

## Gregory Maguire

Like the disadvantaged tooth fairy hatched parentless and alone inside a discarded tin can in his newest children's book, *What-the-Dickens*, Gregory Maguire had a rough start in life. His mother died in childbirth when he was born. At the same time, his father, who worked for the *Times Union*, was seriously ill and unable to care for the three children he already had, let alone a new baby. Various relatives looked after the older children while he convalesced, but Gregory was placed in St. Catherine's Infant Home in Albany and lived as an orphan until his father recovered, then remarried, and was finally able to collect all his children together again.

So it comes as no great surprise that the related concepts of being parentless and homeless -- of feeling abandoned and always in search of one's place in the world -- are main concerns for many of Maguire's characters. His bestselling adult novel, *Wicked*, "The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West," which has sold more than two million copies worldwide and been adapted into the runaway musical hit that is still running on Broadway, relies on our nostalgic attachment to the movie version of *The Wizard of Oz* and the innocent girl from Kansas who is trying desperately to get home again -- not to her absent parents, but to her Aunt Em.

Orphans, stepchildren, and home-seekers pop up everywhere in Gregory Maguire's books. In one of his earlier children's books published in 1994, *Missing Sisters*, Alice Colossus is a 12-year old orphan with hearing and speech impediments who lives in the Sacred Heart Home for Girls on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Troy. After losing the only nun in the orphanage who supports her, Alice learns she has an identical twin sister -- Miami Shaw of 86 South Allen Street in Albany -- who has no disabilities and lives with loving parents, so Alice sneaks away to discover the home and family she has been denied and where she hopes to belong.

In *Lost*, a modern-day, adult ghost story that is a cross between Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, with a literary Jack the Ripper subplot thrown in for good measure, central character and Maguire alter-ego Winifred Rudge visits a Forever Families meeting in Newton, Massachusetts, where

childless couples learn about adopting orphans from other countries, before she sets off on a fateful journey to her lost ancestral home in London. And stepchildren are forced into appalling situations with cruel stepmothers in two other adult novels by Maguire: the stunning Clara in *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, his revisionist Cinderella tale set in tulip-crazed, 17<sup>th</sup> Century Holland, and Bianca de Nevada, the gorgeous Snow White replacement in *Mirror Mirror* who is threatened by the real-life villainess from Renaissance-era Tuscany, Lucrezia Borgia.

However, in *What the Dickens*, Maguire's new hard-to-categorize novel being released on September 11, we are served a whole muffuletta of missing parents, wrecked homes, and related kid-stress calamity, all of it wrapped in a gritty and topical linguistic package: "From those streetlights whose bulbs hadn't been stoned, a tea-colored dusk settled in uncertain tides. It fell on the dirty militias of pack dogs, all bullying and foaming against one another, and on the palm fronds twitching in the storm gutter, and on the abandoned cars, and everything – everything – was flattened, equalized in the gloom of half-light."

Though the central tale is a whimsical fantasy about a rogue tooth fairy, born alone and outside of his pack, who tries to find his place in skibbereen (tooth-fairy) society, it is a tale told "in a Hurricane Katrina-type situation by a man who is very much a picture of me when I was singing at St. Vincent's in Albany, maybe 21 or 22," Gregory Maguire reveals. "He's a young man who has found himself suddenly having to take care of three nieces and nephews whose parents have disappeared, in a situation that is so desperate there's no power, there's no police, people have disappeared, and there's a terrible storm. Mudslides have cut the highway in half. And I never explain what's happening, or how it's happened, or when it's going to get better. He has no more food. There's no news. And all this man has is his ability to tell a story about survival. So the tale itself is somewhat light-hearted, apparently, but the situation in which he's telling it couldn't be more desperate."

Barnes & Noble has placed an initial order for 10,000 copies of *What the Dickens*, and they plan to place it on their front tables and market it with adult fiction titles. Is that simply a commercial decision – an attempt to ride the wave of the final Harry Potter blockbuster and champion another bestselling children's author seven weeks later – or

does it actually underscore what they see as seismic movement in the reading habits of many adults? One way to characterize that is Barnes & Noble saying, “Yes, this is published for children, but this is Maguire doing the kind of work that he does for adults. However much fun it is to read, and despite the fact that children can read it, too, it is a serious novel and we’re going to treat it as such.”

What’s the big deal? Adults have always read children’s literature, anyway. Besides J. K. Rowling’s record-breaking Potter series, which we know many adults read, there are any number of books that were written for children that have been read and cherished by adults since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century – *Alice in Wonderland*, C.S. Lewis’s Narnia books, *Charlotte’s Web*, Grimm’s and Andersen’s books of fairy tales, *Little Women*, *Treasure Island*, *The Once and Future King*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and on and on.

Moreover, realistically, how can we determine what makes a kid’s book these days, anyway? Colorful illustrations? Talking animals? Non-threatening tie-ins to TV shows on PBS or Nickelodeon? Those are the more protective options that only apply for younger children. For tweens and teenagers in our age of 24-hour, 1500-station cable television, can we still seriously refer to the ratings standards which are supposed to denote graphic violence, explicit nudity, foul language and sexual references – G, PG, R, NC-17 – when we swim in an electronic sea of these images, or should we give up any pretense to moral standards and apply the pragmatic ratings that Hollywood Video suggests for its movies? X = Hated it; 1 star = Did not like it; 2 stars = Almost into it; 3 stars = Liked it; 4 stars = Really enjoyed it; 5 stars = Loved it. Perhaps a middle course is organically at work, where kids who read seriously already have access to well-written books that challenge them and help them grow into well-adjusted individuals.

