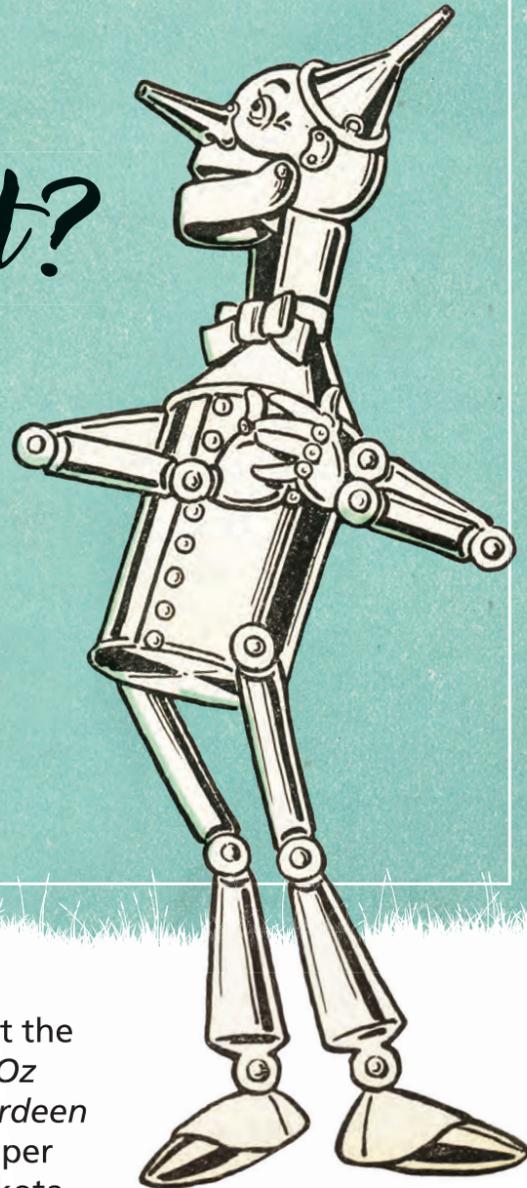




# Have a Heart?

## How a Little Empathy Can Lead to Genocide

by Daniel Witt



In 1890, L. Frank Baum was not yet the famous author of *The Wizard of Oz* but merely the editor of *The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*, a small newspaper in the brand-new state of South Dakota. Emotions were running high, thanks to fresh outbreaks of conflict with the Native American population. So that December, Baum wrote an editorial suggesting a simple solution: kill all Native Americans. “Why not annihilation?” he wrote:

Their glory has fled, their spirit broken, their manhood effaced; better that they die than live the miserable wretches that they are. History would forget these latter despicable beings, and speak, in later ages of the glory of these grand Kings of the forest and plain that [James Fenimore] Cooper loved to heroise. We cannot honestly regret their extermination, but we at least do justice to the manly characteristics possessed, according to their lights and education, by the early Redskins of America.<sup>1</sup>

In an editorial a few weeks later, he doubled down, arguing that “[h]aving wronged them for centuries we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth.”<sup>2</sup>

These sentiments have baffled modern readers, because they go against Baum’s image as a kindly progressive (he advocated for women’s suffrage, for example) and beloved children’s author—how could the creator of Oz call for *genocide*? To make the matter even more perplexing, Baum seems to show sympathy for the Native Americans in the very same pieces that call for their annihilation!

I think the explanation for this apparent incongruity of character is fairly simple. But it’s hard to face, because it tells us something about human nature that we’d rather not admit: Baum harbored genocidal urges, not in spite of his capacity for empathy, but *because* of it.

Empathy is held in high esteem in our culture, sometimes to the point of fetishization. But recently, some psychologists have been warning of downsides of empathy. Ironically, empathy can reduce a person’s capacity or willingness to help the suffering, because empathetic emotions can be painful and difficult to bear.<sup>3</sup> This has led to a move to distinguish between empathy and *compassion*. They are not the same thing, and empathy is useless if it does not translate into compassion.

