

The Next Queen of Heaven

by Gregory Maguire



About the Book

With the new millennium approaching, the eccentric town of Thebes grows even stranger. Mrs. Leontina Scales begins speaking in tongues after being clocked by a Catholic statuette. Her daughter, Tabitha, and her sons scheme to save their mother or surrender her to Jesus --- whatever comes first. Meanwhile, choir director Jeremy Carr, caught between lust and ambition, fumbles his way toward Y2K. The ancient Sisters of the Sorrowful Mysteries join with a gay singing group. The Radical Radiants battle the Catholics. A Christmas pageant goes horribly awry. And a child is born.

Only a modern master like Gregory Maguire could spin a tale as frantic, funny, and farcical as **The Next Queen of Heaven**.

Discussion Guide

1. A history of millennial anxiety has plagued the Western, largely Christian world since the turn of the first millennium in 999 (technically the millennium turns at the end of the year 1000, but 999 and 1999 seem more propitious as dates over which to gnash our collective teeth). Even the half-millennium at 1499 provoked fears of the world ending, prophecies of doom, the Apocalypse, the Second Coming of Christ, and so on. While in 1999 our overt fears seemed largely focused on the Y2K problems of potential global computer meltdown, it might be said that the anxiety over related fears of social anarchy through the disruption of transportation, food distribution, and communication networks was just a modern version of our age-old dread of change. In what ways do Tabitha, Jeremy, Pastor Huyck, Mrs. Scales, Sean Reilly, and the other citizens of Thebes express --- or resist --- the anxiety of the period, as late autumn yields to winter and to New Year's Eve, 1999?

2. With notable exceptions, especially in the years since this book takes place, in general our America culture is particularly tolerant of the freedom to live in a sacred or a secular way. On the one hand, piety in America is expressed in a thousand and one different manifestations, from the personal epiphany of a momentary mood to mass hypnosis on a

cult level --- and many legitimate and persuasive (if peculiar) instances of codified faith and belief systems in between. **The Next Queen of Heaven** demonstrates a number of varieties of religious experience in the lives of its many characters. How would you enumerate or characterize them, and who --- if any --- is the person whose experiences most closely accord with experiences of your own?

3. The story of **The Next Queen of Heaven** is set --- purposefully --- about five years before the revelations about the machinations of the hierarchy of the Catholic church in covering up or inadequately punishing the crimes of pederasty on the part of some of its priests. Does knowing what history would reveal to us five years after the end of the story in any way effect how you read the scenes that express religious and laity in their practice of honorable Catholic devotion?

4. Further to that point about timing, the book concludes in late January, 2000. Y2K has come and gone, and the menace of social breakdown has not happened. Jeremy and Tabitha (and for that matter, Mrs. Scales) live into a new century and a new millennium (as they count it) and, in relief, try harder to escape their various lonelinesses. But we know, as they cannot, that September 11, 2001, is only twenty months away, and that for many alive at this critical moment, the century will seem to begin right then, that day, with a dawning awareness of horror that was not to be left behind in the vicious twentieth century. Indeed, Jeremy may even have gotten a job in the World Trade Center, we realize. Does knowing this, as the characters cannot, change the impact and meaning of their successful escape from their various woes? Put more philosophically, perhaps, are our own lives made more precious or more defeated by the knowledge of the certain catastrophe of death that awaits, sooner or later, for us all?

5. Is there a character in the novel who might legitimately be thought to be **The Next Queen of Heaven**? Who would you nominate, and why?

6. Thebes, New York, is an invented town, though it shares some characteristics with small upstate New York towns in the work of John Gardner, Richard Russo, perhaps William Kennedy. The portrait of a town as seen through its inhabitants is a tricky business. Garrison Keillor can do it, but he has had decades to build up the impasto that suggests permanence and transience alike, decades in which to remind us that local history is made up of single days lived one at a time, from one point of view at a time. In what ways and at what points does Thebes come most clearly to life? Were you to scribble a short story about an incident in Thebes that the author apparently neglected to include, what incident might round out the picture of this hardscrabble town on the shores of Lake Ontario?

7. Tabitha Scales is foul-mouthed and her mother, until the accident, has a tongue washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. In what ways do Tabitha and her mother trade places in the course of the novel? In what ways might Tabitha be said to be a result of the apparently well-meant if dubious child-rearing practices of her mother?

8. While sex is talked about freely in this novel, the incidents of sexual congress happen either in the past or off-stage. Jeremy Carr, particularly, has become paralyzed in his emotional life due to his actively freshened memories of his romance with the love of his life, Willem Handelaers. And the novel and riveting erotic experiences Tabitha has lately enjoyed with her former boyfriend capsize her ability to think beyond him, to see herself in Thebes in any vital and fulfilled way. (In this way, the younger of the two, she is way ahead of sluggish Jeremy.) Does the involvement in sex and romance with either of these characters seem to contradict whatever passes in them for spiritual experience? Why or why not?

9. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Scales might be said to be deluding herself about her capacity as a mother, about

her overall rectitude. Perhaps the clonk on the noggin she receives is a moment of revelation to her, a kind of Annunciation, that she has to deal with her own inner demons before she can capably address the foibles of her children. However, how does her daughter delude herself, too? Is Hogan guilty of self-delusion? Kirk? In fact, is Tabitha actually pregnant at novel's end, or is she experiencing an hysterical pregnancy? To what in the text can you point to support your claims?

10. The author has revealed that some of his personal experiences inspired part of the novel. He was, for instance, the director of a choir in a Catholic church in upstate New York while he was in college and shortly thereafter. One unsigned criticism of the novel on a blog or discussion board suggested that the author allowed himself to be too easy on the Catholic church while consigning the Pentecostal church next door to the situation of providing comic relief --- that is, weighting the story theologically in favor of Catholicism over fundamentalist Protestantism. Is there any validity to this criticism? In the course of telling a story, is a novelist obliged in any way to fairness in representing characters, or is allowing the characters to behave according to the needs of the story the only criterion of legitimacy required?

Author Bio

Gregory Maguire is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *A WILD WINTER SWAN*; *HIDDENSEE*; *AFTER ALICE*; *CONFESSIONS OF AN UGLY STEPSISTER*; *LOST*; *MIRROR MIRROR*; and the *Wicked Years*, a series that includes *WICKED* --- the beloved classic that is the basis for the blockbuster Tony Award-winning Broadway musical of the same name --- *SON OF A WITCH*, *A LION AMONG MEN* and *OUT OF OZ*. He lives with his family in New England.

Critical Praise

"A delight. . . . [A] funny and warmhearted exploration of the sacred and the profane."

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