

## — Q&A with Author Gregory Maguire —

*You are an internationally best-selling adult author, but you also have an impressive number of books for children. What made you want to return to writing novels for this age group?*

As readers, kids are by turns demanding, fickle, devout, and unimpressed by literary notices. They are therefore the hardest audience to win over, and the most important one to reach. Unlike that trope about containment, usually referencing Las Vegas, what happens to us in childhood doesn't stay in childhood. Those experiences remain with us our whole life, including the power of what we have read. So it's a mission of the highest order to try to lend humor, consolation, challenge, and stimulation to the lives of children. I hope to be up to the job.

*Baba Yaga plays a pivotal role in Egg & Spoon. Can you explain your preoccupation with witches, since they seem to appear as prominent characters in your books?*

I've spent a long time wondering why witches are attractive characters. I don't mean to be glib when I say all my grade-school teachers were nuns in traditional long black habits. They were strong women, those nuns, smart and fierce. They stood apart from the common round of family life, and they lived in close proximity to mystery: the inscrutable Latin of the Mass, the legends of saints, the prayers and rituals of a Catholic childhood. They were good women, but they brooked no nonsense. The wrath of superior morality might strike at any moment. They were not sadistic, not the ones I knew. They encouraged me in my writing. They were ruthless in their admiration for reading, learning, and self-discipline. And they were also loving, but you had to learn how to see that. Doesn't that sound kind of witchy to you?

*What research went into writing this book? What sources did you draw from for character inspiration and setting?*

I still prefer the label "magic story" over "fantasy." "Magic story" is the term my siblings and I used when describing a new favorite library book. ("Fantasy" made it sound like a clinical delusion, and everyone knew magic was real.) I admit, technically speaking, that *Egg & Spoon* is a fantasy. I set it in a definite (if unnamed) year in the early twentieth century. In order to steep myself in a certain darkly joyful Russian attitude, I first read *War and Peace*, and followed that with Robert Massie's biography *Catherine the Great*. Only when the novel was well into its fourth or fifth draft did I dare skate through *Nicholas and Alexandra*. I didn't want my story to be exactly historical, but to occur in the Russia of our imaginations: the Russia in which *Peter and the Wolf* and *Swan Lake* and *Doctor Zhivago* might all be happening simultaneously.

*Egg & Spoon is a rich, layered novel — but if you had to boil it down to one central theme that you hoped young readers would take away from it, what would that be?*

Something deep motivates every literary fantasy, even whimsies like *Winnie-the-Pooh*. My new book features a quest agenda laid upon a prince-and-the-pauper plotline, but you're asking for a theme. It may be this: at moments of high peril, we must lay aside our private ambitions and work for the good of all, or we run the risk that none of us, and nothing that we value, will endure.