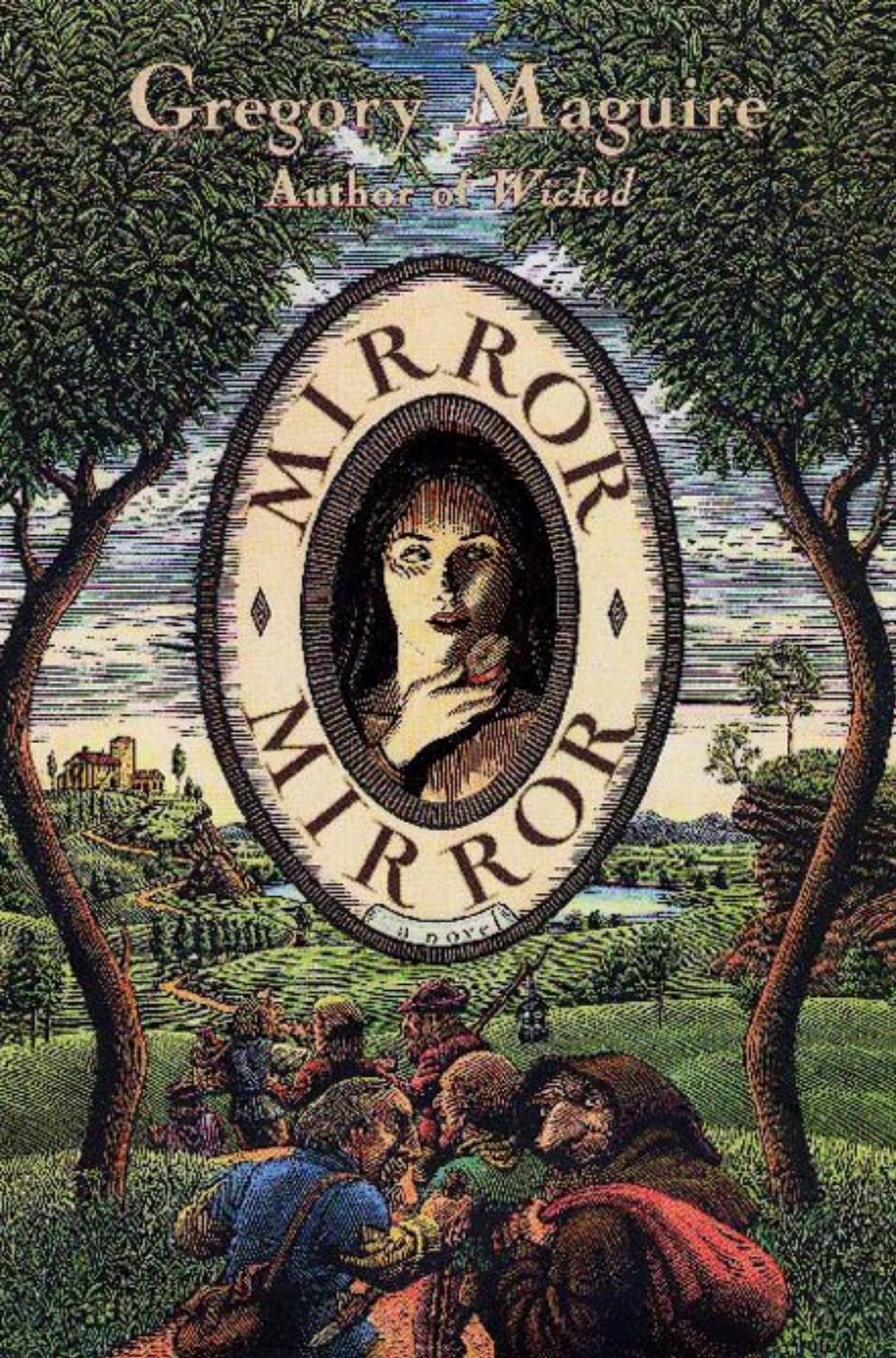
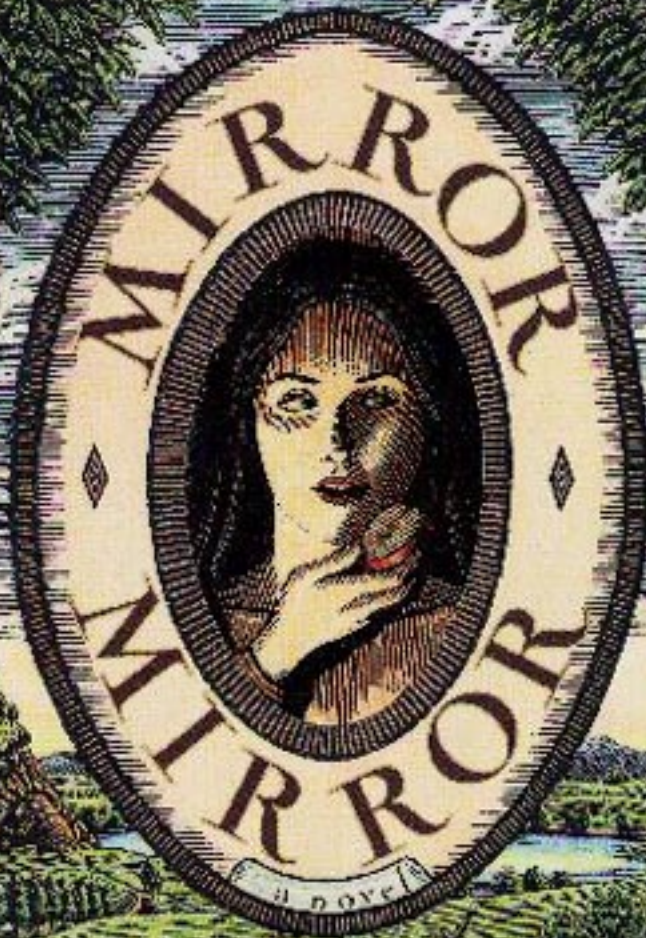