Canadian professor Trisha Dowling summarizes the distinction well:

Empathy is a mental construct that allows us to resonate with others’ positive and negative feelings. We can feel happy at the joy of others and we can feel distress when we observe someone in physical or mental pain.... In contrast to empathy, compassion is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern, and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other’s wellbeing. Compassion goes beyond feeling *with* the other to feeling *for* the other.<sup>4</sup>

I would suggest that Baum’s genocidal editorializing is merely an extreme example of empathy that

failed to translate into compassion. He clearly feels empathy for the Native Americans. That empathy feeds his sense of guilt since he blames the situation on the white settlers. So perversely (yet quite naturally) he wants to end the pain and guilt caused by that empathy by removing the cause of it—by simply *getting rid of the Native Americans*.



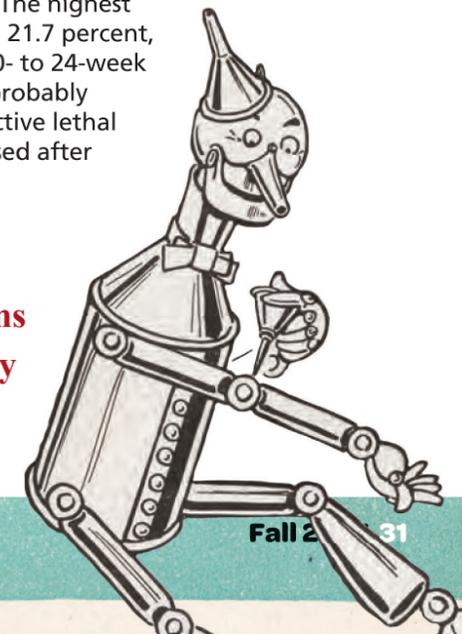
## The Baums of the 21st Century

Is such a reaction shocking? Well, it’s more common than we might realize. The world is full of people like L. Frank Baum. They’re just harder to recognize because we are not looking from the safe vantage point of the future.

Take, as a case in point, a recent scientific study conducted in Quebec that looked at the “risk of live birth” in second-trimester elective abortions.<sup>5</sup> Most people on the pro-choice side of the abortion argument prefer to ignore such cases, yet this study was not conducted for a pro-life group or according to a pro-life agenda. I’m grateful for the study because it sheds light on the reality of born-alive aborted infants. But, as we’ll see, it also reveals something disconcerting about the way empathy guides proponents of abortion.

The researchers found that 11.2 percent of 13,777 abortions committed in Quebec between 15- and 29-weeks gestation had resulted in a baby being born alive. The highest rate of live births, 21.7 percent, occurred in the 20- to 24-week window. (This is probably due to more effective lethal methods being used after 24 weeks.)

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It may be surprising to some people that there are still abortion survivors in the 21st century. But, somehow or other, technology or praxis has not yet advanced so far as to remove the possibility of a child surviving an abortion. Even stranger, the percentage of live births seems to have *gone up* over time: from 4.1 percent in 1989–2000, to 10.2 percent from 2000–2010, to a staggering 20.8 percent in 2011–2021. (The study doesn't say what the survival rate was for 20–24 weeks in the 2011–2021 period, but it must be higher than either the overall 2011–2021 or the overall 20- to 24-week rates, yielding a shockingly high percentage.)

This data was easy enough to find, because hospitals in Canada keep records of patients, and according to Canadian law, babies who are born alive are automatically patients. Therefore, the hospitals must provide a discharge notice for the baby as well as the mother. If the baby dies, the hospital must provide a death certificate

In other words, when an abortion “fails,” the “contents of the uterus” is miraculously transformed into a hospital patient! This may be the only situation where someone automatically becomes a doctor's patient the moment the doctor fails to kill her. Just think about it from the doctor's perspective: a few seconds ago, that patient was “the contents of the uterus,” a “clump of cells” ... and now you're writing a death certificate for her.

Of course, the fact that the doctor-patient relationship exists on paper doesn't mean it exists in real life. The study says that only 5.5 percent of the abortion survivors received palliative care and only 24.5 percent were admitted to the intensive care unit. Usually, only babies of 19 or more weeks gestational age received intensive or palliative care from the hospital (presumably because they look more humanlike after that age). The authors note:

Gestational age influenced the likelihood of receiving palliative care, with more care provided to infants born later in gestation. It may be that the benefits of palliative care are underrecognized among earlier abortions.

