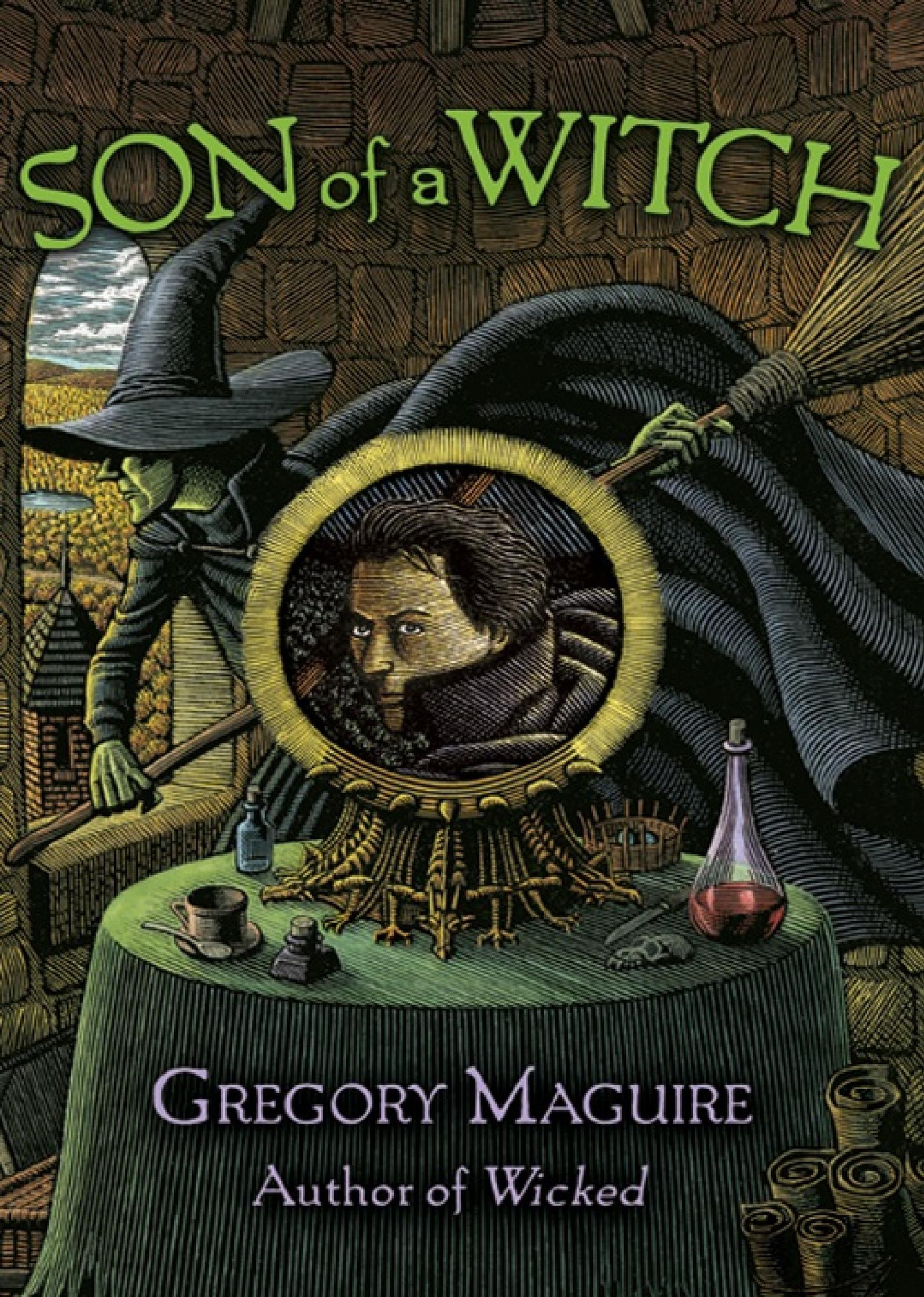


SON of a WITCH



GREGORY MAGUIRE

Author of *Wicked*

SON OF A WITCH

A NOVEL

Gregory Maguire

 HarperCollins e-books

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[L. FRANK BAUM'S second Oz novel, *The Marvelous Land of Oz* \(1904\)](#), was dedicated to the actors David C. Montgomery and Fred A. Stone, who performed the roles of the Tin Woodman and the Scarecrow in the first theatrical version of *The Wizard of Oz*.

In that spirit, *Son of a Witch* is dedicated to the cast and creative team of the musical *Wicked*, which opened on Broadway in October 2003—the night before Halloween.

