

The Point

Beyond the rainbow

Maguire adds twists to the yellow brick road

by Charlie Herman

Surrender Dorothy! Somewhere over the rainbow. I'll get you and your little dog too! For Americans from all backgrounds, *The Wizard of Oz* with its yearly showing on TV has become a part of our national culture. But for "Friends of Dorothy," the 1939 film charting her journey in the land of Oz with her three sensitive companions has become one of the most highly regarded and adored Gay icons. The actors, the songs, the costumes, the sets, the lines, the sheer camp of it all appeal to a particular sensibility in the Gay community.

But what of the Wicked Witch of the West? Sure, she has some of the best quips in the film, but do we really know and understand her? Enter Gay author Gregory Maguire and his recently released in paperback book *Wicked: The Lives and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (ReganBooks, \$14), which turns the tale we all know on its head in attempting to explain why that Witch wanted those ruby slippers so desperately.

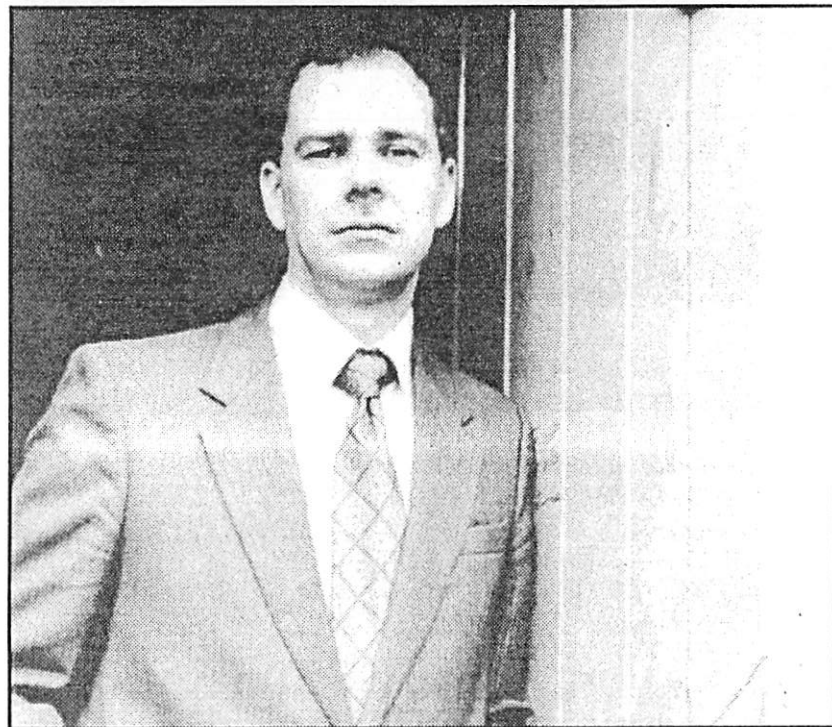
"My original intention was really to write a story about somebody who was completely evil by the time we got to the end of the book, and it was my way of trying to understand how somebody could get to be evil, how they could change," he said.

Maguire, previously a writer of children's books, started *Wicked* in London during the Persian Gulf War. He became interested in the vilification of Saddam Hussein and wanted to explore how someone could be reduced to one word: "evil." He equates this process with homophobia — "Anybody who has ever been called faggot ... knows what it is like to crawl under the burden of one word and to have you find your humanity and your largeness of soul given the confines of

one derisive word." Maguire turned to one of his childhood favorites, *Oz*, to try and understand in a specific case how someone, the witch, became, "wicked."

What he intended to write, however, quickly changed once he started. "I did do a revisionist history," explains Maguire. "I intended not to do that, I intended just to do a prelude to the story exactly as we know. Instead I retold the story a little bit in important ways." His tale begins with the early childhood of Elphaba (the witch's name), who is ostracized from others because of her green skin. Growing up with little love from her parents, she later attends college and ends up rooming with Glinda (a.k.a. the "Good Witch of the North"). Eventually, she quits her studies to become an underground agent in the Emerald City, working to bring about the downfall of the tyrannical Wizard of Oz. When her revolutionary activities end in tragedy, she retreats to the West, and there, her legend as the "Wicked Witch" begins to solidify. And she wants those ruby slippers because her sister, the Wicked Witch of the East, promised them to her. In Maguire's story, however, those shoes represent more. They are the love of Elphaba's father for her sister and not for her. She wants the shoes because she wants and needs his love.

It is this lack of love from others, for others, and for herself that Maguire pinpoints as the source of her evil ways. Without love, she hates herself. Maguire believes that "if you really hate yourself and the biological im-



British writer Gregory Maguire examines the Wicked Witch of the West's psyche in his new novel, *Wicked*.

perative is too strong not to kill yourself, then ... you kill the world instead ... I think that element is at the core of most examples of evil behavior that we could name."

Maguire portrays her actions toward others, including Dorothy, as misguided, but he still makes her responsible for them. "I don't really want to rehabilitate her. By the end of my book, I want you to think, 'Oh God, you're doing something wrong here.'"

For Maguire, writing *Wicked* provided an opportunity to explore the concept of evil while having fun with what has become, as he describes it, "an American myth" — the story of Dorothy in Oz. "I wanted to know in the end what I thought about [evil] ... I need to write stories in order to figure out what I believe." ▼