But for Greg Maguire, there have been specific differences between how he approaches novels for adults or for children. “I try very hard to be emotionally sound and honest in my writing for children. I try hard not to be sentimental and to suggest, both when you are in a dark time and also when you’re in a bucolic time, that there are more vagaries and ambiguities to any set of circumstances or emotions than one can possibly go into at any one time.”

And for the adult novels -- *Wicked*, *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, *Lost*, *Mirror Mirror*, *Son of a Witch* -- “What prompts a story in my mind is some sort of knotty little philosophical question, or social or moral question, that I am struggling with,” Maguire admits, “one that I then have to devise a plot around, partly so that I can just see what I think about it seriously.” These adult books also traffic in sophisticated language, ambiguous characters, and moral concepts that most kids would find too difficult to understand, so there’s a self-selection component operating with them.

But Maguire believes his process is changing. Whether he is running out of Philosophy 101 concepts like, “What is the nature of evil?” (*Wicked*) or “Can we compare relative values of beauty?” (*Confessions . . .*) or “What are the costs of the fruit of knowledge, and of maturing as a person or a society?” (*Mirror Mirror*), or whether he simply wants to experiment as an artist, he is letting character and plot drive his recent work. He has just finished the first draft of the third book in his “Wicked Sequence,” tentatively called *Deposition of an Oracle*, and until he wrote the last two words of the book, he didn’t know what the book would all be about. “I started out with a scene in which an elderly woman, an Oracle, as it came her time to die, couldn’t die, and wouldn’t die. They even put her down in a crypt and she came up and said, ‘Sorry, it’s not taking.’ That was my first scene. It was meant to be a funny scene, and it was meant to kick-start something in me, but I really didn’t know what would come next.”

Maguire believes, at this early stage, that his Oracle wants to ‘vex history’ and deny her fate, but perhaps she has also finally gotten used to life on Earth. It’s her home, and she’s been so busy dispensing all that oracular information that it took her a long time to recognize she actually has an important purpose here, and now she’s reluctant to leave. As Greg Maguire might muse, “Hmmm, does that sound familiar?”

## Gregory Maguire Interview Transcription

**Bill Patrick:** I'd like to begin by asking you about the books that have influenced you the most, from the earliest ones that you can remember to the ones that have an effect on you now.

**Gregory Maguire:** Well, that's pretty easy. I didn't realize at the time that both the parables that I used to hear in church, in the Gospels, and the fairy tales that I got out of the library or must have had read to me were going to be sort of life-long totems, but clearly they were. I do remember, by the time I was about 5<sup>th</sup> Grade, I would go to the library and sometimes get out collections of either Grimm's or Andersen's fairy tales, even though I knew they were intended for a slightly younger audience. But not exactly – there is a lot of grimness in them. I used to go back to them the way you sometimes will pull out, you know, an early Joni Mitchell album, just to kind of sink back into the pleasure of the art but also what it evoked in you from your memories of how old you were at the time. And even at the age of ten or twelve, I could have a nostalgia for a reading experience that I might have had at six. I didn't think about it then, but I realize it as I look back now, that there was a trust factor in certain early influences. The parables and the fairy tales are the two that come closest for me.

**BP:** Why the parables?

**GM:** Well, because they were stuffed down our throats . . . but also because they were really short. The one thing that I think may be similar about the two, and one reason why I think they may stick with me, is that they're both extremely portable little vessels of story. They have almost no reference in them that isn't transportable across oceans and centuries, you know. They're really boiled down to essences, to essential relationships among people, and among people and either their morals or their prospects – morals in terms of the parables and prospects in terms of the fairy tales.

And so therefore you can use them and you can refer to them, both internally and in writing, almost all the time, and they are always somehow pertinent. Partly, that's because they are so quick and so quicksilver.

**BP:** Yeah, they're distilled.

**GM:** They are absolutely distilled. That's the exact word. It's like homeopathy – there's one little molecule of meaning, reduced to its smallest, infinitesimal essence, but it still has meaning and it still has the power to connect and to contaminate. I mean that in a good way.

**BP:** How about books as you were growing up?

**GM:** As I was growing up, then I began to lurch toward the particular children's fantasies that were particularly prominent back then, in the pre-Harry Potter fantasy days. 60s and early 70s – things like the Narnia books, which really were published in the 50s. The Narnia books and *Charlotte's Web*, which was also published in the 50s, *A Wrinkle in Time*, published in the 60s.

We didn't call them fantasies. Fantasy is an adult way of talking about a genre, and I think a kind of dismissive way -- if it's fantasy, then it's not real, so you don't have to take it seriously. We called them magic books, and while we had never personally experienced magic ourselves as child readers, we were not entirely ready to profess that it didn't exist. These books might have been entertaining stories, or they might have been symbols into ways of being that were so far beyond our ken -- we were pretty open-hearted about what they might be. So they were magic books, and by that I mean novels.

The one novel, though, that stands out in my childhood reading experience that wasn't a fantasy is the famous book, *Harriet the Spy*. And that's because in the portrait of the 12-year old Harriet, daughter of a wealthy family in Manhattan, and her obsession with journal keeping and her desire to be a writer, she was a real role model for me. And I instantly, after finishing the book (maybe for the fourth time, which doesn't make it too instant), I got a journal of my own. I didn't call it a journal – I called it a spy notebook – and I began to spy on my neighbors and family members in Albany. And I still keep it, though I don't call it a spy notebook anymore, but that's essentially what it is. I'm on Volume 54.

