

Over the Rainbow and Through the Woods

It is, as VHS cases typically are, identical to pretty much every other VHS tape on the planet: white edges and rounded corners – all of which have gone faintly yellow with age. The once-smooth plastic of its cover is marred with scratches and dents, the product of decades spent on shelves and under coffee tables, kicked around by uncaring, childish little feet. Its cover is the only real distinguishing feature it has. The same scratches, after all, can be found on cases in every household in the country – at least, the ones that still have VHS. Its cover, however, is also unremarkable, for all that it is immediately recognizable: Judy Garland, in a blue dress and pigtails. An Emerald City, visible just over her shoulder. And in the foreground, a lion, a scarecrow, and a tin man (oh my!). The MGM logo, of course, hangs over everything – and everyone – else.

The Wizard of Oz, as everyone over the age of forty dearly loves to inform me, was once shown only a couple times a year. You had to make sure to catch it at the right time – and, when you did, the glorious technicolor of Oz never quite came through the monochrome fuzziness of the television set. It was, I am told, quite an event. Not an event the same way that, say, *The Ten Commandments* might have been when it rolled into theaters near you – but something like it, on a scale at once grander and more intimate, taking place in living rooms across the country. At three years old and a few decades too late, it never quite occurred to me that what I held in my chubby toddler-hands was something remarkable – and at the level of the literal, of course it wasn't. In 1999, you could find a VHS copy of *The Wizard of Oz* at every Blockbuster in the world. This was entertainment, mass-produced: thousands of Judy Garlands on thousands of Yellow-Brick Roads, all of them with the most urgent feeling that they weren't in Kansas, anymore. Sure, you still sat down in your living room to watch it – but now it could happen any old time, in any old place (so long as it had a VHS player).

Even so, our copy was special. It was *different* from the others, though you wouldn't know from looking at it – because even though it had Dorothy and Aunt Em and strange men behind curtains, the first words we heard were *not*: “She’s not coming yet, Toto!”

The copy of *The Wizard of Oz* that we had was audio described, meaning that as events played out onscreen – even credits and title cards – a voice-over described them to the audience. So, before Judy Garland's lovely voice ever hit the television speakers, another voice would come on and tell us about the cloudy sky in the background of the opening sequence. This was – and is – done for the benefit of blind viewers, like my grandfather. He and my grandmother kept of a neat row of audio-described children's movies on a shelf beside the television. They were the same titles you might find at any video store: *Fantasia*, *Babe*, even *Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, only my grandfather had them delivered specially for him – and for me, I now realize. He was not the kind of person to sit through Jim Carrey's antics for an hour and fifty minutes (even if Jim Carrey happened to be hairy and green at the time) – but he would have if I'd asked him to. This was, after all, the only human being on the planet willing to watch *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* eight times in a row with me. He couldn't promise to stay awake through it all, but he'd do it – and would do it the next day, and the day after that, too.

Of the various audio-described films he had, however, *The Wizard of Oz* is the only one I remember watching in any real detail. There was a very specific process involved: First, I'd make instant Pillsbury muffins, or else one of my Concoctions (sprinkles of various types and colored stirred into bowls of 2% milk) under the watchful and benevolent eye of my grandma. When I'd finish, we'd beckon grandpa over from the computer room, and he'd be our taste-tester and victim. On a good day, he'd get a warm muffin. On a bad day, he'd have to swallow down some very milky toothpaste, after I'd decided to

get creative with my concoction. Each time, though, we would wander out to the living room afterward, and watch a video on the TV. More often than not, it was my grandpa's copy of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Confession: the tornado scene was more terrifying to me than those flying monkeys ever were.

The funny thing about growing up with something a little different than the ordinary, is that even an awareness of that difference cannot change its unique familiarity. The audio described version of *The Wizard of Oz* is, to me, the 'real' version of *The Wizard of Oz*. It's the one I know, the one that brings back the taste of blueberry muffin batter and the smell of dust. I can – and have – watched the 'normal' version of the movie as many times as I like, and it won't ever be the same. It can't.

A product made for a particular group of Americans, my version of *The Wizard of Oz* seems to speak to the best and the worst that the 'land of opportunity' has to offer. It is, first of all, a reminder that many of our cultural artifacts are created without certain people in mind: as it exists 'normally,' the film exists on the premise that everyone who watches it can see, or can hear. Most theaters *today* lack audio descriptive options for their audience, much less those that existed in 1939. What my grandpa had – and, through him, me – was a unique product of an America that had come to recognize the different needs and abilities of its various audiences, but even this must be understood as the product of years of effort on the part of disability activists.

I don't remember what the first words of *my* version were. My grandpa's copy is long gone, tucked away somewhere that no one can recall. Most versions of the film being sold still do not come with an option for audio description. The ones that I *have* found are different from the one I knew. This is sad to me, for a number of reasons, but is nevertheless a reminder: the cultural experience of 'marginal' Americans will never be same as that of the majority – and, for that reason, it is much more difficult to preserve. I am many things – some of which *do* exist in the margins – but I am not disabled. This specific experience has given me insight into only one of innumerable issues that disabled people face throughout their lives.

All of us are American, but not all of us have access to that identity – or to the many things that America has to offer – in the same way.

The Wizard of Oz, I've heard many times, is one of the films that make up the American cultural canon. To watch it – in whatever form – is part of what it means to be an American, a small piece of a much larger (and infinitely more complicated) American cultural *experience*.

I'm not sure quite what to think of this. For the most part, such status seems wonderfully emblematic of the centrality of the stories we tell – in sentences or celluloid – to the identities we assume for ourselves. Kansas is just Kansas: a midwestern state of fields and farmhouses. It's also Dorothy Gale's 'no place like home,' a land of tornadoes and terriers and Almira Gulch. You can catch a flight there from Delta or Southwest, but everyone knows that the easiest way to get there is through the click of your red ruby slippers. Kansas, in the decades since *The Wizard of Oz* hit the silver screen, cannot exist apart from it. The two of them are, in the cultural consciousness, inextricable – one informs the meaning of the other, even if only one of them actually exists in the real world. This is American mythmaking, though not all myths are created equally, and not all of them are charming and harmless. Some, like *King Kong* or – yes – *The Wizard of Oz* give fictive (though not necessarily *false*) histories and meanings to specific things and places. Others, like the cultural signifier that *is* John Wayne, affix meanings and perspectives to entire chapters of history, often – ironically – without regard for truth or justice. All of them, though, help us to make sense of and find meaning within something far more nebulous and chaotic

than we can comprehend. Our myths tell us who we are and why we are here. They both are and aren't America – but America, as we know it, could not exist without them.

We follow the Yellow Brick Road. It changes direction at times, heading in strange directions through strange places. Sometimes, we seem to go backwards. Sometimes, we forget where we have come from. Sometimes, the yellow brick beneath our feet is stained red. Always, though, we follow it. And, though we may not know it, we are the ones who must pave it – trying, successfully or otherwise, to get it to take us where we want to be. The emerald city, maybe, or sometimes just *forward*. There are no maps to follow.

Luckily, there are a few things that we know, going forward: that we *should*, in fact, pay attention to the man behind the curtain. That anybody can have a brain – though it is, at times, a very mediocre commodity. And, finally, that – for better or for worse – there really is no place like home.