TERRY Mc MILL AN

Terry McMillan was born in 1951 in Port Huron, Michigan, and was educated at the University of California at Berkeley and Columbia University. She taught at the University of Wyoming and the University of Arizona before the critical success of her first novel, Mama (1987), and the controversy surrounding her second novel, Disappearing Acts (1989), encouraged her to devote her full attention to writing. Her third novel, Waiting to Exhale (1992), a story of the romantic complications besetting four contemporary African American women friends, was adapted into an extremely popular film. Her most recent work includes How Stella Got Her Groove Back (1996) and The Interruption of Everything (2005). In “The Movie That Changed My Life,” reprinted from The Movie That Changed My Life (1991), McMillan analyzes her positive and negative reaction to watching The Wizard of Oz.

The Movie That Changed My Life

I grew up in a small industrial town in the thumb of Michigan: Port Huron. We had barely gotten used to the idea of color TV. I can guess how old I was when I first saw The Wizard of Oz on TV because I remember the house we lived in when I was still in elementary school. It was a huge, drafty house that had a fireplace we never once lit. We lived on two acres of land, and at the edge of the back yard was the woods, which I always thought of as a forest. We had weeping willow trees, plum and pear trees, and blackberry bushes. We could not see into our neighbors’ homes. Railroad tracks
were part of our front yard, and the house shook when a train passed—twice, sometimes three times a day. You couldn’t hear the TV at all when it zoomed by, and I was often afraid that if it ever flew off the tracks, it would land on the sun porch, where we all watched TV. I often left the room during this time, but my younger sisters and brother thought I was just scared. I think I was in the third grade around this time.

It was a raggedy house which really should’ve been condemned, but we fixed it up and kept it clean. We had our German shepherd, Prince, who slept under the rickety steps to the side porch that were on the verge of collapsing but never did. I remember performing a ritual whenever *Oz* was coming on. I either baked cookies or cinnamon rolls or popped the movie [The Wizard of Oz] taught me that it’s okay to be an idealist, that you have to imagine something better and go for it.

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popcorn while all five of us waited for Dorothy to spin from black and white on that dreary farm in Kansas to the luminous land of color of *Oz*.

My house was chaotic, especially with four sisters and brothers and a mother who worked at a factory, and if I’m remembering correctly, my father was there for the first few years of the *Oz* (until he got tuberculosis and had to live in a sanitarium for a year). I do recall the noise and the fighting of my parents (not to mention my other relatives and neighbors). Violence was plentiful, and I wanted to go wherever Dorothy was going where she would not find trouble. To put it bluntly, I wanted to escape because I needed an escape.

I didn’t know any happy people. Everyone I knew was either angry or not satisfied. The only time they seemed to laugh was when they were drunk, and even that was short-lived. Most of the grown-ups I was in contact with lived their
lives as if it had all been a mistake, an accident, and they were paying dearly for it. It seemed as if they were always at someone else's mercy—women at the mercy of men (this prevailed in my hometown) and children at the mercy of frustrated parents. All I knew was that most of the grown-ups felt trapped, as if they were stuck in this town and no road would lead out. So many of them felt a sense of accomplishment just getting up in the morning and making it through another day. I overheard many a grown-up conversation, and they were never life-affirming: "Chile, if the Lord'll just give me the strength to make it through another week..."; "I just don't know how I'ma handle this, I can't take no more..." I rarely knew what they were talking about, but even a fool could hear that it was some kind of drudgery. When I was a child, it became apparent to me that these grown-ups had no power over their lives, or, if they did, they were always at a loss as to how to exercise it. I did not want to grow up and have to depend on someone else for my happiness or be miserable or have to settle for whatever I was dished out—if I could help it. That much I knew already.

I remember being confused a lot. I could never understand why no one had any energy to do anything that would make them feel good, besides drinking. Being happy was a transient and very temporary thing which was almost always offset by some kind of bullshit. I would, of course, learn much later in my own adult life that these things are called obstacles, barriers—or again, bullshit. When I started writing, I began referring to them as "knots." But life wasn't one long knot. It seemed to me it just required stamina and common sense and the wherewithal to know when a knot was before you and you had to dig deeper than you had in order to figure out how to untie it. It could be hard, but it was simple.

