



Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister by Gregory Maguire

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 Library Journal

After years of writing quality fantasy for children, Maguire published his first adult novel, *Wicked*, to literary acclaim. His new novel is even more accomplished, setting the Cinderella story in 17th-century Holland and making it a narrative of domestic upheavals and artistic challenges. The tale begins with the arrival of a recent widow from England, returned to her native Haarlem with her apparently retarded older daughter and a younger one who is unattractive but sharp and quickly develops an interest in painting. The three become housekeepers to the family of a tulip merchant; when his wife dies, leaving his own young daughter motherless, merchant and widow marry, and their daughters become stepsisters. Maguire places the reader wholly within his story's milieu, evoking the smells, the sights, and the superstitions of the time while deftly capturing his characters' personalities. The plot cannot be intended to surprise, but the sophisticated retelling gives the reader new insights into the truths about human motivations within relationships. For literary collections, including those for older teens.

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From Kirkus Reviews

A revisionist view of Cinderella's adoptive family dominates this brilliantly plotted fantasy from Maguire, a popular children's book author whose first adult novel, *Wicked* (1995), offered a similar reimagining of the land of Oz. The time is the 17th century, the place Holland. And the story begins when Dutch-born Margarethe Fisher brings her daughters from their native England to the thriving city of Haarlem, where a kindly grandfather's home promises safe haven. But Grandfather has died; preadolescent Iris (who narrates) is too plain to marry, and elder sister Ruth is an ungainly simpleton scarcely able to speak. A beautiful "changeling" child seen through a window confers a kind of blessing on the astonished Ruth, and the resourceful Margarethe quickly restores their fortunes, installing them as house servants to portrait painter Luykas Schoonmaker ("The Master") and later marrying Luykas's widowed and wealthy patron, importer Cornelius van den Meer (whose willful, strangely reclusive daughter Clara is that very "changeling"). As Margarethe seizes ever greater riches and power, Iris begins to blossom into a confident young woman whose artist's eye earns her the respect of both the Master and his handsome apprentice Caspar, becoming a handmaiden-mentor whom the highborn beauty Clara eventually accepts as a sister. Maguire's patient re-creation of the world of the Dutch burghers builds a solid realistic base from which the novel soars into beguiling fantasy when its links with the familiar Cinderella story become explicit. The visiting Dowager Queen of France arrives in Haarlem seeking a worthy portraitist. A lavish ball, Clara's enchantment of a Handsome Prince, a climactic fire, and a wonderfully ironic surprise ending all figure prominently in the superbly woven climax and denouement. A ravishing meditation on the truism that "beauty helps preserve the spirit of mankind." Maguire is rapidly becoming one of contemporary fiction's most assured myth-makers.

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