In other words, it may be that doctors don't realize that fetuses at earlier stages of development *can still feel pain* and thus don't bother to give them palliative care.

The authors of this study obviously feel some empathy towards fetuses younger than 19 weeks of development; otherwise, they wouldn't recommend palliative care for abortion survivors of that age. But what sort of action does that empathy lead to? Palliative care for a dying infant would be a good

thing, but that's not the main point of the article. The deeper solution proposed in the paper should make your skin crawl. Apparently, the best way to deal with the unfortunate realities of wounded and suffering 19-week-old babies is to *make sure that none of them survive the abortion in the first place*. The authors advise: “Feticidal injection is effective at preventing unintended live birth and should be considered for second-trimester abortions before 24 weeks.”

That's the ultimate agenda of the paper: keep abortion emotionally safe (for those of us who have already survived infancy) by ensuring that no survivors linger on to inflict emotional pain on empathetic observers.

### Push It Out of Sight

Ensuring a clean kill isn't the only way people try to erase the horror of abortion. That kind of “solution” fits the general pattern of dealing with the...*unpleasantness* of the procedure. A similar method is to restrict abortion to the least-empathy-inducing age group.

Unlike the U.S. federal government, many European countries restrict abortion after a certain number of weeks, most commonly 12. (This information is startling to most Americans. After the first Trump administration released a statement noting that only seven countries worldwide permitted elective abortion after 20 weeks, the fact-checkers at the *Washington Post* actually admitted that they were surprised to find that this was true.<sup>6</sup>) Yet, counter-intuitively, abortion is also not (generally speaking) as controversial in Europe as it is in America. That's probably *because* of the restrictions, not in spite of them.<sup>7</sup> It is impossible to look at an aborted third-trimester fetus and not see a human baby. It is somewhat easier to look at an aborted first-trimester baby and dismiss it as non-human, simply because its body is not quite as “human-shaped” yet. By restricting the crimes against humanity in Europe to those humans most easily dehumanized, the shame is assuaged, and the crime can go on. Sweden restricts abortion after 18 weeks, yet only four percent of its population think abortion should be illegal in most cases.<sup>8</sup>

That means that if the pro-life movement in the U.S. wins something like a 12-week ban, this will save lives, but it will also almost certainly make abortion harder to abolish entirely. The more half-victories the pro-life movement wins, the harder the ultimate victory becomes, because the most undeniably evil cases are removed from the picture. The final result

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in America may simply be a sanitized evil, committed without any shame, and therefore unassailable—which is what we already see in European societies.