**BP:** Really? And you've got them all?

**GM:** I have them all. They're in a safe deposit box at a bank. I'm no Virginia Woolf, and I'm no Anais Nin, but I have kept a record of my life for the past forty-six years or so. Not every day – increasingly, the last few years since I've been a father, it has been harder and harder to write even once a month in there.

**BP:** How about current books? What do you read now?

**GM:** I still favor British fiction. I think the American vernacular, by and large, tends to divide too extremely, for my taste, between the rugged and the street-wise male writing, if you will, and the tending-toward-sentimentality writing of women. I understand that's a huge statement, but I find that English writers tend to be able to entertain more effects, in the pages of a single writer, than those that I see in American writers. I just read the new Ian McEwan novel.

Now, that said, I can think of at least three exceptions to the rule: my favorite American writers are Ron Hansen and Jess Walter. Ron Hansen is just great; he's daring and extremely capable with a pen. They're the breed of

American writer that I really care for. Every once in a while, I'll pick up a Don DeLillo, and I read the latest John Updike rather admiringly, *The Terrorist*. But by and large, I'm not compelled by American novels. But when I'm in England, the stuff just looks more enticing, and I end up spending more pounds there than I am dollars here.

**BP:** Now when do you live in England?

**GM:** I was there from 1990 to 1995, and I don't live there anymore, but I have enough friends there that I go and visit once or twice a year.

**BP:** What was your initial reason for going?

**GM:** My former boyfriend had a job there. My work was more portable then, and he had been somewhat unhappy in employment for some time, so I thought if he had found a job that he really liked that I should commit to joining him there, so I did.

**BP:** In an earlier interview that you and I did, you speculated that news stories were a source of information that helped make your father over-protective with you. So how do these so-called "real" stories that we all absorb from the media affect your writing? Do you let that stuff in?

**GM:** Now? Yes, I do. Indeed, for the book called *Son of a Witch*, which is my most recent adult novel, it was inspired by – actually compelled by – the photographs on the covers of the newspapers of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib being taunted. Especially the one of the man in the hood that they made stand on a box with electrodes coming off his fingertips. I was desperately angry at our government, and firmly convinced from early on that our response to 9/11 was wrong-headed and wrong-toned. But when I saw that, I had so much venom in my spleen that if I didn't write something to help expunge my reaction, then I just felt that I would become corrupt as a person myself, and cynical.

I had never intended to write a sequel to *Wicked*. I thought it was intact in and of itself. But the presence of those pictures shot me back into an imaginative zone where I had to deal with corruption on a fictional level, so that I could tolerate it on a real level. And the prison known as Southstairs, in *Son of a Witch*, which is the prison in the middle of the Emerald City, is definitely my reaction to Gitmo and Abu Ghraib.

**BP:** When you get an idea for a book, how do you usually proceed with it, and when do you know whether it's a book for adults or for kids? How does the structure develop? In other words, can you reveal some of your creative process?

**GM:** Right. I don't think I've ever made the mistake of writing a book for one audience and then finding it was for another – that is, writing a book for children and finding it was for adults, or vice versa. Maybe I did it for my very first book, thirty years ago. But not since.

Since my books are more prompted by intellectual concepts – I don't mean to sound grand -- I just mean that a funny character, in and of himself or herself or itself, doesn't necessarily prompt a story, in my mind. What prompts a story in my mind is some sort of knotty little philosophical question, or social or moral question, that I am struggling with, and that I then have to devise a plot around, partly so that I can just see what I think about it really seriously. At least that's how it's been for a good part of my life.

If I was going to write a book, say, about beauty, as I did in *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* . . . the very central question of that book, which is can we compare relative values of beauty? . . . How can the beauty of a rose, which will be dead in six days, compare to the beauty of a young girl who will be older and less beautiful in two years, or compare to a painting where the varnish may yellow but it will still be ravishing in 300 years – is it an impossible job to compare beautiful things and why do we try and what is beauty itself and why does it exist?

So once I set that as my, you could say, set of Philosophy 101 concerns (what is beauty and what use does it has?), I then ferret around for a situation or a set of characters that will be conducive to those sorts of concerns. And I settled, quite happily, in the question of beauty, on early 17<sup>th</sup> Century Holland, for many reasons. For one, it was the place where the great tulip boom and bust happened, where people began to value beautiful flowers so much that a single bloom, and a bulb that would produce a single bloom, might be worth an entire household, an estate with chattel. And then of course the bottom fell out of the market, just as it did in 1929 in Wall Street.

Also, it was the time, as I found out, when the first really genuine middle class emerged in world history, with disposable income, and they were concerned with beauty and with showing off their prosperity, and that's partly why there was a Dutch Golden Age of Renaissance painting – because there was a market for it and there were people who had money for it and they wanted to glamorize themselves and beautify their homes and dignify themselves as burghers and merchants.

At the same time, we have all those paintings of beautiful people and beautiful towns and a beautiful life, so the paintings themselves are an aspect of beauty. And finally because I am from Albany and Albany has the tulip festival. My childhood memories of the tulip festival were conjoined with the crowning of the Tulip Queen, the most beautiful woman in Albany. So female pulchritude was conjoined with the beauty of the natural world, the beauty of the blossom, for me when I was young. All that stuff kind of rolled together in my head and it all seemed like Holland would be a perfect setting for a story in which I could

investigate the limits and the advantages and the limitations of the appreciation of beauty. And putting Cinderella on top of it was the last thing that I did – that was the convenient armature, and that was the thing that I knew was going to sell the book – “Oh, a Cinderella story.” That was the easy part. But the hard part was really conceiving, “What do I want to write about? What are my concerns? What do I want to think about for the next year? Where can I set it so that I can take best advantage of different ways of considering this intellectual problem?”

