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LIVING

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Nashua man shares his passion for the Land of Oz in a series of books

By DARRELL HALEN Telegraph Correspondent

When he was a young boy, Joshua Patrick Dudley fell in love with "The Wizard of Oz" and yearned to travel to the story's magical land.

So he did – in his imagination. Now, the Nashua author is sharing the second story of his "journey" in the Land of Oz.

"Lost in Oz: Rise of the Dark Wizard," the second installment of Dudley's twist on the classic Oz stories, recently became available at online bookstores. It continues the saga of four teenagers who stumbled upon their own journey down the yellow brick road.

• "I'm not in this for monetary gain at all," said Dudley, 22. "It's just spreading my love of Oz, spreading my interpretation of it."

Dudley's obsession with the story started early. When he was about 3, he fell in love with the classic 1939 film starring Judy Garland when he watched it for the first time.

He would watch the film again "thousands of times," he said, wearing out several copies of the movie.

"It was a completely different place for me, to see different colors and Munchkins and the Yellow Brick Road and crazy things like that," recalled Dudley, who was also heavily influenced by reading L. Frank Baum's Oz books. "Stuff kids dream about. It was awesome."



Staff photo by Bob Hammerstrom

Dudley's stories are written in the first person. Joshua is joined on his journey in the Land of Oz by his twin sister, Tamara, his best friend, Tommy, and his friend, Laura.

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In Dudley's first book, "Lost in Oz," the teens' presence in the land has altered the original story and they must deal with the consequences.

In his sequel, the group searches for Glinda's Great Book of Records, which keeps track of everything that happened in Oz, to erase that they had been there. Meanwhile, the Dark Wizard wants to steal the book so he can put into motion evil plots of destruction.

Dudley grew up in Hooksett and was heavily influenced artistically by his mother, Laurel Levesque, a teacher. He graduated from Manchester Central High School in 2004, and earned a degree in musical theater from the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City.

Dudley designed his own book covers and also drew the pictures in his second novel. His love for Baum's stories isn't confined to his writing – his bedroom is filled with Oz collectibles and memorabilia and he has performed in four theater productions of "The Wizard of Oz."

Dudley, whose book tours take him to Oz festivals, book fairs, middle schools and book signings, has heard from kids as young as 5 who enjoyed reading his first novel with their parents, as well as longtime Oz lovers in their 60s who like his fresh twist on the classic story.

"The Wizard of Oz," a perennial classic with its engaging story, lovable music and technical artistry, was a ratings hit when it first aired on television in 1956.

"The basic Baum story is so well known, it's one of the few things that hasn't gone out of style," said John Fricke, a Manhattan-based writer and producer who has chronicled Judy Garland's career and the appeal of Oz. "It's a real pop culture phenomenon that shows no sign of fading."

It's a film that kids fall in love with immediately, Fricke said. They relate to Dorothy's love for her dog, Toto, and the Kansas farm girl's desire to travel to a better place.

"I think everyone wants to find that place – just like in the song 'Over the Rainbow' – where they feel completely comfortable with themselves," added Dudley, who plans to write a third installment. "Oz is for, has always been and always will be about the kids. You get sucked in when you're a kid. You love this fantasy world so much you want nothing more than to be a part of this world, and it just stays with you for life. The characters are relatable. You feel for Dorothy during her entire journey."

Nowadays, the Baum books – he wrote 13 sequels to "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" – appeal primarily to kids younger than 12, said Fricke. Dudley's books are geared to older readers, especially middle school students and teenagers, he said.

"I think he found an untapped audience with his first book," said Fricke, who met Dudley at an Oz festival in Lancaster, N.Y., where the young author was promoting his first book. "He's been an entertainer, so he's good with the public. He's very personable. He has that youthful energy that's so much like Oz."

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