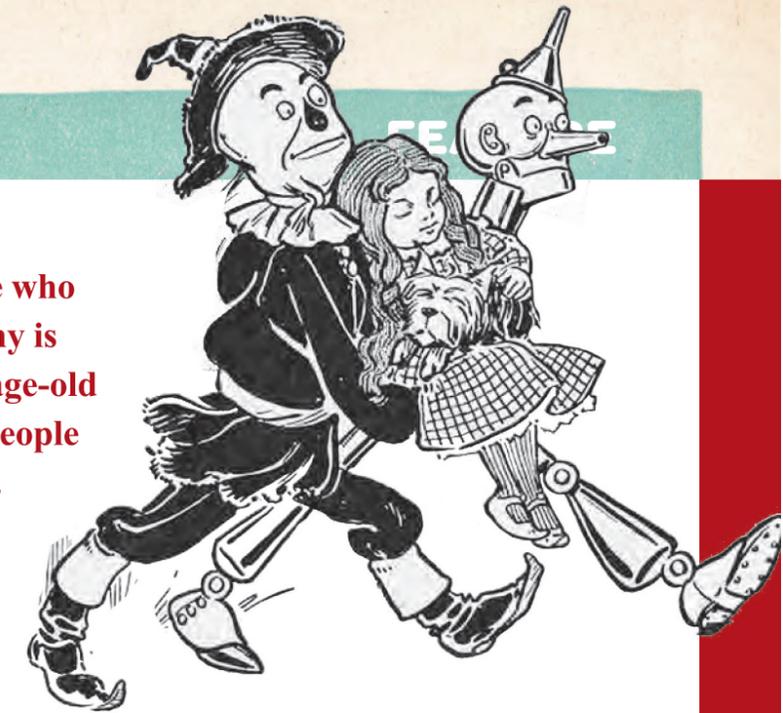
### The Solution: Compassion

Of course, the tactic of ignoring the marginal cases and attempting absolute bans on abortion isn't likely to work either. The reason it won't work is that America is (more or less) ruled by popular governance, and only about 36 percent of Americans think abortion should be illegal in most cases.<sup>9</sup>

The only lasting solution, as far-fetched as it might seem, is to start from the beginning—from the worldview. Until America is populated by a people who know that the true purpose of empathy is compassion, there will be no end to the age-old phenomenon of people treating other people like a problem to be cleared away.

This will not be easy. Psychologists have noted another downside of empathy: it has a strong in-group bias. Baum felt sorry for the Native Americans, certainly, but he seemed to feel more for his own people—otherwise, it's inconceivable that genocide could have seemed like the best solution to him. Likewise, the pro-choice position survives on a very selective empathy: lots of empathy for women who suffer from having to carry a child to term (in itself, a good thing), but very little empathy for the children being carried. This double standard is easy to achieve, psychologically, because of the in-group bias: none of us are fetuses, none of us remember being fetuses, none of us have to worry that we might one day become fetuses, and none of us have friends who are currently fetuses. The unborn are the ultimate out-group.

There might be only one way to break people out of this in-group bias. Just as Native Americans in the 19th and 20th centuries were the ones best equipped to arouse compassion for Native



Americans, today it's abortion survivors who are best equipped to arouse compassion for abortion victims: heroes like Melissa Ohden, who founded the Abortion Survivors Network; like Pastor Marvin Hightower, who survived two abortions and made it to adulthood;<sup>10</sup> and like Carrie, who has publicly forgiven her mother for leaving her deformed and partially paralyzed from a failed abortion.<sup>11</sup> And there are many more.

But they can't do it alone any more than victims of any other historical atrocities have been able to speak for themselves alone. They need the rest of us to magnify their voices.

We may not have the opportunity forever. Technology moves forward. If the sanitizers of evil have their way, this may be the last generation where surviving an abortion is possible. Then the horror of abortion will be safely out of sight, forever. We can't let that happen. The survivors must be given a voice while there are still survivors to speak. ☉

#### Notes

1. *The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* (Dec. 20, 1890), as quoted in Nancy Tystad Koupal, “On The Road to Oz: L. Frank Baum as Western Editor,” *South Dakota State Historical Society* (2000) and A. Waller Hastings, “L. Frank Baum's Editorials on the Sioux Nation.”
2. *The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* (Jan. 3, 1891), as quoted in Koupal and Hastings.
3. “The Surprising Dark Side of Empathy,” BBC (Mar. 25, 2022).
4. Trisha Dowling, “Compassion Does Not Fatigue!” *The Canadian Veterinary Journal* (Jul. 2018).
5. Nathalie Auger et al., “Second-Trimester Abortion and Risk of Live Birth,” *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* (Jun. 2024).
6. Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “Is the United States One of Seven Countries that ‘Allow Elective Abortions After 20 Weeks of Pregnancy?’” *The Washington Post* (Oct. 9, 2017).
7. “The War That Never Ends,” *The Economist* (Jan. 18, 2003).
8. “Support for legal abortion is widespread in many places, especially in Europe,” Pew Research Center (May 15, 2024).
9. “Broad Public Support for Legal Abortion Persists 2 Years After Dobbs,” Pew Research Center (May 13, 2024).
10. “I Survived Two Abortions,” *Focus on the Family* (Jan. 7, 2021).
11. “An Abortion Survivor's Story (Living with Facial Paralysis and Other Conditions),” (Feb. 14, 2019).