To Winnie Holzman and Stephen Schwartz, foremost and first, for their vision; to Wayne Cilento, Susan Hilferty, Eugene Lee, Joe Mantello, Stephen Oremus, Kenneth Posner, and Marc Platt and his associates, for bringing visions to life; and, among all the capable cast, most especially to Kristin Chenoweth (*Galinda/Glinda*), Joel Grey (*The Wizard*), and Idina Menzel (*Elphaba*), for bringing life to visions.

I HAVE NO FEAR that the poetry of democratic peoples will be found timid or that it will stick too close to the earth.

I am much more afraid that it...may finish up by describing an entirely fictitious country.

—Alexis de Tocqueville,
Democracy in America, 1835, 1840

ALL COWS were like all other cows, all tigers like
all other tigers—what on earth has happened to
human beings?

—Harry Mulisch,
Siegfried, 2001

Under the Jackal Moon

The House of Saint Glinda

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SO THE TALK OF RANDOM BRUTALITY wasn't just talk. At noontime they discovered the bodies of three young women, out on some mission of conversion that appeared to have gone awry. The novice maunts had been strangled by their ropes of holy beads, and their faces removed.

Her nerve being shaken at last, Oatsie Manglehand now caved in to the demands of her paying customers. She told the team drivers they'd pause only long enough to dig some shallow graves while the horses slaked their thirst. Then the caravan would press on across the scrubby flats known, for the failed farmsteads abandoned here and there, as the Disappointments.

Moving by night, at least they wouldn't make a sitting target, though they might as easily wander into trouble as sidestep it. Still, Oatsie's party was antsy. Hunker down all night and wait for horse hoofs, spears? Too hard on everyone. Oatsie consoled herself: If the caravan kept moving, she could sit forward with her eyes peeled, out of range of the carping, the second-guessing, the worrying.

With the benefit of height, therefore, Oatsie spotted the gully before anyone else did. The cloudburst at sunset had fed a small trackside rivulet that flowed around a flank of skin, water-lacquered in the new moonlight. An island, she feared, of human flesh.

I ought to turn aside before the others notice, she thought; how much more can they take? There is nothing I can do for that human soul. The digging of another trench would require an hour, minimum. An additional few moments for prayers. The project would only further agitate these clients as they obsess about their own precious mortality.

Upon the knee of the horizon balanced the head of a jackal moon, so-called because, once every generation or so, a smear of celestial flotsam converged behind the crescent moon of early autumn. The impact was creepy, a look of a brow and a snout. As the moon rounded out over a period of weeks, the starveling would turn into

a successful hunter, its cheeks bulging.

Always a fearsome sight, the jackal moon tonight spooked Oatsie Manglehand further. *Don't stop for this next casualty. Get through the Disappointments, deliver these paying customers to the gates of the Emerald City.* But she resisted giving in to superstition. Be scared of the real jackals, she reminded herself, not frets and nocturnal portents.

In any case, the light of the constellation alleviated some of the color blindness that sets in at night. The body was pale, almost luminous. Oatsie might divert the Grasstrail Train and give the corpse a wide berth before anyone else noticed it, but the slope of the person's shoulders, the unnatural twist of legs—the jackal moon made her read the figure too well, as too clearly human, for her to be able to turn aside.

“Nubb,” she barked to her second, “rein in. We'll pull into flank formation up that rise. There's another fatality, there in the runoff.”

Cries of alarm as the news passed back, and another mutter of mutiny: Why should they stop?—were they to bear witness to every fresh atrocity? Oatsie didn't listen. She yanked the reins of her team of horses, to halt them, and she lowered herself gingerly. She stumped, her hand on her sore hip, until she stood a few feet over the body.

Face down and genitals hidden, he appeared to have been a young man. A few scraps of fabric were still knotted about his waist, and a boot some yards distant, but he was otherwise naked, and no sign of his clothes.

Curious: no evidence of the assassins. Neither had there been about the bodies of the maunts, but that was on rockier ground, in a drier hour. Oatsie couldn't see any sign of scuffle here, and in the mud of the gulch one might have expected...something. The body wasn't bloody, nor decayed yet; the murder was recent. Perhaps this evening, perhaps only an hour ago.

“Nubb, let's heave him up and see if they've taken his face,” she said.

“No blood,” said Nubb.

“Blood may have run off in that cloudburst. Steel yourself, now.”

They got on either side of the body and bit their lips. She looked at Nubb, meaning: It's only the next thing, it's not the last thing. Let's get through this, fellow.

She jerked her head in the direction of the hoist. One, two, heave.

They got him up. His head had fallen into a natural scoop in the stone, a few inches higher than where the rain had pooled. His face was intact, more or less; that is to say, it was still there, though shattered.