



THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

THE FLIGHT OF GEMMA HARDY

A Novel

by Margot Livesey

Acclaimed, award-winning author Margot Livesey delivers her breakout novel: a captivating tale that is both an homage and a modern variation on the enduring classic, *Jane Eyre*.

The Flight of Gemma Hardy is set in Scotland in the 1950s and '60s and follows Gemma Hardy, an orphan, from the ages of ten to nineteen. After her parents die in Iceland, Gemma moves to Scotland to live with her uncle. The novel opens soon after his death as she realizes how unwelcome she is in her aunt's household. A scholarship to a private school seems an ideal solution, but at Claypoole Gemma finds herself treated as an unpaid servant.

To her delight, the school finally goes bankrupt and she takes a job as an au pair on the Orkney Islands. The remote Blackbird Hall belongs to Mr. Sinclair, who works in London; his eight-year-old niece is Gemma's charge. Even before their first meeting Gemma is, like everyone around her, intrigued by Mr. Sinclair. Rich (by her standards), single, flying in from London when he pleases, Hugh Sinclair plays a crucial role in the life of the community. When he arrives for his annual holiday, he and his guests fill the house with life. One day he invites Gemma on an expedition and the two of them talk not as employer and au pair, but as equals. Their courtship leads to the chambered tomb of Maes Howe, where Mr. Sinclair confesses the secret that has shadowed his youth.

Dismayed, Gemma flees to mainland Scotland and vows to forget him. But as she rebuilds her life she wonders with increasing intensity whether she may still have a family in Iceland. As for her vow, that proves harder to keep than she imagines.

“I have re-read *Jane Eyre* a number of times since my first passionate reading and my understanding of the novel has shifted with each visit. Like most readers I was initially riveted by the discovery of Bertha in the attic but on re-reading I saw that Jane had a larger part in her own fate than I had first understood.”

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HOW DID THE IDEA FOR YOUR BOOK ORIGINATE?

I fell in love with *Jane Eyre* the winter I was nine years old. I was living at that time at Bell's Cottage with my father and my elderly stepmother. Our sitting room window looked out on the moors and just down the road was the boys' school where my father taught with its battlements and turrets. I knew every bird's nest and tree around our house; I knew where to find the first snowdrops and the last rowan berries.

The next summer my father moved to the Borders of Scotland and I was enrolled in a private girls' school. I was an outsider at Craigmount in several respects. I was a day pupil and almost everyone else boarded; my family was poor; and by dint of hard work I was in a class of girls several years older than myself. I was bullied and I prayed nightly for the school to burn down.

Eventually the school did close for financial reasons and my life grew easier. I studied hard and waited for someone, a man, to recognize me. (Dear reader, someone did.)

I have re-read *Jane Eyre* a number of times since my first passionate reading and my understanding of the novel has shifted with each visit. Like most readers I was initially riveted by the discovery of Bertha in the attic but on re-reading I saw that Jane had a larger part in her own fate than I had first understood. It is she who, inadvertently, in her quest for equality with Rochester, causes Bertha's brother to come and break up the wedding. And when she and Rochester are at last united she has her own income, and her own strong sense of self.

I made my heroine a little older than me because I wanted her to come of age just slightly before the rising tide of feminism—the pill, equal pay, discrimination—broke over both Britain and the States. *The Flight of Gemma Hardy* is, in my mind, neither my autobiography nor a retelling of *Jane Eyre*. Rather I am writing back to Brontë, recasting Jane's journey to fit my own courageous heroine and the possibilities of her time and place. And like Brontë I am, of course, stealing from my own life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margot Livesey is the acclaimed author of the novels *The House on Fortune Street*, *Homework*, *Criminals*, *The Missing World*, *Eva Moves the Furniture*, and *Banishing Verona*. Her fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, and she is the recipient of grants from both the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. *The House on Fortune Street* won the 2009 L.L. Winship/PEN New England Award. Livesey was born in Scotland and grew up on the edge of the Highlands. She currently lives in the Boston area and is a distinguished writer in residence at Emerson College.

EARLY PRAISE FOR *THE FLIGHT OF GEMMA HARDY*:

“Margot Livesey’s *The Flight of Gemma Hardy* is the portrait of a delicate, iron-willed girl, an orphan and a heroine in the grand tradition. The writing is at once wholehearted and razor sharp, but here as in all of Livesey’s novels, the real treasure is her gift for exploring the unreduced human psyche with all its radiant contradictions, mercurial insights, and desperate generousities. Gemma is real—it’s as simple as that. And through her eyes we see step by step what it means to stay determined in the face of the world’s ceaseless ambiguities—what it means, in other words, to take possession of one’s own life.”

—David Wroblewski, author of *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*

“In *The Flight of Gemma Hardy*, Margot Livesey offers a new telling of *Jane Eyre*, for which no contemporary writer is better suited. As always, Livesey’s prose is a garden of pleasures: precision here, lyricism there, wit and compassionate insight throughout.”

—Amy Bloom, author of *Away* and *Where the God of Love Hangs Out*

“In *The Flight of Gemma Hardy*, the fabulous Margot Livesey has written a book steeped in remote landscapes, secret histories, and great love. Orphan Gemma is a modern day Jane Eyre, thoroughly engaging and bracingly unsentimental. The prose is meticulous, the tale transporting. Trust me, you will love this book.”

—Karen Joy Fowler, author of *The Jane Austen Book Club* and *Wit’s End*

“*The Flight of Gemma Hardy* is an inventive re-imagining of Jane Eyre; the feisty Gemma is a delightful character in her own right, and it was a pleasure to follow her adventures.”

—Audrey Niffenegger, author of *The Time Traveller’s Wife* and *Her Fearful Symmetry*

“Enchanting, from the first page to the last. Reading *The Flight of Gemma Hardy* reminded me of that way we fall into certain novels when we’re younger, with utter absorption and concentration, the outside world disappearing entirely as the spell of a fictional world takes hold. That’s how strong and convincing this novel’s voice is: within just a few pages, I was helplessly in its grip. I stayed up too late, I forgot things I was supposed to do. All I wanted to do was follow Gemma’s path where next it led.”

—Andrea Barrett, author of *Ship Fever* and *Servants of the Map*