**BP:** What are the instigating concepts for the other adult novels?

**GM:** As I’ve moved on, I have to say -- I am now writing my sixth adult novel, and I’ve finished the first draft – I do feel as if I’ve gone through the first semester of Philosophy 101. I’m running out of big concepts, in a sense, and I’m not a philosopher. And I’m trying, in my more recent work, to let character and plot drive the story first. Then, when it’s done, I go back and look at it and say, “Okay, now what is my subconscious telling me this is about?”

So that’s for the sake of keeping myself alive as an artist, and also as a way of encouraging myself to experiment. In my most recent book – it’s the third book of a projected four books in what will eventually, sadly be known as the *Wicked* series or sequence; sadly, because I didn’t really set out to write a series – which is called *Deposition of an Oracle*, I started out with a scene in which an elderly woman, an Oracle, as it came her time to die, couldn’t die, and wouldn’t die. They even put her down in a crypt and she came up and said, “Sorry, it’s not taking.” That was my first scene. It was meant to be a funny scene, and it was meant to kick-start something in me, but I really didn’t know what would come next. I knew some of what would come next, but I didn’t know what the book would all be about.

Now I finally got to the end of the first draft and I now see that the book is really, in a large sense, about fate and the temptation, and perhaps the inability, as the last two words of the book put it, to “vex history.” That is, to do something that fate has not prepared you for, and that is not necessarily to be deduced by everything you have ever done before or by every evidence of your character development that you have ever observed. That’s a slim premise on which to build a book, and it’s a slim book therefore.

**BP:** No, but it’s an interesting idea, because it’s really kind of the American idea – the idea that history doesn’t necessarily have to determine who we are. The pilgrims set off and, for most of them, it was a new religious beginning, but so many pioneers came to this country for a new life, and one that wasn’t pre-determined by Calvinism or some other restrictive European faith.

**GM:** Well, that is true, and thank you for saying it, because I will go back to my draft, when I go back to it tomorrow morning on the plane to California, and I'll go back not having thought of that before and look at it with that notion in mind.

**BP:** I love that "vex history" idea. That's a great idea.

**GM:** Thank you. Those are the last two words of the book, and when I got to them . . . you know, one of the main characters of the book is the Oracle and the other character is the Cowardly Lion, and at the end of the book, he has been led in a bad direction. His life has been shunted off onto rather disappointing tracks, to rather seedy landscapes, and he finally gets to a point where he has a chance for a certain kind of rehabilitation – a deeply interior rehabilitation – or he could have a social rehabilitation, which is the thing he's been working for during the whole book. And he has to make a choice. In the last paragraph, he decided to do a third thing. In fact, he's putting off the choice, and he's doing the third thing simply to vex history, to confound it so that it can't find him, perhaps.

When I wrote those words, I thought, "Okay, that's what the book is about. She went down to die, and she couldn't die. She was internally trying to vex history. History told her she had to die in a certain way and at a certain time and she won't do it. She wants to vex history. She wants to vex expectation." So finally it came together, as I said, in the last two words of the book.

**BP:** Now why "deposition?"

**GM:** That's really part of the plot. The whole story is premised on a 24 to 36-hour period in which the Cowardly Lion comes to the place where the Oracle is living and needs to interview her about matters in her past.

**BP:** How about the other books?

**GM:** Well, I'll start with *Mirror Mirror* first, because at that point I was a little boxed in, if you will, by the success of my earlier books. My publisher was now demanding of me that I do some more fairy tale retellings for adult audience, the way that I do them, and I didn't really want to get stuck doing that. On the other hand, I did want to buy peanut butter for my family's sandwiches, so I did it. But I did it in a way that made sense to me, which was to say, "Okay, Snow White is the story that is being proposed, and Snow White is a great story. It's got lots of interesting things in it. It's also fairly static, because she falls into a sleep and lies in a tomb and is taken up into life by somebody else's kiss, and that's a little static for a main character.

But what does it seem to be about? What is the story about? And I started to look at the notion that she was poisoned by the apple and by the fact that the dwarves, who are in her little cottage taking care of her, are no threat, no sexual threat to her. She's innocent. She's a virgin. But she lives with these seven men who don't have wives, and there's never any question that they are using her as their honky-tonk girl and housemate. So what is this all about, and what is the apple, and why does she fall asleep when she eats the poisonous apple. And I began to make the association between the poison apple and the apple of knowledge, the fruit of knowledge. The story is about the costs of maturing as a person.

But then I wanted to open it up. So I started to think about what the costs of maturing are for a society. When did culture mature, at any time that this story was popular? And there is an Italian version of the story of Snow White, in which there aren't seven dwarves but there are seven bandits, and it pre-dates the other versions by a hundred years or more, in its earliest form, and it takes place in Italy. So I thought that was the height of the renaissance, and what was the Renaissance but the maturation of a medieval society? What did the Renaissance have to give up in order to mature, and what does an innocent girl have to give up in order to mature?

As I was thinking about that, and starting to get excited, I thought, *There's a poison apple. Who is the most famous poisoner? Well, one of the most famous, top 5 anyway, was Lucrezia Borgia, who was said to have poisoned her husband and her blah blah. And her brother was Cesare Borgia, to whom Machiavelli referred when writing The Prince. And their father was Pope Alexander VI, the most corrupt in the history of Christendom, to date. What kind of maturation is that? Must you mature into corruption - is that the only way?*

So I began to read about Lucrezia Borgia, and found out that most of the stories about her were planted by the other republicans - they were told by her enemies in Rome, or by the enemies of the pope in Rome, and there was very little proof that any of them were true. Maybe some of them were true; makes a great story. But that she, too, was a complicated person. Anyway, it all began to come together, about the costs of maturing, of the person, culture and society, and what was going to be left behind with the magic world. The dwarves themselves were older figures, from a more magical universe. We weren't going to see dwarves again after the Renaissance, not as magical creatures of the ground - we were going to see them as misshapen humans who had something wrong with them - so what was that all about?