The initial thing I remember striking me about Oz was how nasty Dorothy's Auntie Em talked to her and everybody on the farm. I was used to that authoritative tone of voice because my mother talked to us the same way. She never asked you to do anything; she gave you a command and never said "please," and, once you finished it, rarely said "thank you."
The tone of her voice was always hostile, and Auntie Em sounded just like my mother—bossy and domineering. They both ran the show, it seemed, and I think that because my mother was raising five children almost single-handedly, I must have had some inkling that being a woman didn’t mean you had to be helpless. Auntie Em’s husband was a wimp, and for once the tables were turned: he took orders from her! My mother and Auntie Em were proof to me that if you wanted to get things done you had to delegate authority and keep everyone apprised of the rules of the game as well as the consequences. In my house it was punishment—you were severely grounded. What little freedom we had was snatched away: As a child, I often felt helpless, powerless, because I had no control over my situation and couldn’t tell my mother when I thought (or knew) she was wrong or being totally unfair, or when her behavior was inappropriate. I hated this feeling to no end, but what was worse was not being able to do anything about it except keep my mouth shut.

So I completely identified when no one had time to listen to Dorothy. That dog’s safety was important to her, but no one seemed to think that what Dorothy was saying could possibly be as urgent as the situation at hand. The bottom line was, it was urgent to her. When I was younger, I rarely had the opportunity to finish a sentence before my mother would cut me off or complete it for me, or, worse, give me something to do. She used to piss me off, and nowadays I catch myself—stop myself—from doing the same thing to my seven-year-old. Back then, it was as if what I had to say wasn’t important or didn’t warrant her undivided attention. So when Dorothy’s Auntie Em dismisses her and tells her to find somewhere where she’ll stay out of trouble, and little Dorothy starts thinking about if there in fact is such a place—one that is trouble free—I was right there with her, because I wanted to know, too.

I also didn’t know or care that Judy Garland was supposed to have been a child star, but when she sang “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” I was impressed. Impressed more by the song than by who was singing it. I mean, she wasn’t exactly
Aretha Franklin or the Marvelettes or the Supremes, which was the only vocal music I was used to. As kids, we often laughed at white people singing on TV because their songs were always so corny and they just didn’t sound anything like the soulful music we had in our house. Sometimes we would mimic people like Doris Day and Fred Astaire and laugh like crazy because they were always so damn happy while they sang and danced. We would also watch square-dancing when we wanted a real laugh and try to look under the women’s dresses. What I hated more than anything was when in the middle of a movie the white people always had to start singing and dancing to get their point across. Later, I would hate it when black people would do the same thing—even though it was obvious to us that at least they had more rhythm and, most of the time, more range vocally.

We did skip through the house singing “We’re off to see the Wizard,” but other than that, most of the songs in this movie are a blank, probably because I blanked them out. Where I lived, when you had something to say to someone, you didn’t sing it, you told them, so the cumulative effect of the songs wore thin.

I was afraid for Dorothy when she decided to run away, but at the same time I was glad. I couldn’t much blame her—I mean, what kind of life did she have, from what I’d seen so far? She lived on an ugly farm out in the middle of nowhere with all these old people who did nothing but chores, chores, and more chores. Who did she have to play with besides that dog? And even though I lived in a house full of people, I knew how lonely Dorothy felt, or at least how isolated she must have felt. First of all, I was the oldest, and my sisters and brothers were ignorant and silly creatures who often bored me because they couldn’t hold a decent conversation. I couldn’t ask them questions, like: Why are we living in this dump? When is Mama going to get some more money? Why can’t we go on vacations like other people? Like white people? Why does our car always break down? Why are we poor? Why doesn’t Mama ever laugh? Why do we have to live in Port Huron? Isn’t there someplace better than this we can go
live? I remember thinking this kind of stuff in kindergarten, to be honest, because times were hard, but I'd saved twenty-five cents in my piggy bank for hotdog-and-chocolate-milk day at school, and on the morning I went to get it, my piggy bank was empty. My mother gave me some lame excuse as to why she had to spend it, but all I was thinking was that I would have to sit there (again) and watch the other children slurp their chocolate milk, and I could see the ketchup and mustard oozing out of the hot-dog bun that I wouldn't get to taste. I walked to school, and with the exception of walking to my father's funeral when I was sixteen, this was the longest walk of my entire life. My plaid dress was starched and my socks were white, my hair was braided and not a strand out of place; but I wanted to know why I had to feel this kind of humiliation when in fact I had saved the money for this very purpose. Why? By the time I got to school, I'd wiped my nose and dried my eyes and vowed not to let anyone know that I was even moved by this. It was no one's business why I couldn't eat my hot dog and chocolate milk, but the irony of it was that my teacher, Mrs. Johnson, must have sensed what had happened, and she bought my hot dog and chocolate milk for me that day. I can still remember feeling how unfair things can be, but how they somehow always turn out good. I guess seeing so much negativity had already started to turn me into an optimist.

