

# Talking with Gregory Maguire

The popular author and children's literature advocate discusses his latest fictional reworking of traditional tales.

By Cyndi Giorgis

Gregory Maguire is a versatile, witty, and innovative weaver of stories for children and adults. His wildly popular adult book, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995), has entranced both readers and, in its stage adaptation, theatergoers alike. In his newest offering for young people, *Egg & Spoon* (2014), he taps into the premise of a familiar story, "The Prince and the Pauper," while crafting a lyrical tale of poverty and prosperity, magic and mischief, suspense and silliness.

In *Egg & Spoon*, Maguire takes readers to the impoverished Russian countryside, where they meet Elena Rudina, whose mother is slowly dying because there is no food to nourish her or medicine to cure her. When a train containing a noble family, accompanied by their unlimited wealth and food, is detained in the village, two lives soon collide, and the ensuing adventures are filled with mistaken identity and abundant treachery. Rich, descriptive language and engaging vignettes weave together Baba Yaga, the acerbic witch from Russian folklore, with a story of burgeoning friendship and stark determination.

In the following interview, Maguire shares his process for creating *Egg & Spoon* and his ability to successfully construct a story filled with mystery, magic, and mayhem.

"One of the hardest parts of writing novels is making readers realize as early as possible that a character is worth following."



Andy Newman

**BKL:** You set *The Dream Stealer*, published in 1983, in the village of Miersk and drew on Russian tales about Baba Yaga and the Firebird. *Egg & Spoon* also begins in Miersk and captures those same folk stories. Did you know that you wanted to revisit this world?

MAGUIRE: I was approached six years ago by a Hollywood production company that had an interest in making a film out of a book for which I had not yet sold an option or rights. I talked to them about *The Dream Stealer*, and they liked the sound of it. As I started to put it into dramatic form, I began to realize that while the germs of the novel were still captivating to me, I was 30 years older than when I wrote it, and the story wasn't about the things I am interested in now.

It was a short hop from there to say that if Miersk existed 30 years ago, then it exists 30 years later. I thought I'd look in on it and see who is living there now. The population of the city had changed

in the course of a few decades and very few people remained the same, but the eternalists still existed. Baba Yaga has a whiff of eternity about her, as does the Firebird, which is the spirit of Russia. Immediately I realized that while I couldn't write a screenplay based on *The Dream Stealer*, I did want to write a new book set in the same place. *The Dream Stealer* is about a quarter of the length of *Egg & Spoon*, but if you put them side by side and read one after the other, I don't think there are any specific inconsistencies.

**BKL:** Why do you think a story written decades ago stayed with you?

MAGUIRE: There are two really interesting things about *The Dream Stealer*. One is that the central portion of that novel came to me in a dream. I was having nightmares about wolves, and one involved a Russian village. When I woke up from fright, I said to myself that if I don't write this as a story, I'm

going to be pestered by it for a long time. That story became *The Dream Stealer*. In a sense, I was stealing my own dream and turning it into a novel. Twelve years after *The Dream Stealer* was published, I began to write *Wicked*. Now, I look back at the arc of my career, and I think that *The Dream Stealer* was really my first effort to deal with a complex character who lives on the margins of society, and it's impossible to say whether she is good or evil. Baba Yaga in *The Dream Stealer* prefigured Elphaba as the Wicked Witch of the West. It's unpacking a complex character and seeing that the capacity of good and evil exists in all human forms.

**BKL:** *Egg & Spoon* looks at issues such as climate change, floods and droughts, and extreme weather. It appears that an underlying message of the story is that we need to work together to solve the problems that affect us all.

**MAGUIRE:** I don't want to write anything that doesn't have deep significance to me and reflect the things that keep me tossing and turning at night. Currently, I'm not having nightmares about wolves, but I have nightmares about storms. Our house in Vermont was spared the ravage of Hurricane Irene a few summers ago, but many properties in our village were wracked by that storm. As scary as weather issues are, I'm even more frightened about starvation and the changes in food distribution. I worry about the future, and I have to write a book about something; otherwise, there is no reason to write. I'm not strictly an entertainer; I'm a citizen, and I happen to have the skill of telling stories. Unless there is a deep moral question that engages me at the heart of anything I write, whether it is for adults or children, it isn't worth my time.