And then, finally -- I know this is a long-winded answer - but, finally, I was listening to NPR one day, and there was a piece on NPR about mercury poisoning, and the fact that one of the symptoms of mercury poisoning is paranoia. And I thought, *Well, hmm, mercury, is often painted on the back of glass in order to make a mirror. So if the dwarves, who worked underground, made the glass and painted it with mercury, that's how the magic mirror could be a magic mirror. And what*

would it do – it would amplify the qualities of mercury, which would mean that whoever looked into it would become paranoid.

So, “Mirror mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” -- that’s a paranoid question. Then the plot began to come together out of some historical realities. I did a lot of reading about the history of Central Italy in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it was fascinating. Every time I turned around, I found something interesting. There’s a bit at the very beginning of *Mirror Mirror* that I think I quoted, where in Rome they dug up a casket in the late 1400s, I think, and they opened it and inside was a woman whose skin had not deteriorated and whose hair was black and whose face was beautiful. They deemed her a saint and named her St. Tombstone or something. But just to read that in a history of the times, I thought, *Well, no wonder Snow White became a popular story around that time.*

I wasn’t trained as a historian, but I love to give myself the opportunity to read widely and to find little bits and pieces that will make my story -- even if it has a somewhat magical realist stance – feel somewhat valid in large human and cultural terms.

**BP:** How about *Lost*?

**GM:** Partly I wanted to write a portrait of a character who was suffering such grief that she lost her mind, in a sense. It is harder for me to remember the ins and outs of how that came about, but it is related both to Charles Dickens and to Jack the Ripper – both to *A Christmas Carol* and Scrooge and to the ghosts that haunted him, and to the ghosts that haunt a contemporary writer. It’s my only contemporary novel – that is, a novel set in contemporary times, for adults. It is a ghost story, though. It is a genuine tale of psychological suspense. And the main character in it is a writer who is somewhat trapped by the success of a book that she did not intend to be so successful, if that’s any biographical . . .

**BP:** Hmm, does that sound familiar?

**GM:** And she kind of goes abroad to try and write something different, and the reader follows her, slowly, slowly realizing that she’s not going abroad to really go someplace – she’s following a lot of red herrings in order to avoid looking at what she really needs to look at, which is what happened to her before she got to that point. It’s harder for me to sum that up. Part of what I was doing was trying to experiment and to not get stuck into rewriting Rapunzel into Rapunzel at the Louvre, or Rumpelstiltskin Does Memphis.

**BP:** And I know you have an interesting and long speech that you give about evil, because I’ve been fortunate enough to hear it, but a quick précis of *Wicked*?

**GM:** I won't do a long speech, but *Wicked* was really to examine the nature of evil. Can we say anything about evil behavior of a human character or of the universe even and stand behind it in every instance. To come to the Wicked Witch of the West was accidental and extremely lucky on my part – it was lucky that I had cared so much about children's writing for my whole life. But rehabilitating the Wicked Witch of the West was not my central concern. And the topic of evil in the world has only become more compelling since I wrote that book, which is interesting.

**BP:** Okay, I have a long build-up to this next question, which includes a quote on page 23 of *Lost*: "How easily Neverland is corrupted into the deserted island of *Lord of the Flies*. How quickly Tinkerbell regresses to being one of the flies pestering the gouged eye sockets of the pig that the lost boys butcher." Now I'm not equating this statement with you, of course. Revealing the grimier side of Winfred Rudge's character doesn't necessarily reflect your actual beliefs, but it does kind of point to that seemingly inevitable slide from innocence into experience that occurs for most of us. And it's also a way of entering into what I am really interested in today, which is the difference between the books you write for children and the books you write for adults.

And I'm wondering if you approach the differences mechanically – like by avoiding or choosing specific topics, tones, vocabularies, narrative modes, those kinds of things – or are there really separate conceptual, emotional, and moral universes from the outset? Or is it all just mixed up together, intuitively?

**GM:** That's a really good question. I think that there are a few prohibitions about writing for children, and this is out of human kindness. One does not write about a fixed game, like Sartre's *No Exit*. One does not present that to children, even if one believes that it is so. If one believes that it is so and feels compelled to present it in art, then one presents it to somebody else, not to children. It's just not fair. It's cynical, and it's a kind of abuse. And it stunts the growth of children, to get that too early.

Well, mercifully, children will not accept it, so what's the point of presenting it? That's a deeply-held belief that I have, so it means that as an idea occurs to me, it makes its audience known fairly quickly. When one gets an idea for a book, even if one doesn't have a plot or characters yet, it's a little bit like driving down Mt. Marcy or something and seeing a fogged-in landscape down below – you don't know, once you get into the fog, what you're going to find. But before you approach it, you can kind of get a sense of its character somehow, its color. You can guess what it's going to conceal, and you make an early assessment. This is going to be something that is appropriate for children, or this is something that will be appropriate for adults.

Now, that said, I try very hard to be emotionally sound and honest in my writing for children. I try hard not to be sentimental. I mean, I am sentimental to begin with, as a person. But I try hard not to be only sentimental. I try to suggest, always, even if it's in subtle ways, I try always to suggest that there are always new things to learn about a situation -- both when you are in a dark time and also when you're in a bucolic time -- that there are more vagaries and ambiguities to any set of circumstances or to any set of emotions than one can possibly go into at any one time. And that is, I hope, what gives my children's books some validity.