I was a very busy child, because I was the oldest and had to see to it that my sisters and brother had their baths and did their homework; I combed my sisters' hair, and by fourth grade I had cooked my first Thanksgiving dinner. It was my responsibility to keep the house spotless so that when my mother came home from work it would pass her inspection, so I spent many an afternoon and Saturday morning mopping and waxing floors, cleaning ovens and refrigerators, grocery shopping, and by the time I was thirteen, I was paying bills for my mother and felt like an adult. I was also tired of it, sick of all the responsibility. So yes, I rooted for Dorothy when she and Toto were vamoosing, only I wanted to know: Where in the hell was she going? Where would I go if I were
to run away? I had no idea because there was nowhere to go. What I did know was that one day I would go somewhere—which is why I think I watched so much TV. I was always on the lookout for Paradise, and I think I found it a few years later on “Adventures in Paradise,” with Gardner McKay, and on “77 Sunset Strip.” Palm trees and blue water and islands made quite an impression on a little girl from a flat, dull little depressing town in Michigan.

Professor Marvel really pissed me off, and I didn’t believe for a minute that that crystal ball was real, even before he started asking Dorothy all those questions, but I knew this man was going to be important, and I just couldn’t figure out how. Dorothy was so gullible, I thought, and I knew this word because my mother used to always drill it in us that you should “never believe everything somebody tells you.” So after Professor Marvel convinced Dorothy that her Auntie Em might be in trouble, and Dorothy scoops up Toto and runs back home, I was totally disappointed, because now I wasn’t going to have an adventure. I was thinking I might actually learn how to escape drudgery by watching Dorothy do it successfully, but before she even gave herself the chance to discover for herself that she could make it, she was on her way back home. “Dummy” we all yelled on the sun porch. “Dodo brain!”

The storm. The tornado. Of course, now the entire set of this film looks so phony it’s ridiculous, but back then I knew the wind was a tornado because in Michigan we had the same kind of trapdoor underground shelter that Auntie Em had on the farm. I knew Dorothy was going to be locked out once Auntie Em and the workers locked the door, and I also knew she wasn’t going to be heard when she knocked on it. This was drama at its best, even though I didn’t know what drama was at the time.

In the house she goes, and I was frightened for her. I knew that house was going to blow away, so when little Dorothy gets banged in the head by a window that flew out of its casement, I remember all of us screaming. We watched everybody fly by the window, including the wicked neighbor
who turns out to be the Wicked Witch of the West, and I’m sure I probably substituted my mother for Auntie Em and fantasized that all of my siblings would fly away, too. They all got on my nerves because I could never find a quiet place in my house—no such thing as peace—and I was always being disturbed.

It wasn’t so much that I had so much I wanted to do by myself, but I already knew that silence was a rare commodity, and when I managed to snatch a few minutes of it, I could daydream, pretend to be someone else somewhere else—and this was fun. But I couldn’t do it if someone was bugging me. On days when my mother was at work, I would often send the kids outside to play and lock them out, just so I could have the house to myself for at least fifteen minutes. I loved pretending that none of them existed for a while, although after I finished with my fantasy world, it was reassuring to see them all there. I think I was grounded.

When Dorothy’s house began to spin and spin and spin, I was curious as to where it was going to land. And to be honest, I didn’t know little Dorothy was actually dreaming until she woke up and opened the door and everything was in color! It looked like Paradise to me. The foliage was almost an iridescent green, the water bluer than I’d ever seen in any of the lakes in Michigan. Of course, once I realized she was in fact dreaming, it occurred to me that this very well might be the only way to escape. To dream up another world. Create your own.

I had no clue that Dorothy was going to find trouble, though, even in her dreams. Hell, if I had dreamed up something like another world, it would’ve been a perfect one. I wouldn’t have put myself in such a precarious situation. I’d have been able to go straight to the Wizard, no strings attached. First of all, that she walked was stupid to me; I would’ve asked one of those Munchkins for a ride. And I never bought into the idea of those slippers, but once I bought the whole idea, I accepted the fact that the girl was definitely lost and just wanted to get home. Personally, all I kept thinking was, if she could get rid of that Wicked Witch
of the West, the Land of Oz wasn’t such a bad place to be stuck in. It beat the farm in Kansas.