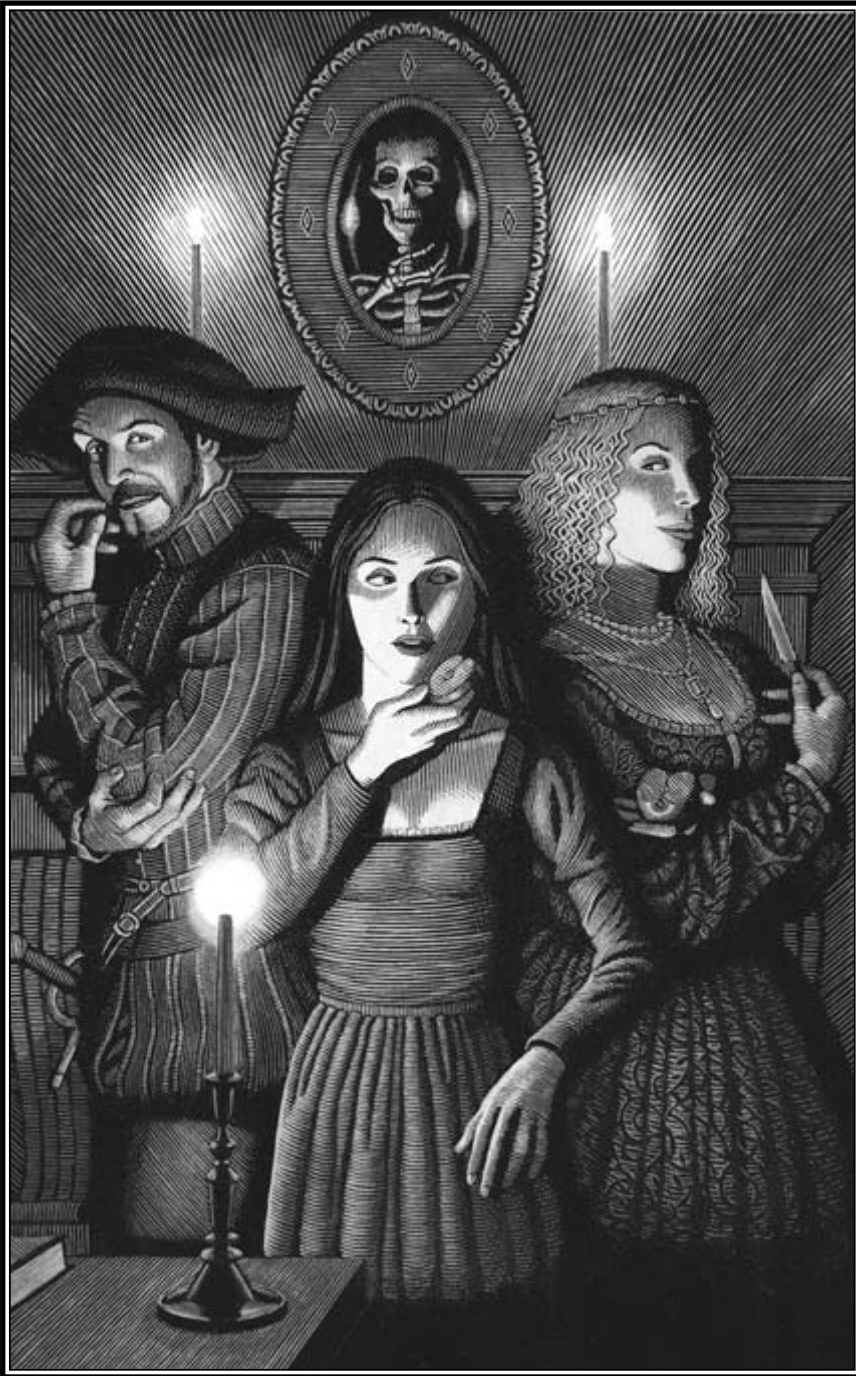


