

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Winter 1998

## Review of *Our Landlady* By L. Frank Baum

John E. Miller

*South Dakota State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Miller, John E., "Review of *Our Landlady* By L. Frank Baum" (1998). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2082.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2082>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Our Landlady*. By L. Frank Baum. Edited and annotated by Nancy Tystad Koupal. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. Photographs, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. xii + 285 pp. \$35.00.

It is widely known that L. Frank Baum spent several years in South Dakota before moving to Chicago, where he wrote the Oz books that

made him famous. And since the publication of Henry M. Littlefield's *American Quarterly* article in 1964 suggesting that the Populist movement of the 1890s inspired many of the characters and scenes in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, it has been widely assumed that Baum drew directly upon his South Dakota experience while writing his beloved popular classic. Yet no one until now has systematically investigated the attitudes and opinions that Baum held while in Dakota, and many have mistakenly inferred that he personally identified with the Populist cause and used his original Oz book to celebrate that movement.

Nancy Tystad Koupal, Director of Research and Publications at the South Dakota State Historical Society, sets the record straight in this interesting book. She demonstrates that Baum—far from being a Populist—was essentially a traditional Main Street Republican who identified more closely with the store owners and businessmen who lived downtown than with the farmers who lived in the surrounding countryside and often were at economic and political odds with them.

The story is somewhat more complicated, however, than these broad brush strokes might indicate, and Koupal carefully lays out the complexities and ambiguities of Baum's thinking by providing us with the full texts of Baum's columns published weekly in the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* between January, 1890 and February, 1891, and by adding her own commentary and a glossary to place these writings in context. Entitled "Our Landlady," the column described in a generally humorous vein the conversations and activities of four fictional characters – the landlady and three of her regular boarders—and a wide variety of prominent local residents of Aberdeen, South Dakota. The columns can be read on several levels. First of all, they are witty observations about the vagaries of human nature. Second, they relate the day-to-day activities of some of the town's most prominent citizens. Finally, the columns are a commentary on small town life and culture on the Great Plains.

This is the first time that all of these columns have been made available to readers, and in providing the texts Nancy Koupal has done us a real service. More importantly, she provides the context that helps us better understand them. Through meticulous, painstaking research she has recovered factual information about virtually every character referred to in the columns, events discussed, places described, and background information to situate them. Baum's most notable recurring themes include the drought and depression of the early 1890s, a growing interest in an Independent Party, women's suffrage, Prohibition, the Ghost Dance Religion, and the Battle of Wounded Knee. In the process, we come to appreciate better Baum's humor and insight but also his blind spots, such as his widely-shared prejudices against Native Americans.

JOHN E. MILLER  
Department of History  
South Dakota State University