the evidence is kind of flimsy, they'd say oh no, no, no, it's true.

No one mentioned Matilda Joslyn Gage which is amazing to me. Now L. Frank Baum did not share all of her views on progressive issues. But when it came to gender, she seemed to have had a big influence on him.

And Dina thinks one of the reasons why is because not long after Gage went to live with the Baums during the winters, Baum's father died.

DINA: He sort of lost his North Star in some ways, if you will. And I think Matilda filled some of those roles for him. And so being able to overcome the stigma of don't marry the actor and be embraced by her, I think really was a goal. I think that she influenced him because she was brilliant and, in many ways, did the things he hoped to do. And so here is a woman who is traveling the country, giving speeches, writing, and having her writing published. I think he really admired her, and on top of that, he really loves his wife, who clearly admires her mother. And I think that there's a little bit of their love story playing out in being able to carry on Gage's memory.

So how does Baum carry on Gage's memory? Dina says, we can start with the character of Dorothy.

DINA: She is, instead of being bound into the home, you know, if you think of Little Women, it all revolves around home and marriage and how they're going to keep the homestead sort of topics. That is what girl fiction in the 19th century, by and large was. Baum did not believe in that.

Well, what about Alice in Wonderland because that had a girl protagonist and she's not bound to the home, and she goes on an adventure, and that came out way before Wizard of Oz.

DINA: Alice travels alone and she spends a lot of time being confused, a lot of time crying. It is a bit of a novel of manners, and she spends a lot of time trying to figure out the rules and how to interact with these people. And the rules keep changing. Dorothy picks up friends along the way. And so, you have this little girl who's picking up people along the way and acting not just as a traveler and an explorer, but as a leader to the group. She's not lost. She cries very, very little. One of the activities I love to tell my students to do is track how many times Judy Garland cries in the MGM film and compare it to Baum's Oz. They are radically different, and Baum's Dorothy is much younger.

Another influence that Gage had on Baum had to do with Theosophy. Theosophy is a spiritual practice that combines Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and occultism. Gage became a Theosophist not long after Frank came into the family, and he became an active member years later.

DINA: Gage used to do seances while visiting the Baums. And so we know both Maud and L. Frank Baum were there doing seances with her, which echoes a bit of the witchcraft and the interest in witchcraft. But I also think just the kind of crossover between spiritual and supernatural is where we really see that convergence in Wonderful Wizard and the subsequent books.

Let's go back to witches because that is another connection to Gage. Gage was living with the Baums during the time when she was exiled from the Women's Movement for criticizing the church in her book Woman, Church and State. In that book, she wrote extensively about the way the church had persecuted witches – who she thought of as early scientists.

SALLY: She names that as the destruction of female power and authority.

Again, here's Sally.

SALLY: The witches, she said, were wise women. They were midwives. They were women who had control of reproduction. But she also is influenced by the theosophy. And she with that, that sort of Eastern tradition of you don't have good and evil, you have both. You know, it's that balance. And I think that when Frank writes about the good witches and the bad witches, that he's talking about that duality.

DINA: And so, Baum has this balance of good and evil witches. And that idea comes right from Matilda Gage's Woman, Church And State. So she has a passage where she talks about the balance between white magic and black magic. And that passage is exactly what Baum does with his witches. There is a balance in his land between the good witches and the evil witches. And Dorothy really inadvertently throws that balance off by destroying a couple of the evil witches. And this gets into the subsequent books.

Here's where things get really interesting. The book The Wonderful Wizard of Oz ends with Scarecrow running the kingdom in place of The Wizard. Well, the Scarecrow era turns out to be very short lived. In the second book, The Marvelous Land of Oz, a character named General Jinjur leads an army of women against Scarecrow.

SALLY: The women of Oz revolt, they're sick and tired of doing all the work and not being, you know, sufficiently appreciated for it. And so they take over Oz and they go up against the royal army of Oz, which is an old guy with green whiskers who has an unloaded gun, because to have a loaded gun would be unsafe. And so they just, boom, take over Oz, and they sit around eating bon bons.

DINA: There's something interesting going on there. You know, Ginger isn't any better ruler than this man's stuffed with straw.

If the story stopped there, we could interpret it as a dig against the suffrage movement. But there’s another storyline about a character named Tip.

SALLY: The hero is a boy. Tip, he's a boy's boy.

By the way, this is a big spoiler from 1904 if you haven’t read the book yet.

SALLY: At the end of the book, Tip realizes, understands, is told that he is really a woman. That he is Ozma the rightful ruler of Oz. He has been transformed into a boy by the evil witch Mombi. And he has to choose, is he going to continue as a boy or will he become his, his authentic self? And he goes, ew, I don't want to be a girl. And his support system is the Tin Woodman, the Cowardly Lion and the Scarecrow. And they say, you know what? Girls are absolutely as good as boys. In fact, maybe they're better. We will love you just the same as a girl. And Tip becomes her authentic self Ozma.