**BKL:** Do you have suggestions for ways that teachers or librarians can support students in their responses to *Egg & Spoon* and facilitate the rich discussion that can emerge from this multilayered book?

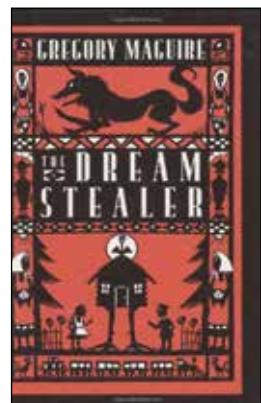
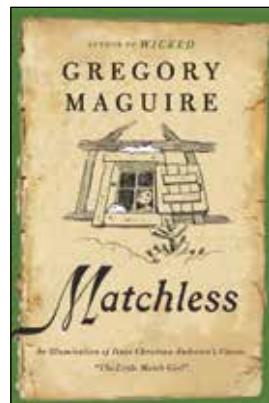
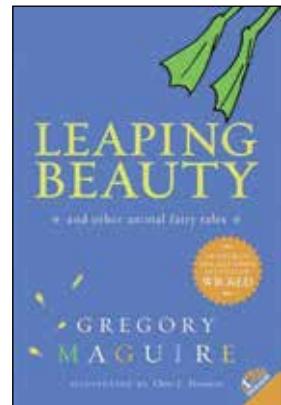
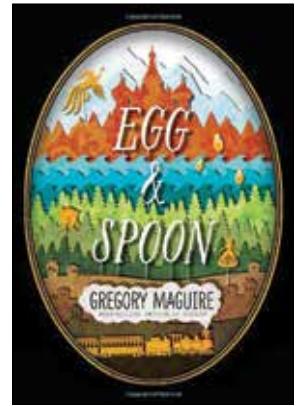
**MAGUIRE:** I haven't read from the

book very often, but there are two things that I have shared in public. One is the chapter in which Baba Yaga and Cat are running out of food and have this discussion about the four different ways to share, including cutting something in half and taking turns. That four-page segment was derived from my parenting techniques of small children. If they are fighting over a piece of pie or who gets to play with the only working Game Boy (about 10 or 12 years ago), you have to teach them about how to live as citizens. One of the things you have to do as a citizen, whether it is a citizen of the family, a citizen of the classroom, or a citizen of the globe, is to determine how you agree to own things. When you have an egg and a spoon, what are your obligations and what are your rights?

**BKL:** Over the course of *Egg & Spoon*, the characters' attributes and shortcomings are revealed slowly. How do you pace those revelations?

**MAGUIRE:** One of the hardest parts of writing novels is making readers realize as early as possible that a character is worth following and to do that without preaching to them or telling them that they should care about that person. When you first meet someone, you can't know everything about them right away other than how they look or the way they make you feel. It's your job to unpack them, and unpacking them takes time.

We are an immediate generation seeking instant gratification. A book requires patience, and there is an investment in trusting that the author is going to make it worth your while. You need to get a return on your investment pretty quickly and decide whether to keep reading. I use the character of the monk being kidnapped at midnight and stuffed into a tower as the opening of the book. Then, you have to know about Elena and her mother and the efforts people have made to keep starvation at bay before Cat arrives on the scene. Otherwise, what Elena has to do won't have any real punch to it.



**BKL:** *Baba Yaga provides comedic moments to release the tension. Is that part of her role in the story?*

MAGUIRE: She is absolutely comic relief. The situation otherwise is quite desperate and frightening. I think readers need a break from time to time. In the most serious books there are comic interludes. They provide a respite for the reader and a chance to realize that the author is making every attempt to present a rounded world. However serious and terrifying our world can be, it is never only serious and terrifying. It is also capable of beauty, kindness, and comedy. So I try to put beauty, kindness, and comedy in any book I have that has a serious message. It makes the story more palatable and more honest.

