

By Peter Galvin

“I didn’t start out to write this book as a gay man trying to tell the gay story of Oz,” says Gregory Maguire when asked about the genesis of his new novel, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. Although the book has what the author calls a “gay presence,” Maguire was unaware of the queer connotations that have become associated with the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* over the years, thanks to the special place in homo hearts held by the character of Dorothy and the actress who portrayed her—gay icon emeritus Judy Garland.

“It was only last year that I discovered that *The Wizard of Oz* is the special province of gay men,” says Maguire, “what with the association of Judy with Stonewall and the fact that the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion are all such unregenerately single gentlemen.”

Although devotees of the classic film may be initially disgruntled to find that their favorite heroine and her swishy sidekicks play only a minor part in *Wicked*, it won’t take long for “friends of Dorothy” to be won over by Maguire’s fascinating—and ultimately sympathetic—portrait of the engaging Wicked Witch of the West.

The 41-year-old Maguire, a noted

author of novels for children, chose the witch as the subject of his first adult novel partly because of his “immense attachment” to the movie *The Wizard of Oz* as a young boy. “When I was a child, I used to get the neighborhood kids together, and we would do a reenactment of the movie the day after it was on television,” Maguire reveals. “I always had to play the Scarecrow, because obviously I couldn’t be Dorothy.”

into my head was the Wicked Witch of the West,” he says. “I decided to trace her life story and find out how she got to be so wicked—if she truly is.”

In *Wicked* the witch—or Elphaba, as she’s called for most of the book—is the product of narcissistic parents too involved with their own lives to give her the love she needs. As she grows up, she finds it difficult to make fulfilling emotional connections with the people in her

life. Ultimately, she fuels most of her passion into her politics. While at college—where the vacuous parvenue Glinda is her roommate—she becomes committed to fighting the rising tide of authoritarianism in Oz. She goes underground to participate in a plot to kill the key adviser to the Wizard, who in Maguire’s account is a fascist dictator gradually gobbling up all of the world’s valuable territories.

In the process the witch tries rather unsuccessfully to sort out her colorful but troubled emotional life. Her one attempt at romance ends tragically. Her relationship with her sister, the Wicked Witch of the East, is fraught with jealousy and bad feelings. And her skills as a parent leave much to be desired.

Far from evil, Elphaba is an extremely likable character. She’s a truth teller in a world of sycophants, phonies, and charlatans, and she spends her entire life battling the forces of evil—personal, theolog-

## A wizard with WORDS

Children’s scholar Gregory Maguire finds a whole new Oz and gay connection in his first novel

The author says that the other major reason for writing *Wicked* had to do, strangely enough, with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. “Observing the way that Hussein was demonized in the American press during the Gulf War, I began to be interested in the idea of evil,” he says, “and I wanted to explore it in fictional form.” Adolf Hitler came immediately to mind, but Maguire says he didn’t want to have to do all the research required to write a fictional account of the German dictator. “The next person to pop

ical, and political—that surround her. “I suppose in one way, I’ve failed in my aesthetic mission,” jokes Maguire, “because she ended up not being wicked at all. I began to like her before I got to the third page of writing this novel.”

Judith Regan, the editor of *Wicked* (which is being published by her HarperCollins imprint, ReganBooks), says she took an instant liking to Elphaba when she first read the novel. Regan, who has taken a lot of flak from politically correct press for publishing books by Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh, says she and Elphaba are very much alike.

“She’s a character I personally relate to,” Regan says. “She lives in a world where telling the truth and speaking your mind are seen as wicked. Like Elphaba, I have been misunderstood and misinterpreted. I’ve gotten a lot of criticism for the books I’ve published. But I think of myself as a very honest, fair-minded, decent person.”

Ultimately, Maguire agrees and believes that any evil acts that Elphaba commits occur as a result of her inability to love herself. “To me, evil is most closely related to self-hatred and the urge to kill oneself,” says the author. “Since there’s such a biological imperative *not* to kill yourself, I think evil is that suicidal urge turned outward. If you can’t kill yourself, you kill the world in small and large ways.”

Although many gay people will be able to relate to the witch’s difficult emotional journey through the novel, there’s little that could be described as overtly gay about the characters or situations in *Wicked*. “Still, being gay has affected the way I write in a general way,” says Maguire. “When you grow up gay, you’re marching to the beat of a different drum without even hearing the sound of the drum. Being gay and not yet knowing it leads you to ask questions about what you’re seeing. My homosexuality has created the novelist in me by gener-

ating a habit of observation and examination.”

Brought up in a strict Catholic family in Albany, N.Y., Maguire says he began to acknowledge his homosexuality after he graduated from high school. “I was sleeping with my male friends in high school without ever thinking that I might be gay,” he says. “It was only after a couple of years that I thought to myself, *Gee, I haven’t ever slept with a woman. I wonder if that means I’m gay.*”

Maguire adds that despite his heavily religious upbringing, being gay never posed a moral problem for him. “I entered into sex because I was entering into love,” he says. “I was really in love with the guys that I was hanging around with, so the sexual aspect seemed like a moral component to my feelings. So I wasn’t really conflicted.”

The author never actually came out to his father and his stepmother (his mother died in childbirth when Maguire was born). “That wasn’t how our family worked,” he says. “My lover, Rafique [Keshavjee], was always around, and everyone eventually got it.” The author and his lover, an anthropologist, have been together now for 15 years.

In 1994 Maguire made his first foray into the world of gay fiction with the story “The Honorary Shepherd,” for a collection called *Am I Blue: Coming Out From the Silence*, an anthology of original short stories for gay and lesbian teenagers. When he’s not writing, Maguire works with children as a freelance teacher, taking part in a speaking tour every spring. He’s also codirector of an educational charity called Children’s Literature New England.

Next up for Maguire, perhaps, is writing the screenplay for *Wicked*. Although the book has not been sold to the movies yet, Maguire has no doubt exactly whom he would like to cast in the role of the Wicked Witch of the West. “I’ve always imagined k.d. lang as Elphaba,” he says. “She’d be painted green with a little bit of a prosthesis for a nose.” For a bar scene in *Wicked* in which Elphaba gets up to sing a song, Maguire would have lang sing “Over the Rainbow.” “Can you imagine anything more sublime?”