At the time, I truly wished I could spin away from my family and home and land someplace as beautiful and surreal as Oz—if only for a little while. All I wanted was to get a chance to see another side of the world, to be able to make comparisons, and then decide if it was worth coming back home.

What was really strange to me, after the Good Witch of the North tells Dorothy to just stay on the Yellow Brick Road to get to the Emerald City and find the Wizard so she can get home, was when Dorothy meets the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Lion—all of whom were missing something I’d never even given any thought to. A brain? What did having one really mean? What would not having one mean? I had one, didn’t I, because I did well in school. But because the Scarecrow couldn’t make up his mind, thought of himself as a failure, it dawned on me that having a brain meant you had choices, you could make decisions and, as a result, make things happen. Yes, I thought, I had one, and I was going to use it. One day. And the Tin Man, who didn’t have a heart. Not having one meant you were literally dead to me, and I never once thought of it as being the house of emotions (didn’t know what emotions were), where feelings of jealousy, devotion, and sentiment lived. I’d never thought of what else a heart was good for except keeping you alive. But I did have feelings, because they were often hurt, and I was envious of the white girls at my school who wore mohair sweaters and box-pleat skirts, who went skiing and tobogganing and yachting and spent summers in Quebec. Why didn’t white girls have to straighten their hair? Why didn’t their parents beat each other up? Why were they always so goddamn happy?

And courage. Oh, that was a big one. What did having it and not having it mean? I found out that it meant having guts and being afraid but doing whatever it was you set out to do anyway. Without courage, you couldn’t do much of anything. I liked courage and assumed I would acquire it
somehow. As a matter of fact, one day my mother told me to get her a cup of coffee, and even though my heart was pounding and I was afraid, I said to her pointblank, "Could you please say please?" She looked up at me out of the corner of her eye and said, "What?" So I repeated myself, feeling more powerful because she hadn't slapped me across the room already, and then something came over her and she looked at me and said, "Please." I smiled all the way to the kitchen, and from that point forward, I managed to get away with this kind of behavior until I left home when I was seventeen. My sisters and brother—to this day—don't know how I stand up to my mother, but I know. I decided not to be afraid or intimidated by her, and I wanted her to treat me like a friend, like a human being, instead of her slave.

I do believe that Oz also taught me much about friendship. I mean, the Tin Man, the Lion, and the Scarecrow hung in there for Dorothy, stuck their "necks" out and made sure she was protected, even risked their own "lives" for her. They told each other the truth. They trusted each other. All four of them had each other's best interests in mind. I believe it may have been a while before I actually felt this kind of sincerity in a friend, but really good friends aren't easy to come by, and when you find one, you hold on to them.

Okay. So Dorothy goes through hell before she gets back to Kansas. But the bottom line was, she made it. And what I remember feeling when she clicked those heels was that you have to have faith and be a believer, for real, or nothing will ever materialize. Simple as that. And not only in life but even in your dreams there's always going to be adversity, obstacles, knots, or some kind of bullshit you're going to have to deal with in order to get on with your life. Dorothy had a good heart and it was in the right place, which is why I suppose she won out over the evil witch. I've learned that one, too. That good always overcomes evil; maybe not immediately, but in the long run, it does. So I think I vowed when I was little to try to be a good person. An honest person. To care about others and not just myself. Not to be a selfish person, because my heart would be of no service if I used it only for myself.
And I had to have the courage to see other people and myself as not being perfect (yes, I had a heart and a brain, but some other things would turn up missing, later), and I would have to learn to untie every knot that I encountered—some self-imposed, some not—in my life, and to believe that if I did the right things, I would never stray too far from my Yellow Brick Road.

I'm almost certain that I saw Oz annually for at least five or six years, but I don't remember how old I was when I stopped watching it. I do know that by the time my parents were divorced (I was thirteen), I couldn't sit through it again. I was a mature teen-ager and had finally reached the point where Dorothy got on my nerves. Singing, dancing, and skipping damn near everywhere was so corny and utterly sentimental that even the Yellow Brick Road became sickening. I already knew what she was in for, and sometimes I rewrote the story in my head. I kept asking myself, what if she had just run away and kept going, maybe she would've ended up in Los Angeles with a promising singing career. What if it had turned out that she hadn't been dreaming, and the Wizard had given her an offer she couldn't refuse—say, for instance, he had asked her to stay on in the Emerald City, that she could visit the farm whenever she wanted to, but, get a clue, Dorothy, the Emerald City is what's happening; she could make new city friends and get a hobby and a boyfriend and free rent and never have to do chores . . .