Gregory Maguire

Author of *Wicked*





MIRROR MIRROR



Gregory Maguire

 perfectbound

For
Jane Langton,
Jill Paton Walsh,
and
John Rowe Townsend



Se non è vero è ben trovato.

Even if it's not true, it's a good invention.

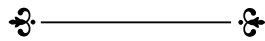
*I am a girl who did no wrong
I am a woman who slept with my father the Pope
I am a rock whose hands have appetites
I am a hunter who cannot kill
I am a mercenary with the French disease
I am a girl who lived among stones
I am a woman who poisoned my enemies
I am a rock and my brothers are rocks
I am a cleric who trafficked in curses
I am a gooseboy or am I a goose
I am a girl who did little wrong
I am a gooseboy or am I a boy
I am a farmer who stole something sacred
I am a monster who let the child go
I am a dog with an unlikely past
I am a hunter who followed the coffin
I am a girl who did something wrong
I am the other side of snow*

I am a mirror a mirror am I

*Mirror mirror on the wall
Who is the fairest one of all*

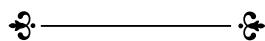
DO PEOPLE say that I am both your father and your lover? Let the world, that heap of vermin as ridiculous as they are feeble-minded, believe the most absurd tales about the mighty! You must know that for those destined to dominate others, the ordinary rules of life are turned upside down and duty acquires an entirely new meaning. Good and evil are carried off to a higher, different plane. . . .

Remember this. Walk straight ahead. Do only what you like, as long as it is of some use to you. Leave hesitation and scruples to small minds, to plebeians and subordinates. One consideration alone is worthy of you—the elevation of the House of Borgia, the elevation of yourself.



—Alexander VI's speech to Lucrezia Borgia, from Arthur de Gobineau's *Scènes historiques de la Renaissance* (1877),
as quoted in *The Borgias* by Ivan Clouas (1989)

ONE DAY some Lombard masons working near the cloister of Sta. Maria Nuova just off the Via Appia had opened a sarcophagus and found the body of a young Roman woman of about fifteen, so well preserved that it seemed alive. A crowd had gathered around and admired the girl's rosy skin, her half-open lips revealing very white teeth, her ears, her black lashes, dark, wide-open eyes, and beautiful hair, done in a knot . . .