Many people have interpreted Ozma as a transgender character. Dina isn’t sure. She says Baum also saw the books as a launching pad for theatrical shows and silent films. So, it’s possible he was setting up what was called a trouser

character, where an actress would play a boy in male clothing. But there's other evidence that Baum was interested in the fluidity of gender.

DINA: Baum himself played with gender, so he wrote under a bunch of female pen names, and honestly, he was doing it before he started writing books. He wrote this entire column called Our Landlady, where he took on the persona of a boarding house owner and would write about, you know, kind of satirically about the town he was living in through this female persona. And sometimes it would be a romance novel or something like that. But still, this is fascinating. Baum is already gender bending long before Oz. He continues gender bending throughout Oz. He gender bends with other things that he writes as a woman. I mean, I want you to imagine a late 19th century man writing as a woman. I completely understand why women write as men or write as androgynously as they can, an androgynous name will sell more books. Baum went the other direction completely.

And the battle of the sexes continues as the series develops. In the third book, which is called Ozma of Oz, Dorothy comes back.

DINA: And Ozma and Dorothy end up overthrowing the Gnome King who is this evil hoarding capitalist, there's no other way to describe him. He has hoarded all of the gems underneath the ground and doesn't want to share them with anybody and wants everything kind of for himself. And the thing that defeats him is a chicken egg. So, this evil hoarding capitalist is defeated with the ultimate symbol of female fertility. And if that isn't Baum commenting on Gage's work, I don't know what else it is. And as the series continues on by the sixth Oz novel, the Emerald City of Oz, Oz becomes this very clear, socialist feminist utopia. Everybody has their needs filled. So, Gage's first chapter in Woman Church and State, she spends a whole bunch of time documenting all of these different matriarchies that existed previous to what we see as Western culture. And what Baum ends up doing is turning Oz into one of those matriarchies. And you have kind of the Holy Trinity of Glinda Dorothy and Ozma running everything. And anytime anybody gets in trouble, the Holy Trinity of Glinda, Dorothy and Ozma come along and saved the day.

I can imagine if Disney adapted these books word for word, social media would flame them for turning Oz woke. In fact, some of the Oz books were banned from libraries going back to the 1920s.

But those ideas can't stay repressed. They're part of our collective unconscious.

BREAK

Gita Dorothy Morena is a Jungian therapist in California. She's thought a lot about the place that Oz has in our collective unconscious. And she has a very personal connection to the books.

GITA: I remember when I was about three years old, my mother, we had our, we had all the first edition of a book in a locked cabinet. So, she would unlock the cabinet. She took the book out and read me the story. And I was named Dorothy. I was called Dorothy for 34 years because that's what my mother named me. I said something to my mother like, you know, this is all about me. And she said, oh no, this is just a fantasy story. Then I was probably five or six when we read it again, again, I was thinking about this story that's all about me. And she said, uh, that my great-grandfather had written the story.

Her great grandfather was L. Frank Baum. Her grandmother was named Dorothy, but she was not Baum's daughter – remember he only had sons. One of Baum's sons married a woman named Dorothy.

GITA: Their first child was my mother, and they had named her Francis. And then they took the baby to meet the parents. And L. Frank said, oh no, her name's not Francis. Her name is Ozma. And gave her a locket with her name engraved on it. So, my mother became Ozma Francis.

L. Frank Baum died when Ozma Francis was very young. But Maud lived to be 91. She doted on her granddaughter. And Maud was a cool grandma.

GITA: My mother was pretty close to Maud, so there was a time when, when Maud took my mother traveling, she was a teenager and she had her first drink and she wore pants and, you know, things that were just sort of cutting edge out of the mainstream.
So, knowing your family legacy, did you read the, as you kept reading the later books, did you also feel a sense of identification once you, once Ozma started showing up in the later books?
GITA: Oh yeah, of course. I mean, Ozma was the princess of Oz, and she was the ruler of my family and, you know, my mother and I did some before my mother died. Toward the end of her life, we did traveling together and we investigated Baum's life and went to different places where he had lived and went to Wizard of Oz gatherings and club meetings that they had. It was really felt like she was the one who commanded the land, and I was the adventuresome one who went out and met people and had experiences and we would talk about them, and it really felt like we, we really did live out Ozma and Dorothy.

Having the name Dorothy inspired her to be independent but to be truly independent, she couldn't live in the shadow of Dorothy. She sought spiritual guidance and found a new first name: Gita.

GITA: I had to get out of the fairytale and away from that whole sort of experience of being Dorothy and Ozma and wrapped into it, I had to find my own self. I felt invisible for who I am underneath that.