I don't know whether you have seen the new book that is coming out in the fall, *What the Dickens*, but it's probably the best example of what I mean. If you don't mind, I'll just describe it a little. The subtitle is "The Story of a Rogue Tooth Fairy." And about 70% of the pages in the book describe the birth and the acculturation and the maturation of a tooth fairy who was born outside of his pack and then becomes integrated into the society and finally rejects it. He decides he can do better on his own. It is a light-hearted story. I mean, what story about a tooth fairy wouldn't be light-hearted?

And yet, the story is being told in a Hurricane Katrina-type situation by a man who is very much a picture of me when I was singing at St. Vincent's, maybe 21 or 22, who has found himself suddenly having to take care of three nieces and nephews whose parents have disappeared, in a situation that is so desperate there's no power, there's no police, people have disappeared, there's a terrible storm. Mudslides have cut the highway in half.

And I never explain what's happening, or how it's happened, or when it's going to get better. But this is all this man has right now. He has no more food. There is no power. There's no news. And all he has is his ability to tell a story, about survival. So the story itself is somewhat light-hearted, apparently, but the situation in which he's telling it couldn't be more desperate.

The tooth-fairy story was originally a much shorter piece that was published in the Boston Globe as a serialized story about four years ago, and I sold it to a local Boston publisher, Candlewick Press, but after they bought it, they called me in and said, "This 36-page story that you think you just sold to us is really just the outline of what we think you can give us. It's bait and switch. We want something deeper and richer. We want you to give it the full Maguire treatment." Those were the exact words. "We want you to do for children what you do for adults, which is to leave no stone unturned. Tell us everything you can find out about this culture and this person."

But how could I do that? We're at war in Iraq, and global warming is happening. And at the time this was being asked of me, Hurricane Katrina had just happened, and we had stood by, with mouths open, unable to believe what unutterable suffering so many people had to endure with the collapse of public infrastructure. I didn't care about the money, and I did care about my time and my contribution to the planet, and I couldn't see writing a big, fat fantasy about a

tooth-fairy culture, just for its own sake. It would have been a fine thing for me to do fifteen years ago, but life is short, and my work has to have meaning now, in a different way than it used to.

So then I thought about Hurricane Katrina, and I thought, *The only way this story really makes sense is if I can use it in service of a larger idea, which is, what do stories do for us when we have no place left to turn? And what they do for us is remind us we're not alone, and remind us there's always another valence of meaning to seek out in any orbit or circumstance.* There's a mixed metaphor for you.

That is an adult idea that I'm very comfortable standing behind, and yet it uses, again, the guise of a children's character – a tooth fairy, of all godforsaken creatures, in order to make its points. In the internal story, it's kind of a parody of socialization and sort of political structures. There's a boss. There's a kind of political rally where tooth fairies learn their history, so they can remember what their jobs are, almost like the Hitler youth rallies. They're not bad tooth fairies, but they have to be reminded what they're doing and why they're doing it. And they sign on once a month by seeing the beautiful movie-star tooth fairy, parading around in a gown, and telling them how they came to be and what their founding legend is and why they do what they do. And it turns out that they do do something very important, as light and frothy and insignificant as they are. They have a great function in human life that I won't reveal to you.

Now, interestingly, Barnes & Noble is taking 10,000 copies or something and they're going to place it on the front tables with all the other adult fiction, for a couple of weeks, when it comes out in September. It's being released on September 11. And this is because the readers at Barnes & Noble say, "Yes, this is published for children, but this is Maguire doing the kind of work that he does for adults. This is a serious novel, however much fun it is to read, and despite the fact that children can read it, too, it is a serious novel and we're going to treat it as such." Which is great for me, but it goes back to your question about how you choose.

In the end, if you are honest, how you chose might not matter so much, because even in that story from *Lost* that you read to me, as your preamble to your question, about Tinkerbell deteriorating into one of the flies, that's a valid concept for Winnie Rudge to be thinking at that moment in the story I'm telling about her, but it's not what she thinks and feels all the way through the book. It's not where she is when she gets to the end of the book.

**BP:** She's a Scrooge figure – she has to have that character arc.

**GM:** Yes, right, exactly. She does, and it's not a great salvation moment, and if it were ever made into a movie, in the last scene she really would be adopting a child. She would be back. And we don't know that, so I'm being honest about the fact that sometimes we get so bruised that our life is really changed, but I'm unclear about that and I leave it for the reader.

**BP:** Well, that's interesting, and it really is a perfect lead-in to my next question, or speculation, which is that the most popular magic books for today's readers -- like *Wicked* or the Harry Potter series, or for earlier readers, *Alice in Wonderland* or *A Christmas Carol* or *Animal Farm*, you name it -- seem to be crossover books, in the sense that there's something, in each of those books, that readers of all ages seem to be drawn to. I don't like to use words like "classics," even though that is kind of the essence of a classic book. Why do you think that happens with some books and not others?

**GM:** What a good question. Once, in the early 90s, when I was about as destitute as I have been in my adult life, trying very hard to write books and sell them, a friend of mine with whom I was living -- not my boyfriend, but we were sharing a flat, because we were that penurious -- said to me one day over tea, "I have a good idea. Why don't you write a bestseller?" And I said, "Well, honey, I hate to tell you this, but I've been trying to write a bestseller since I first started writing." And even the day before yesterday, a friend who is a writer and someone I've known for a number of years, said to me at a cocktail party, "Well, you're almost done with this big book contract you have with Harper now, aren't you? Well, why don't you finish it up and then really write what you want to write?"