— *The Borgias*, *ibid.*

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(read the original version of the classic fairy tale)

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The roofs of Montefiore



FROM THE arable river lands to the south, the approach to Montefiore appears a sequence of relaxed hills. In the late spring, when the puckers of red poppy blossom are scattered against the green of the season, it can look like so much washing, like mounds of Persian silk and Florentine brocade lightly tossed in heaps. Each successive rise takes on a new color, indefinitely more fervent, an aspect of distance and time stained by the shadows of clouds, or bleached when the sun takes a certain position.

But the traveler on foot or in a hobble-wheeled peasant cart, or even on horseback, learns the truth of the terrain. The ascent is steeper than it looks from below. And the rutted track traverses in long switchbacks to accommodate for the severity of the grade and the crosscutting ravines. So the trip takes many more hours than the view suggests. The red-tiled roofs of Montefiore come into sight, promisingly, and then they disappear again as hills loom up and forests close in.



Often I have traveled the road to Montefiore in memory. Today I travel it in true time, true dust, true air. When the track lends me height enough, I can glimpse the villa's red roofs above the ranks of poplars, across the intervening valleys. But I can't tell if the house is peopled with my friends and my family, or with rogues who have murdered the servants in their beds. I can't tell if the walls below the roofline are scorched with smoke, or if the doors are marked with an ashy cross to suggest that plague has come to gnaw the living into their mortal rest, their last gritty blanket shoveled over their heads.

But I have come out of one death, the one whose walls were glass; I have awakened into a second life dearer for being both unpromised and undeserved. Anyone who walks from her own grave relies on the unexpected. Anyone who walks from her own grave knows that death is more patient than Gesù Cristo. Death can afford to wait.

But now the track turns again, and my view momentarily spins back along the slopes I've climbed so far. My eye traces the foothills already gained, considers the alphabet of light that spells its unreadable words on the surface of the river. My eye also moves along the past, to my early misapprehensions committed to memory on this isolated outcropping.

The eye is always caught by light, but shadows have more to say.

Rest. Breathe in, breathe out. No one can harm you further than death could do. When rested, you must go on; you must find out the truth about Montefiore. Granted a second life, you must find in it more meaning than you could ever determine in your first.

• 1502 •



The name of the world



THE WORLD was called Montefiore, as far as she knew, and from her aerie on every side all the world descended.

Like any child, she looked out and across rather than in. She was more familiar with the vistas, the promising valleys with their hidden hamlets, the scope of the future arranged in terms of hills and light.

Once a small dragon had become trapped in the bird-snaring nets slung in the *uccellare*. Bianca watched as the cook's adolescent grandson tried to cut it down and release it. Her eyes were fixed on the creature, the stray impossibility of it, not on the spinney in which it was caught. How it twitched, its webbed claws a pearly chalcedony, its eyes frantic and unblinking. (Despite the boy's efforts, it died, and his grandmother flayed it for skin with which to patch the kitchen bellows.)

Bianca regarded visitors to Montefiore with fierce attention:



emissaries of the world. But the bones of her home—the house itself—remained as familiar and unregarded as her own fingernails.

Montefiore was larger than a farmer's villa but not so imposing as a castle. Too far from anywhere important to serve as a *casale*—a country house—it crowned an upthrust shoulder of land, so its fortifications were natural. On all sides, the steepness of the slope was a deterrent to invaders, and anyway, Montefiore wasn't large enough to interest the *condottieri* who led their small armies along the riverbank on one campaign or another.

Had Bianca an adult eye, she might have guessed from its mismatched roofs and inconsistent architectural details that many owners had lived here before her family arrived, shaping the space with a disregard for symmetry or loveliness. When its masters had had money, they'd made attempts to drill a little grandeur into the old stone hull, like crisp starched lace tied under the wet chins of a drooling *nonna*. A recently completed interior courtyard, handsomely done with columns and vaults in the revived archaic style, provided relief from the roaring breeze.

