

Son of a Witch by Gregory Maguire

Book Review By Alan Bennett Ilagan

Returning to Oz is tricky business. From failed updates like “The Wiz” to far-less-than-worthy pseudo-sequel movies such as “Back to Oz”, the land of the Wizard magically lends itself to only a select few. The movie starring Judy Garland was one, and the novel *Wicked* by Gregory Maguire was another. Both took the premise of L. Frank Baum’s original story and expounded on various aspects, each making it their own. Now Mr. Maguire attempts a revisiting of the land that first brought him adult-novel prominence ten years ago.

Wicked was, and remains, a wonderfully subversive morality tale, turning the “Wicked Witch” into the heroine and rendering the Wizard and Glinda into empty vessels of inferior minds. Released ten years ago, it was Maguire’s treatise on the nature of evil, and quickly became a classic in its own right.

Son of a Witch picks up where *Wicked* left off, a few years after the “Wicked” Witch (Elphaba) had melted away. The story gets off to a chilling start with a mysterious series of “face scrapings” (just as gruesome as it sounds), and a naked young man left for dead. The man, Liir, may or may not be the offspring of Elphaba. After being rescued by a pair of maunts, he lies in a near death-state and the story takes a murky political turn.

At this point, the book falters with a bit of unnecessary backstory, but once Liir is recalled to life by the music (and other administrations) of Candle, a mute young woman who has stumbled into the mauntery, the tale regains its footing (or flying in this case). Their relationship is steeped in secrecy – neither one fully revealing anything to the other, or at least not knowing how. The unsaid ambiguity and unanswered questions lead Liir to set off on his own.

“Surely there was *something* in the world lovely enough to counter the dread of being alone, a solitary figure untroubled by ambition, unfettered by talent, uncertain of a damn thing?” Maguire asks.

Liir’s search for this figure or entity who may end his loneliness begins when he joins the army, mostly for lack of anything else to do. So begins a scathing, but effective, indictment of war, and the tension between blood-lust and apathy is the driving force that inspires Liir’s evolution.

“Now, it seems hardly to matter when and how we become ourselves - or even what we become. Theory chases theory about how we are composed. The only constant: the abjuration of personal responsibility. We are the next thing the Time Dragon is dreaming, and nothing to be done about it.”

While it seems that Liir believes in this reading of the world, (and much of the novel is indeed his aimless meandering through life), he slowly finds a purpose, if only the beginning of one.

The political statements in *Son of a Witch* are more pointed than those in *Wicked*, and as such they falter a bit. Whereas the nature of evil was explored on an abstract level in Maguire’s original novel, the nature of a corrupt government is at the heart of this story. It’s a thinly-veiled condemnation of certain leaders, and more transparent than Maguire’s previous capabilities. Even

so, it doesn't lack for incendiary impressions. The image of innocent civilians aflame on a bridge conjures the idea that not helping them is as terrible as directly inflicting the carnage. Liir realizes this, and his conscience carries the story from this point forward. He deserts the troops and begins his own journey, hoping to carry out what Elphaba couldn't finish. At this point, he takes ownership of his life, but does so without certainty, which may be how most of us begin.

"The colossal might of wickedness, he thought: how we love to locate it massively elsewhere. But so much of it comes down to what each one of us does between breakfast and bedtime." It's a sentiment that at once reveals how small we are, while allowing for our deeds to result in "colossal might".

Maguire deftly balances the darker undertones with moments of whimsy and Rabelaisian humor. *Son of a Witch* is a slightly lighter affair than *Wicked*, easier on those who come to the book from the Broadway musical, but perhaps slightly underwhelming for those looking for the profound challenges of the original. Yet for the most part Maguire's latest should satisfy both camps, including his own. As an openly gay writer of substantial talent, some have wondered why Maguire has not yet written the Great American Gay Novel. Though such a critique is largely meritless, *Son of a Witch* may somewhat pacify those who have so badly wanted a homosexual storyline ~ Maguire finally writes the gay romantic scene that some of us have been waiting for.

"Charity to all, but intolerance toward the heathen. Poverty ennobles, but the Bishops had to be richer than everyone else. The Unnamed God made the good world, imprisoning the rebellious human being within it, and taunting humankind with tinderbox sexuality that must be guarded against at all costs."

The tinderbox explodes at the end of the novel. At first just deliciously hinted at, it finds full fruition late in the game, and the wait is worth it. Devoid of overwrought drama, it's a moment that seems destined, as though the players (Liir and old army buddy Trism) are powerless over the natural course of events. In that surrender is everything the novel hints at - loss, longing, love - the very things that gave life to the Witch herself. There's nothing political about this, but the emotion unleashed is a powerful force, and one of the most haunting aspects of the novel.

There are even echoes of *Brokeback Mountain* in their initial clandestine encounter, and the episode is less about sex and more about simple human contact and what it might mean. As he and Trism part, forever or for a moment, Liir has a preternatural, witch-like premonition:

"His other talent, though, was a distillation of memory into something rich and urgent. He guessed, in the hours or years remaining to him, he would remember the effect of Trism clearly, without corruption, as a secret pulse held in a pocket somewhere behind the heart."

His tryst with Trism is seen on a purer plane - as a natural extension of love. Though far too ambiguous to be considered a gay hero, Liir nonetheless takes the role of outsider, and while he manages to fit in and, forgive me, fly under the radar, he soon gives in to the person he truly is. He may not initially know that person, but he senses a presence. *Son of a Witch* is ultimately about coming into your own when there's no one to guide you. As such it is a lonely story, but one that glimmers with hope in the unlikeliest of places.