And as she tried to find who she was underneath, she became fascinated by her great-great-grandmother, Matilda Joslyn Gage.

GITA: So, I found my connection to her was really important and helpful for me to recognize my place in a way I have a bigger vision than just Oz. It's connected with Matilda, it's connected with bringing the voice of the feminine forward, finding really her call to liberty, her call to freedom for, for everyone, for anyone who's oppressed. And sort of my way of doing that is to work with the oppression that I see happening in the psyche itself.

I mentioned that Gita is a Jungian psychologist. That means she uses talk therapy and other creative ways to help her patients communicate with their unconscious minds. In her private practice, she uses something called sand play. She has actual sandboxes in her office for her patients to use when they have trouble describing what they're going through.

GITA: I have shelves with all kinds of miniatures of anything you can imagine in the world that gives you a chance to express yourself without words. That's one way I work. And of course, I have Wizard of Oz figures on my shelves, and people will often create yellow brick roads, put figures on the road. As you do this over time, of course it gives you a chance to tell the story the way you're experiencing it through the imagery.
Would you able to gimme some examples, just, you know, without mentioning names or details of, of, of situations where Oz would come up, like Oz imagery and, and figures?
GITA: Well, often, you know, I, I have a tornado, for example, that's about 10 inches tall. And it gets used in all different kinds of ways when people are feeling really traumatized, they're feeling like their life has been disrupted. I've had people put things in the tornado at times when they feel really swept up in it or they have something that they're dealing with. Dorothy gets used a lot in different ways, you know, not always on a yellow brick road. I remember one where there was a spider coming into the tray and there were different little, little figures around, and Dorothy was there in that scene trying

to figure out how to deal with the spider. Dorothy in the book is the problem solver. She's the one that, you know, sees what's not right and gathers together her thinking or her feeling or her courage. I remember one scene where a woman, a woman put a Scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz in front of a treasure chest. And her struggle with how to make sense out of her life and the issues that she was dealing with her li in her life and needing that thinking function to figure out what to do, that, that was really hard for her. So it comes up in all different ways.

Yeah, I think that's so interesting to me because I feel like Oz is part of our collective unconscious like the iconography of Oz is so deeply embedded our culture, why do you think it resonated so well and decade after decade, generation after generation, children see The Wizard of Oz and bam!

GITA: I think it's really a universal story. I think it resonates with people, especially these last a hundred years, you know, the turn of the century, when around 1900 when the book was written, things were really starting to change in a big way. The world started changing and has been changing more and more rapidly. And I think in a way it's left us feeling very disoriented and very sort of lost a little bit about how do we catch up and how do we adapt all these things that are happening so fast. And in a way that's really what happened to Dorothy. She got thrown into a whole different world. It was a very different place that she had to adapt to and figure out how to get along and find a way back home to a place that made sense to her where she felt secure and safe. And I think that's a theme that we're all dealing with in the collective. The world has changed so fast, it's very, uh, confusing. And we want to find where that place is for our own security and our own grounded-ness and our own connection internally so that we can relate to each other and feel good about ourselves and, and what we're doing in the world, and I think The Wizard of Oz speaks to that. So, I think Matilda's influence came through Dorothy and then infiltrated through this fairytale, through the unconscious into the collective in such a big way.

In my conversations with Sally, Dina and Gita, they all mentioned at some point that Oz is an American fairy tale. I've heard that before. I've often wondered what it meant. As Gita was talking about change, I started thinking about something Baum and Gage had in common. They both embraced modernity.

Gage thought the modern world should be much more inclusive. We should question old doctrines. Baum was an entrepreneur. He adapted very quickly to new technology in his career and his books. Today Oz seems retro and quaint, but it was meant to reflect the real world of its time.

Pushing for change is very American. Freaking out about change and worrying it's going too fast is also very American. That's why we have Dorothy to help us navigate the road. You know the one.

That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Dina Massachi, Sally Roesch Wagner and Gita Dorothy Morena.

If you want to hear more about Baum's career as an entertainer, check out my 2014 episode, my third episode ever. It was called King Denslow of Oz. It looked at Baum's fraught relationship with his illustrator and collaborator W.W. Denslow.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. If you like the show, please give us a shout out on social media or a nice review wherever you get your podcasts. That helps people discover Imaginary Worlds.

The best way to support Imaginary Worlds is to donate on Patreon. At different levels you can get either free Imaginary Worlds stickers, a mug, a t-shirt, and a link to a Dropbox account, which has the full-length interviews of every guest in every episode. You can also get access to an ad-free version of the show through Patreon, and you can buy an ad-free subscription on Apple Podcast.

You can subscribe to the show's newsletter at imaginary worlds podcast dot org.