Now I'm very fond of this man, and in the 24 hours that followed, I thought, *Okay, don't think about it in terms of what it means to you -- think about it in terms of what it says to him.* So even now, I mean, I've been a professional writer for 30 years, and there are some people who really can't believe this is what I want to do. This is the kind of story that I want to tell, and this is the way I want to tell it. I enjoy doing it. I don't want to do it forever. If I had other ideas, I would follow them. I'm not a prisoner. I'm not a slave. I can do what I want to do, and this is how my ideas come. We're all limited by the constraints of our own talents, and mine constrain me very happily in an area I enjoy.

**BP:** It's more about audience, I think, than it is about us determining as writers what we're going to do and whom we're going to affect out there. Why do some people say, "This is an adult book?" Why does Barnes & Noble say, "Well, wait a second, *Wicked* has done well, we can sell this as an adult book?" Okay, that's the commercial aspect.

**GM:** In the case of Barnes & Noble, it's absolutely commercial. They like me. I sell very well at Barnes & Noble. So they think they can make more money out of this if it is positioned as an adult book. But they also think it can stand up as an adult book -- they wouldn't do it otherwise.

**BP:** But that's the interesting thing about this. Harry Potter showed everybody that these books can cross over completely, if they didn't remember that fact from *A Christmas Carol* or *Charlotte's Web* or a hundred other books. There are

plenty of books, including Grimm's *Household Tales*, that for whatever reason basically allow adults to become children again, at least during the reading experience, and why that happens with certain books and not others is what I'm interested in.

**GM:** Well, that is very interesting, and it happens more often with fantasy, though not exclusively. I can think of books like *Huckleberry Finn* and, to some extent, *Little Women*, which were published for children and became acceptable reading for adults. I don't know if many adults dive into *Little Women* now, but *Huckleberry Finn* is definitely part of the literary canon.

But it happens more often with fantasy, I would posit, and perhaps that's because fantasy itself is in the business of blurring boundaries. Maybe because of the ways that fantasy works as an art form, we are never quite sure of where we stand. Maybe that helps the reader to relax, and also allows them to tolerate the fact that they're never quite sure where they stand, in terms of whether they're the correct audience or not. I hadn't thought of that before.

*Alice in Wonderland* is beloved among English Departments, and deservedly so. I once saw a very cogent literary analysis that made comparisons and equations between *Alice in Wonderland* and *To the Lighthouse*, and it was not silly. It was extremely fruitful and well thought out, and concluded that *Alice in Wonderland* is a great work in the English language.

Incidentally, after the success of *Wicked*, the first thing my editor said to me was, "Oh, that was so great. Now why don't you do *Alice in Wonderland*?" Like I do treatments. And I said to her, quite politely, "*The Wizard of Oz*, profoundly moving a story as it can be, is nonetheless a somewhat flawed book by a writer writing almost beyond the range of his talents. *Alice in Wonderland* is a work of genius in the English language. It's Nabokov. It's Virginia Woolf. It's Shakespeare. I mean, there is not a step wrong in it, and to go in and mess with it would be a supreme act of injustice on my part. I wouldn't have the nerve, and I wouldn't want to be tarred with that brush. I don't feel so bad about *The Wizard of Oz*, because there are inherent contradictions and lapses in the story that make it easier for a writer to go in."

And that goes back to your earlier question about parables and fairy tales. One of the reasons that I did go back to, say, *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, but did not go back to *Alice in Wonderland*, is that the fairy tales, because they are so old, have bits and pieces of background and consequence and information that have gotten worn away through time, and are therefore much more amenable to being reinterpreted. You can reinterpret *Cinderella* a hundred times in a hundred different settings, but you'll never lose the essence of what the ur-Cinderella tale is, in your head. No matter how many times you see Drew Barrymore or Julia Roberts doing something that they say is a Cinderella story, it can never mar the Cinderella template in your mind. And that's one reason why I can do that sort of retelling, but would shy very much away from *Alice in Wonderland*.

Even with *A Christmas Carol*, which is a very fine story, I used it only tangentially, and I used it mostly because I was pushed into having some sort of literary association by my publisher. I would have been happy to write *Lost* as a

**BP:** I think that some publishers and agents, because of commercial considerations, can allow themselves to forget that books are about language, and if you have a book like *Alice in Wonderland*, which is so much about a particular, specific kind of language, you don't want to go in and mess with that language.

Well, back to this notion of why we think people choose certain stories that they can enjoy their whole lives – is it because magic literature allows us to reclaim innocence in some way?

**GM:** I think any time you lie back on your bed and put your head on your pillow and open up a book about which you know little – I'm now thinking about *On Chesil Beach*, which is the most recent piece of fiction I have read in its entirety, you are reclaiming innocence. The very act of dipping into a first page and not knowing what is going to come is a kind of innocence, you know. You go through the experience of being impregnated with the story, if you will. There's always the sense of appropriation of experience that happens in approaching an art. That's my devil's advocate speaking.

But that said, I do think there's something about the ways in which we need to relax if we're really going to let a fantasy or a magic story have its way with us. There's a way in which we need to relax that does approximate a return to innocence. The only other metaphor I can think of right now is that there's a way you need to really relax if you're going to sing, you know. You can't sing if you're really tense. You can't dance if you're really tense. You have to kind of let go of a lot of things. Those are active art forms. They're performing arts.

In a way, perhaps reading a fantasy, you have to relax your spirit so much that reading a fantasy becomes more of a performing art than reading a gritty, social realist novel set in the slums in 1952. I don't know that that's true. I'm just throwing that out there.