**BKL:** *The text in Egg & Spoon contains wonderful vocabulary, such as the word feckless. How do you incorporate rich language for an audience that might not be familiar with all the words you use?*

MAGUIRE: The way we learn language is in context. Very few of us read the dictionary to absorb new words. We inherit rich vocabulary from the people using it around us. If I would have seen *feckless* in books over years, I would begin to absorb its meaning. In the meantime, not to have known exactly what *feckless* meant in the sentence didn't mean that I didn't realize a child was being scolded, and *feckless* wasn't a good thing to be, whatever it meant.

**BKL:** *There is a performance quality to your writing, and there are times when readers might be inspired to read passages aloud so that they can hear the language. Do you read your work aloud, and do you feel there is a rhythm to your writing?*

MAGUIRE: I feel there is a rhythm to my writing in the same way that if you like to speak in public or tell stories at the dinner table, there's a rhythm in how you unpack a story. I am subconsciously aware of the music and balance of parallelism and the sudden stops in spoken language that inform how one writes. I absolutely read my work aloud. I may not read every word aloud, but if I have a

passage that is really working well, then I might read it aloud just to make sure that I am right. You may be dazzled by your own temerity and not see that there was a flaw in the pacing or in the conveying of information because you got carried away by the drama, the music, and the rhythm of the language. So I read a lot of work aloud because the placement of a single word or a couple of words makes all the difference in the world.

There is the scene at the beginning of part four when Elena has been arrested and thrown in prison and Cat has been reunited with her great-aunt Sophia. Sophia is angry with Cat because she shows no interest in Elena being in prison. The scene ends when Sophia states, "I have not lost my heart," adjusts her spectacles, slaps Cat across the face, and then says, "Nor my aim." To me, that is very theatrical. The action is brief, and the response is three words. You feel the sting of it in the same way that Sophia would slap her great-niece, with whom she has just been reunited. But that she would slap her is shocking, and it is a moral and brutal action all at the same time, but it is beautiful, too, when she says, "I have not lost my heart." So there is absolutely a rhythm to my sentences.

**BKL:** *As in picture books, page breaks in chapter books move the reader through the story. Do you consider ways to encourage readers to continue turning the pages?*

MAGUIRE: I make sure there is a burst of emotion or an emotional quotient of the book at the end of a chapter. I also make sure that it's not the same kind of burst each time. It's not always a revelation, such as "Your father is alive!" or "Put your hands up!" Sometimes it's quieter, as when the monk sees something happening, and it worries him. That's a punch, too: "And when the cycle is broken? What happens to the magic? What happens to the world?" That's not action, but it's beautiful, and you feel a little swallow in your throat, metaphorically speaking. Then, as a reader, you have to turn the page to see if it is founded or unfounded, and what happens next. The white space on

a page is also meant for you to pause, even if you mentally pause for an eighth of a second to feel a sizzle or sting before you go to the next page.

**BKL:** *At times, the text will state, "Cat said," while at other times, it reads only "Cat:" or "Baba Yaga:" without the word said. Why did you choose to vary the text in that way to indicate who is speaking?*

MAGUIRE: Two reasons. One is that I am acknowledging to myself that when I began to think about this story, I really did think of it in terms of a screenplay and who was going to say what and when. The other reason is that you don't need to have the word *said* as long as you know who is talking. *Said* is a wasted word. I wanted from time to time for my readers to remember that all of this was being written by the monk, and he was working quickly. Sometimes when you are writing and telling a funny story, you start by telling it with full description, but then you get into a shorthand mode and abbreviate it to move along a little faster. The other reason for writing the text this way was pacing. In addition to the rhythm of a sentence, there is a rhythm of people speaking. You wouldn't need *said* if this book were being read out loud in an audiobook. It would be understood who was speaking, because it would be implied by the tone of voice and the accent of the actors.

