



# Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister: A Novel

By Gregory Maguire

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“[An] engrossing story...endearing and memorable.”

—*Boston Herald*

“[An] arresting hybrid of mystery, fairy tale, and historical novel.”

—*Detroit Free Press*

“A tale so movingly told that you will say at the end of the first reading, ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve read a book this good.’”

—*Nashville Tennessean*

Gregory Maguire proves himself to be “one of contemporary fiction’s most assured myth-makers” (*Kirkus Reviews*) with *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, his ingenious and provocative retelling of the timeless Cinderella fairy tale. Perhaps best known for his dark and breathtaking Oz series *The Wicked Years*—including the novel *Wicked*, which inspired the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical—Maguire is a master at upending the ordinary to help us see the familiar in a brilliant new light.

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## Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister: A Novel By Gregory Maguire Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1450168 in Books
- Published on: 2010-09-28
- Released on: 2010-09-28
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .96" w x 6.00" l, .90 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 384 pages



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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Gregory Maguire's chilling, wonderful retelling of *Cinderella* is a study in contrasts. Love and hate, beauty and ugliness, cruelty and charity--each idea is stripped of its ethical trappings, smashed up against its opposite number, and laid bare for our examination. *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* begins in 17th-century Holland, where the two Fisher sisters and their mother have fled to escape a hostile England. Maguire's characters are at once more human and more fanciful than their fairy-tale originals. Plain but smart Iris and her sister, Ruth, a hulking simpleton, are dazed and terrified as their mother, Margarethe, urges them into the strange Dutch streets. Within days, purposeful Margarethe has secured the family a place in the home of an aspiring painter, where for a short time, they find happiness.

But this is *Cinderella*, after all, and tragedy is inevitable. When a wealthy tulip speculator commissions the painter to capture his blindingly lovely daughter, Clara, on canvas, Margarethe jumps at the chance to better their lot. "Give me room to cast my eel spear, and let follow what may," she crows, and the Fisher family abandons the artist for the upper-crust Van den Meers.

When Van den Meer's wife dies during childbirth, the stage is set for Margarethe to take over the household and for Clara to adopt the role of "Cinderling" in order to survive. What follows is a changeling adventure, and of course a ball, a handsome prince, a lost slipper, and what might even be a fairy godmother. In a single magic night, the exquisite and the ugly swirl around in a heated mix:

Everything about this moment hovers, trembles, all their sweet, unreasonable hopes on view before anything has had the chance to go wrong. A stepsister spins on black and white tiles, in glass slippers and a gold gown, and two stepsisters watch with unrelieved admiration. The light pours in, strengthening in its golden hue as the sun sinks and the evening approaches. Clara is as otherworldly as the Donkeywoman, the Girl-Boy. Extreme beauty is an affliction...

But beyond these familiar elements, Maguire's second novel becomes something else altogether--a morality play, a psychological study, a feminist manifesto, or perhaps a plain explanation of what it is to be human. Villains turn out to be heroes, and heroes disappoint. The story's narrator wryly observes, "In the lives of children, pumpkins can turn into coaches, mice and rats into human beings. When we grow up, we learn that it's far more common for human beings to turn into rats." --*Therese Littleton*

#### From Publishers Weekly

The inspired concept of Maguire's praised debut, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, was not a fluke. Here he presents an equally beguiling reconstruction of the *Cinderella* story, set in the 17th century, in which the protagonist is not the beautiful princess-to-be but her plain stepsister. Iris Fisher is an intelligent young woman struggling with poverty and plain looks. She, her mother, Margarethe, and her retarded sister, Ruth, flee their English country village in the wake of her father's violent death, hoping to find welcome in Margarethe's native Holland. But the practical Dutch are fighting the plague and have no sympathy for the needy family. Finally, a portrait painter agrees to hire them as servants, specifying that Iris will be his model. Iris is heartbroken the first time she sees her likeness on canvas, but she begins to understand the function of art. She gains a wider vision of the world when a wealthy merchant named van den Meer becomes the artist's patron, and employs the Fishers to deal with his demanding wife and beautiful but difficult daughter, Clara. Margarethe eventually marries van den Meer, making Clara Iris's stepsister. As her family's hardships ease, Iris begins to long for things inappropriate for a homely girl of her station, like

love and beautiful objects. She finds solace and identity as she begins to study painting. Maguire's sophisticated storytelling refreshingly reimagines age-old themes and folklore-familiar characters. Shrewd, pushy, desperate Margarethe is one of his best creations, while his prose is an inventive blend of historically accurate but zesty dialogue and lyrical passages about saving power of art. The narrative is both "magical," as in fairy tales, and anchored in the reality of the 17th century, an astute balance of the ideal and sordid sides of human nature in a vision that fantasy lovers will find hard to resist. (Oct.)

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From School Library Journal

YA-What were Cinderella's wicked stepmother and the ugly stepsisters really like? Maguire has come up with a fascinating hypothesis in this logical, not necessarily magical, retelling of the classic tale. Recently arrived from England, the Dutch-born widow Margarethe and her two children, ungainly and seemingly slow-witted Ruth and plain but intelligent Iris, move into the social mix that is Haarlem in the 17th century. Soon after her arrival, she marries a newly widowed tulip merchant with one child. The author firmly places his characters into the down-to-earth and stolid reality of a Holland fearful of the plague and intent on developing the tulip business that will make it famous, yet capable of nurturing Rembrandt and Hals. The well-drawn characters include a striving Dutch painter and his appealing apprentice; a beautiful, otherworldly child; her scatterbrained mother and burgher father; and even "The Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies." The plot is plausible and, given the fact that readers will think they know how it all works out, full of surprises. This is not an easy read, but the pretext is appealing and the resulting story worth the effort. Thoughtful YAs will enjoy a new take on a familiar tale, and be thoroughly involved in this historical romp.

*Susan H. Woodcock, Chantilly Regional Library, VA*

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