Except for the courtyard, though, most attempts at improvement had been abandoned in mid-effort. Some windows were fitted with glass, but in most windows, squares of linen had been nailed to the shutter moldings, pale light conferring a sense of height and volume to the dark rooms. Along one retaining wall, a loggia ran unevenly, its walls inset with terrazzo putti whose faces had become bubonic with the remains of insect cocoons. For half a century the chapel had stood with a roof beam and naked struts, the old cladding and tiles having been swept away in an arrogant gale. When the January *tramontana* blustered in, the geese sometimes sheltered there from the wind, though they seldom took communion.

Fortunately too inaccessible to garrison an army, Montefiore was nonetheless valuable as a lookout. From time to time in its history it had been commandeered for its prospects. On a clear day one imagined one could glimpse the sea.

What child does not feel itself perched at the center of creation?



Before catechisms can instill a proper humility, small children know the truth that their own existence has caused the world to bloom into being. The particular geography of home always charms, but the geography of Montefiore was unarguably pastoral. The arrangement of Tuscan and Umbrian vistas, draped from the very threshold of home through diminishing folds to the horizons, taught soft blues and browns to Bianca de Nevada. That was what they were there for; this brown, that blue; this here, that there.

These moments, more or less, had their flashing existence, circa 1500 anno Domini, though the name of a year means little to one who doesn't yet know the name of corruption.

Lago Verde



THERE WERE the grapes to harvest, the sweeter first olives and the richer late ones, and the second cutting of hay to manage before an early frost sapped it of life. But the weather, this year, was benign, and the agricultural operations around Montefiore were conducted without delay, each in its time. Therefore, the cook's augury of chicken livers predicting success, Vicente de Nevada organized a corpus of laborers to continue work on ditch digging at the far end of the green lake.

Still considered an unacceptable landlord—for the Spanish slant to his otherwise serviceable Italian—de Nevada was tolerated but not admired. Well, he was new in the district still, only these few years, having arrived from the suspicious unknown with a motherless child and a writ of occupancy sealed in a plum-colored wax. He was a quiet man and a gentle one, and his passions, as far as the locals observed, didn't show in a manly, obvious way upon his face; so he



wasn't admired. Who could take the time to study a man whose face was the same in winter or summer, in prayer or labor, on feastday or, presumably, at an auto-da-fé in his homeland, Spain? No, Vicente wasn't admired, but he was tolerated: he saw to it that the sick were tended, the dead blessed by the priest attached to Montefiore, and the wheat shared out and the apples in their time, and the joiner paid for his labors when a coffin had to be built.

Vicente de Nevada loved his small holding, and since the weather was cooperating and the work crew needed encouragement, he pulled off his shirt and got hip-deep in the swampy water at the lake's draining edge. He helped to unsettle boulders that had rolled into the mud back in the time of Potiphar.

"Go on, assist the good man, you lazy cleric," said Primavera Vecchia, the cook.

"It wouldn't be seemly," said Fra Ludovico calmly. "If you think he needs help, do it yourself."

"I'm watching the child."

"Leave her in my watch."

"What a mistake that would be. She'd wander up to her nose in the green water and drown before your eyes, while you tiptoed around squealing for an angel to come to her aide. I'd no more leave her in your care than I would my own soul."

"Hmmmph," said Fra Ludovico. "I've never been persuaded you had much of a soul. More like a little damp anchovy stuck between your breasts, trying to breathe. That's what you smell like, anyway."

The small girl balanced on the margin of the moment, toes in the water and heels in the mud. She was thinking that from the house, the small lake did look green, because regular flooding made the poplars stand knee-deep in water. But from here, on site, with the sun sliding westward, the water looked silvered, and there were flicking scales of sky blue and white as well as poplar green and an uncertain black.

The reflections speckled her pale skin. She stopped to ruck her tunic a few inches higher. It was tied in a knot in back, with a vague hope of keeping it dry, but its hem was dripping.

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