I had to watch The Wizard of Oz again in order to write this, and my six-and-a-half-year-old son, Solomon, joined me. At first he kept asking me if something was wrong with the TV because it wasn't in color, but as he watched, he became mesmerized by the story. He usually squirms or slides to the floor and under a table or just leaves the room if something on TV bores him, which it usually does, except if he's watching Nickelodeon, a high-quality cable kiddie channel. His favorite shows, which he watches with real consistency, and, I think, actually goes through withdrawal if he can't get them for whatever reason, are "Inspector Gadget," "Looney Tunes," and "Mr. Ed." "Make the Grade," which is sort of a junior-high
version of “Jeopardy,” gives him some kind of thrill, even though he rarely knows any of the answers. And “Garfield” is a must on Saturday morning. There is hardly anything on TV that he watches that has any real, or at least plausible, drama to it, but you can’t miss what you’ve never had.

The Wicked Witch intimidated the boy no end, and he was afraid of her. The Wizard was also a problem. So I explained—no, I just told him pointblank—“Don’t worry, she’ll get it in the end, Solomon, because she’s bad. And the Wizard’s a fake, and he’s trying to sound like a tough guy, but he’s a wus.” That offered him some consolation, and even when the Witch melted he kind of looked at me with those Home Alone eyes and asked “But where did she go, Mommy?” “She’s history,” I said. “Melted. Gone. Into the ground. Remember, this is pretend. It’s not real. Real people don’t melt. This is only TV,” I said. And then he got that look in his eyes as if he’d remembered something.

Of course he had a nightmare that night and of course there was a witch in it, because I had actually left the sofa a few times during this last viewing to smoke a few cigarettes (the memory bank is a powerful place—I still remembered many details), put the dishes in the dishwasher, make a few phone calls, water the plants. Solomon sang “We’re off to see the Wizard” for the next few days because he said that was his favorite part, next to the Munchkins (who also showed up in his nightmare).

So, to tell the truth, I really didn’t watch the whole movie again. I just couldn’t. Probably because about thirty or so years ago little Dorothy had made a lasting impression on me, and this viewing felt like overkill. You only have to tell me, show me, once in order for me to get it. But even still, the movie itself taught me a few things that I still find challenging. That it’s okay to be an idealist, that you have to imagine something better and go for it. That you have to believe in something, and it’s best to start with yourself and take it from there. At least give it a try. As corny as it may sound, sometimes I am afraid of what’s around the corner, or what’s not around the corner. But I look anyway. I believe that writing is
one of my “corners”—an intersection, really; and when I’m confused or reluctant to look back, deeper, or ahead, I create my own Emerald Cities and force myself to take longer looks, because it is one sure way that I’m able to see.

Of course, I’ve fallen, tumbled, and been thrown over all kinds of bumps on my road, but it still looks yellow, although every once in a while there’s still a loose brick. For the most part, though, it seems paved. Perhaps because that’s the way I want to see it.

For Study and Discussion

QUESTIONS ABOUT PURPOSE

1. In the process of showing why the movie was significant for her, what does McMillan reveal about herself?
2. What advantages does McMillan suggest that fantasy has for children? What effects might fantasies other than The Wizard of Oz have, perhaps books like C. S. Lewis’s Narnia series or a movie like Star Trek?

QUESTIONS ABOUT AUDIENCE

1. How justified do you think McMillan is in assuming that her readers are very familiar with the movie The Wizard of Oz? What would be the effect if they’re not familiar with the movie?
2. What personality traits and outlook on life do you think readers are likely to have who like this essay and find it persuasive? To what extent do you think you and your friends share those traits?

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRATEGIES

1. How does McMillan tie the attraction that the Oz movie has for her to conditions in her own life? How well does that strategy work?
2. How does McMillan fill in details of the movie for readers who may have forgotten or didn’t know the story of The Wizard of Oz? How good a job does she do?

Homework:
Practice by analyzing the effect a contemporary movie or television show has had on you and your circle of friends.