**BP:** If you think about, for instance, genre novels that people read these days – pick a James Patterson or Michael Connelly or Elmore Leonard or Patricia Cornwell book – then I agree with you conceptually that when you open that book, it is a kind of act of innocence. You're saying, "Okay, I can suspend my disbelief. I can enter this world that's been created for me, fresh." But on the very first page of most of the books that many adults read, more mature experience is what it's about – there's a sex scene, or a scene of graphic violence, or one of political terrorism – and it reminds you immediately that this is the world we have grown used to, the one that the media presents to us daily.

Whereas, in a magic book, often when you read the first page or two, you are no longer in the world we know, and so what allows readers who are used to adult books, used to mature experiential stuff, to read those first two pages and say, "Okay, I can believe again. I can believe in magic enough that I will enter the universe of this book and I'll pretend to be ten years old again. I willingly put aside all the difficulties of the last forty years. I want to live in this world." So which books allow us to do that, and why do we give ourselves permission to do it with those books?

**GM:** Well, that's a really good question, but are there books that are not fantasies that allow us to do that?

**BP:** Probably.

**GM:** Maybe that comes down to the individual author. I don't mean to be too stereotypical, but I'm sure there are probably certain businessmen, let's say, who settle down on an airplane and pick up whatever the current iteration of what James Bond is, Le Carre or whoever, and as they get into the first pages they remember what it was like to be reading the early Smiley books or maybe some books by Graham Greene, and it's a return to an experience that they have some sense of, and they can relax because they feel they know the territory a little bit. Maybe they can be made more innocent because of that.

There are other readers, and again, just for the sake of argument I'm picking the obvious relationships and not the less obvious ones, maybe there is a grandmother whose job it is to take care of her grandchildren and she has just put the kids in the car which will take them back to their mother's home, after her day on Wall Street, and the grandmother settles down and she picks up a romance set in Georgian times with people back home from the Napoleonic Wars and women fluttering around in Empire-waist gowns. And because she's read a lot of them during her lifetime, maybe there's a way in which she becomes a young woman again as she reads that story, anticipating romance, picking up some cues and hopes from it. So I don't want to hammer the nail too hard that says fantasy is the only literature that allows us to do this. Maybe it has more to do with how we are predisposed to like our fiction, and I'm predisposed to like books that really take me far away from the gritty world. I don't like the gritty world very much. But for other people, their tolerance of grit, or their love of something else, may set their internal barometers at a different range than mine. Maybe they are just as much swept away as I might be in the first few pages of T.H White's *The Once and Future King*, which is another book that I really love.

**BP:** All good points. But I think that what I'm really getting at, though is . . . Maybe I'm going about it the wrong way. Perhaps kids should not know certain things that adults do know. And maybe magic literature allows children to not know those things.

**GM:** That may be. I don't dispute it. I'm not sure that I would put it that way myself. You know, I think in metaphor a great deal, and I think that a book about magic, like a fairy tale, like a parable, is an extended metaphor – a hugely extended metaphor. Maybe all fiction is. But more obviously so, in magic – the sword that needs to be drawn from the stone is not simply the Bronze Age learning how to make iron, out of iron ore, which is where some people think that metaphor comes from, way way back. But it's also about how we have to consolidate all our strengths in order to do the impossible when we make the shift between childhood and adulthood.

So the metaphor is huge and expansive and it covers the end papers and the jacket art of books, and a metaphor is a vehicle for transporting meaning. It carries meaning from one shape to another. It carries meaning from the shape of the image into whatever way we can understand it conceptually. And I think children are not necessarily capable of articulating any of this, and they're probably not capable of understanding what the transference is or how it works, but they are capable of responding to it. That may be why the stories are so strong.

**BP:** Here's an easy one for you: how has the success of *Wicked*, both the book and the musical, changed your life, and does that success present hurdles for you as a writer?

**GM:** Yes, it has changed my life by making me less anxious about making my mortgage payments, and that is a very unusual experience for a full-time writer to be in. I never expected to be in it, actually, and I'm happy to be in it. But it has alleviated – it has kept the wolf from the door. The wolf no longer comes around the door. But what I didn't quite understand is that, quite often, the wolf at the door arrives carrying the muse on its back.

So, necessity being the mother of invention, without the need to pay certain bills, etcetera . . . in a way, the imagination works in a different way. I'm also older than I was. I've been writing professionally for 30 years, and full-time for about 15. It may be that I'm just slowing down anyway. But that is the way that I've changed.

**BP:** Is there anything that I haven't asked you about your work, maybe something specific that readers should understand? What have I missed that you would want to have included here?

**GM:** Well, for a long time, I had taken a hiatus from writing for children, because *Wicked* had been so successful, for one thing, and I needed to consolidate my professional base, and my reader base there. But I never lost interest in the notion that children's reading is about the richest that happens to us in the course of our life here on Earth. That there is a way that the innocence of children diving into a book, without the prior experience of having read two or three or four thousand novels before that, makes the reading experience more virginal and more exciting and more revelatory. Who would not want to write for such a rapt audience?

So when I went back to write *What the Dickens*, this time – and I assume that if I have more ideas, I will continue to write for that audience – it is because I respect the audience and because I respect the life-changing experience of children's reading. My children's books do not sell anywhere near well as my adult books – they're not even in the same camp. They can't even be charted on the same graph. My children's book sales are relatively miniscule, and my adult book sales are relatively healthy. But the way that I choose to spend my time as a professional is not to ignore the less lucrative market, because it isn't all about lucre.