

Maquire, Gregory. (1996). *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. New York: HarperCollins. ISBN 0060987103. 406 pp.

Reviewed by Paul Patton, May 2007

Wicked, a novel by Gregory Maguire, tells the life story of Elphaba, better known from the *Wizard of Oz* as the Wicked Witch of the West. The novel is divided into five parts, beginning with the events surrounding the witch's birth and childhood, her time at school, her years living in the Emerald City, her life in the western land of the Vinkus, and her murder and the events surrounding it. *Wicked* is a political and religious allegory that reestablishes the reader's understandings of well-known fantasy characters while debating the nature and ramifications of terms like good and evil.

Born to a prestigious family, and posed to inherit her maternal grandfather's throne as the Eminent Thropp Third Descending of Munchkinland, Elphaba is an anomaly to her own family with her green skin, sharp teeth, and her apparent allergies to water; Elphaba's upbringing introduces the reader to an eclectic mix of characters, including her father, Frex, a failed and disgraced minister of the Unnamed God, her noble-blooded adulterant mother, Melena, her Nanny, who serves as perhaps the true heroine of the novel, and a mysterious crone, Yackle, who weaves in and out of the story to indirectly impact the lives of the characters.

The story of Elphaba continues with accounts of her time at Shiz University, where the reader is introduced to the politics of the Land of Oz, the many colorful and satiric religions that compete for followers, and characters such as Galinda, who becomes Glinda; Elphaba's armless sister, Nessarose, the future Wicked Witch of the East; Madame Morrible, headmistress of Shiz and a crone for the Wizard; and the *Animal*

professor Doctor Dillamond, who mysterious murder begins to alter the characters' perspectives on life in Oz. Elphaba's time at Shiz University reveals the harsh rule of the Wizard who came to power in Oz only sixteen years before, under which Animals (animals with souls and the ability to talk) slowly lose their rights and place in society, the Yellow Brick Road is constructed to aid in resource extraction and transportation of the Wizard's armies, and murder or imprisonment is the primary means of silencing opposition. The turning point for the novel occurs when Elphaba and Glinda have a face-to-face confrontation with the Wizard, during which the major conflict is established: the Wizard believes it is the job of leaders to decide what is good and evil and the citizenry's role is to serve leadership. Elphaba sees the Wizard as a threat to Ozian freedoms and goes underground to become a revolutionary against him.

The pace of the novel shifts dramatically following Part II, with Elphaba stalking the streets of the Emerald City to attack the "pawns" of the Wizard. She becomes romantically involved with a former friend from Shiz University, who soon after, disappears mysteriously and most likely at the hands of the Wizard. As the story continues to unfold, Elphaba furthers herself from the citizens of Oz, becoming deeply involved with the Animals' liberation.

Although Maguire's novel is clearly a work of fiction, the themes and issues broached through this fantasy tale are very real and relevant to modern American politics, religion, and human social dynamics and ethics. Environmental themes and questions are a cornerstone of the novel, and Elphaba's involvement in the Animal Relief League and the actions she takes against the government authorities of Oz are comparable to many radical activist organizations, such as the Earth Liberation Front (E.L.F.). The political

and religious overtones of the novel are reminiscent American discussions of progress or the security of the “civilized” majority versus their opposition. Amidst the many topics considered by the narrative, the benefits of resource extraction for the majority despite their negative impacts on local communities, animal and human rights, the preservation of political security at the cost of environmental integrity are all considered in this fantastic tale. *Wicked* captures the utter complexities of the political, religious, and social realms of human societies while bringing special attention to the issues of the modern environmental movement. Maguire’s spin on the Land of Oz and its inhabitants is vibrant, intellectual, and a pertinent read for any student of environmentalism, political science, or sociology.