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## Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

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*Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*  
by  
Gregory Maguire  
(New York: HarperCollins, 2004)

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### **Author:**

Gregory Maguire is the author of six novels for adults and more than a dozen novels for children.

His adult novels, all published by HarperCollins, are *Wicked* (1995), praised by John Updike in *The New Yorker* as "an amazing novel"; *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* (1999); *Lost* (2001); *Mirror Mirror* (2003); *Son of a Witch* (2005); and *A Lion Among Men* (2008).

*Wicked* was developed as a big-budget Broadway musical, with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz (*Godspell*, *Pippin*, *The Prince of Egypt*, etc.), book by Winnie Holzman (*My So-Called Life*, etc.), and direction by Joe Mantello (Tony Award-winning director for *Take Me Out*). The original cast recording, released in December 2003, features performances by Kristin Chenoweth, Joel Grey, and Idina Menzel.

*Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* was filmed for ABC/Disney and aired originally in the spring of 2002. It starred Stockard Channing and Jonathan Pryce.

Maguire's work for adults and for children has been published abroad in England, Ireland, and Australia, and various works have been purchased for translation into French, German, Danish, Dutch, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese.

His children's novels include *The Hamlet Chronicles*, a seven-book series, comprised of *Seven Spiders Spinning*, *Six Haunted Hairdos*, *Five Alien Elves*, *Four Stupid Cupids*, *Three Rotten Eggs*, *A Couple of April Fools*, and *One Final Firecracker*. Though he is best known as a fantasy writer, Maguire has also written picture books, science fiction, and realistic and historic fiction.

For the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* Maguire has published signal reviews of significant fantasies by J. K. Rowling, Philip Pullman, and Maurice Sendak. He has also contributed articles, essays, and fiction in journals such as *Ploughshares*, *Boston Review*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Horn Book Magazine*, and others.

Maguire has been the recipient of several awards and fellowships. He was artist in residence at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, and has received fellowship residencies at Blue Mountain Center, New York; the Hambidge center, Georgia; The

Virginia Center for the Creative Arts; and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Vermont. In addition to writing, Maguire is a national figure in children's literature education. He was a professor and associate director of the Center for the Study of Children's Literature at Simmons College from 1979 through 1986. Since 1986 he has been codirector and founding board member of Children's Literature New England, Incorporated, a nonprofit that focuses attention on the significance of literature in the lives of children.

Maguire received his Ph.D. in English and American Literature at Tufts University (1990). He has lived abroad in Dublin and London, and now makes his principal home in Massachusetts. [From HarperCollins]

**Summary:**

This is the book that started it all! The basis for the smash hit Tony Award-winning Broadway musical, Gregory Maguire's breathtaking *New York Times* bestseller *Wicked* views the land of Oz, its inhabitants, its Wizard, and the Emerald City, through a darker and greener (not rosier) lens. Brilliantly inventive, *Wicked* offers us a radical new evaluation of one of the most feared and hated characters in all of literature: the much maligned Wicked Witch of the West who, as Maguire tells us, wasn't nearly as *Wicked* as we imagined.

When Dorothy triumphed over the Wicked Witch of the West in L. Frank Baum's classic tale, we heard only her side of the story. But what about her arch-nemesis, the mysterious Witch? Where did she come from? How did she become so wicked? And what is the true nature of evil?

Gregory Maguire creates a fantasy world so rich and vivid that we will never look at Oz the same way again. *Wicked* is about a land where animals talk and strive to be treated like first-class citizens, Munchkinlanders eek the comfort of middle-class stability, and the Tin Man becomes a victim of domestic violence. And then there is the little green-skinned girl named Elphaba, who will grow up to become the infamous Wicked Witch of the West, a smart, prickly, and misunderstood creature who challenges all our preconceived notions about the nature of good and evil. [From HarperCollins]

**Questions:**

1. Gregory Maguire fashioned the name of Elphaba (pronounced EL-fa-ba) from the initials of the author of *The Wizard of Oz*, Lyman Frank Baum-L-F-B-Elphaba. *Wicked* derives some of its power from the popularity of its source material. Does meeting up with familiar characters and famous fictional situations require more patience and effort on the part of the reader, or less?
2. *Wicked* flips the Oz we knew from the classic movie on its head. To what extent does Maguire's vision of Oz contradict the Oz we're familiar with? How have Dorothy and the other characters changed or remained the same? Has *Wicked* changed your conception of the original? If so, how?

3. The novel opens with a scene in which the Witch overhears Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Woodman gossiping about her. She's "possessed by demons," they say. "She was castrated at birth . . . she was an abused child . . . she's a dangerous tyrant." How does this scene set the stage for the story, and what themes does it introduce?
4. What is the significance of Elphaba's green skin? What are the rewards of being so different, and what are the drawbacks? In Oz -- and in the real world -- what are the meanings associated with the color green, and are any of them pertinent to Elphaba's character?
5. One of *Wicked's* key themes is the nature and roots of evil. What are the theories that Maguire sets out? Is Elphaba evil? Are her actions evil? Is there such a thing as evil, a free-floating power in the universe like time or gravity? Or is evil an attribute of the actions of human beings? (Hint: Turn to pages 231 and 370 for scenes that will draw you into the conversation.)
6. Discuss the importance of the Clock of the Time Dragon. Does the Clock simply reflect events, or does it shape them? Why is it significant that Elphaba was born inside it? That Turtle Heart was killed by it? What revelations does it offer to Elphaba and the reader when she reencounters it at the end of the book?
7. The first section of the book ends powerfully but enigmatically when the young Elphaba is discovered under the dock, cradled in the paws of a magical beast as if sitting on a throne. How do you interpret this scene, and what do you think it foretells, if anything?
8. The place of Animals in society is an important theme in *Wicked*. Why does Elphaba make it her mission to fight for Animal rights? How else does social class define Oz, and why?
9. [Galinda] reasoned that because she was beautiful she was significant, though what she signified, and to whom, was not clear to her yet" (page 65). Discuss the transformation of Galinda, shallow Shiz student, to Glinda the Good Witch. How does she change -- and by how much? What is her eventual "significance," both in Oz and in the story?
10. Discuss the ways in which Elphaba's determination and willfulness lend purpose and order to her life, and the cost of being such a strong character. Elphaba isn't the only strong female character in *Wicked*. How do Nessarose, Glinda, and Sarima deal with the issues of power and control? Where do each of them draw strength from? Is the world of Maguire's Oz more or less patriarchal than millennial America?
11. *Wicked* is an epic story, built along the lines of a Shakespearean or Greek tragedy, in which the seeds of Elphaba's destiny are all sown early in the novel. How much

- of Elphaba's career is predestined, and how much choice does she have? Do you think that she was no more than a puppet of the Wizard or Madame Morrible, as she fears?
12. Early in their unlikely friendship, Galinda catches a glimpse of Elphaba and thinks she "looked like something between an animal and an Animal, like something more than life but not quite Life" (pages 78-79). Discuss the dual, and sometimes contradictory, nature of Elphaba's character. Why does Elphaba insist that she doesn't have a soul?
  13. Who or what is Yackle? Where does she appear in the story, and what role does she serve in Elphaba's life? Is she good or evil -- both or neither?
  14. Was Elphaba's story essentially a tragedy or a triumph? Did she fail at every major endeavor, and thus fail at life; or because she refused to give up or change to suit the opinions of others, was her life a success? Is there a possibility that Dorothy's "baptismal splash" redeemed Elphaba on her deathbed, or was this the final indignity in a life of miserable mistakes?