**BKL:** *Egg & Spoon ends with the sentence, "Live your life." What does that mean for you and for your readers?*

MAGUIRE: In a sense, it doesn't matter what we are given. We might have a great-aunt to take care of us, or we are given dead parents whom we loved and who love us beyond the grave. We have the capacity to turn our backs on what we've been given that might nourish us. You have to want to live your life. It's brief, and it's magnificent, and while much pain and hardship may accompany it, it's also a gift, and you have to accept it and accept it consciously. And so when the monk says "Live your life" at the end to the children, he is basically saying to be conscious and accept sadness with joy.

## Common Core Connections: Gregory Maguire's *Egg & Spoon*

The following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with Gregory Maguire's novel *Egg & Spoon* (2014). You can find more information about the standards at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).



**In the Classroom:** As students read *Egg & Spoon*, have them write down, or mark with a sticky note, "Golden Lines" from the book, which include the following descriptive passages, phrases, or sentences that achieve one or more of the following objectives:

- help you see, smell, feel, taste, or hear something in the book
- make you sound poetic
- connect with your life
- connect with another book, movie, or television show
- make you wonder
- make you laugh
- make you sad or upset
- make you stop and think
- form your favorite part

Remind students to include the page number of their selected passage, phrase, or sentence. Finally, as a class discussion or in a writing assignment, have students share a selection of their chosen lines and why they were personally meaningful.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.1.** Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**In the Classroom:** Instruct students to select one of the central characters from *Egg & Spoon*. As they read, have them consider the

following topics and questions to assist in unpacking the character and respond in either an oral or written exercise:

- Background knowledge: What do you already know about this character?
- Plot details and character motivation: What are the key actions or behaviors of the character? Why does the character do these actions or behaviors?
- Character's perspective about self and others: How does the character feel about the events, himself or herself, and other characters in the story? Why does she or he feel this way?
- Others' perspective of character: What do other characters think about your character? Do your thoughts or feelings change about your character during the course of the story?
- Plot details: How does your character's action and behavior influence or change the plot?

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3.** Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

**In the Classroom:** Locate various retellings of folk tales featuring Baba Yaga and/or the Firebird. Have students read and discuss the stories and identify similarities and differences among them. Use a chart or Venn diagram for students to record their responses. Finally, note traditional elements of the tales that Maguire has drawn from in *Egg & Spoon*.

### Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.9.** Compare and contrast stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics.

**In the Classroom:** Ask students to identify the various societal, environmental, and global issues in *Egg & Spoon*. Next, have students brainstorm a list of similar global issues that concern them. Once this is done, have students rank their items and then select what they feel is the most important or pressing issue and explain why. Finally, have students share their opinions in pairs or in small groups.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.4.** Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

**In the Classroom:** Have students select an event from *Egg & Spoon*. Using a square piece of paper, have students fold in the corners to the center point to make four triangular flaps. On the back of the paper, the students write a description of an event. Next, the student writes a different character's name on each of the flaps. Under the flap will be a description of how the character's point of view impacted the event. Have students share their responses.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.6.** Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

That is what I'm saying to my readers.  
Read my books, but live your life.

### Sampling Maguire

**The Dream Stealer.** Illus. by Diana Bryan. 1983; rev. ed., 2002. 144p. Clarion, o.p. Gr. 3–5.

**Egg & Spoon.** 2014. 496p. Candlewick, \$17.99 (9780763672201). Gr. 6–10.

**Leaping Beauty: And Other Animal Fairy Tales.** Illus. by Chris L. Demarest. 2004. 224p. HarperCollins, paper, \$6.99 (9780060564193). Gr. 5–8.

**Matchless: An Illumination of Hans Christian Andersen's Classic The Little Match Girl.** 2009. 112p. HarperCollins, paper, \$12.99 (9780062004826). Gr. 5–8.

**Missing Sisters.** 1994. p.192. HarperCollins, paper, \$6.99 (9780061232039). Gr. 5–7.

**What the Dickens: The Story of a Rogue Tooth Fairy.** 2007. 304p. Candlewick, \$15.99 (9780763629618). Gr. 6–9. 

**Cyndi Giorgis** is a professor of children's and young adult literature and the Dean of the College of Education at the University of Texas at El Paso.

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