

Knitting Needles and Pretenderettes: Women's Suffrage Activism in Children's Fantasy Novels by L. Frank Baum and E. Nesbit

It was not until 1920 that American women gained the right to vote. In Britain, full women's suffrage wasn't achieved until 1928. But in spite of the "separate spheres" ideology of the day, which confined women's influence to the home, the political activism of women was under active consideration in turn of the century children's literature. This paper will consider two fantasy novels, L. Frank Baum's *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904) and E. Nesbit's *The Magic City* (1910). In *The Magic City*, two children travel to a magical upside-down realm where "Girls are expected to be brave, and the boys, kind." But rather than celebrating this reversal of traditional gender roles, the novel instead seems to reinforce them, as the children must defeat a villainous, domineering Pretenderette (a monstrous suffragette). In Baum's novel, General Jinjur leads a girls' Army of Revolt "because the Emerald City has been ruled by men long enough." Jinjur's revolt seems to echo contemporary satires of the women's suffrage movement, leading the critic Edward Wagenknecht to state in 1929 that Jinjur is a "burlesque of the violent suffragette." However, the fact that Jinjur's occupation of the Emerald City is defeated by another female leader, with another army of women, in order to put a female ruler, the Princess Ozma, on the throne, contradicts this reading. This paper will discuss the internal conflicts in both texts, but will also explore both writers' use of fantasy to represent women's activism in the social and political struggle over suffrage.