**OE\_Margot Livesey\_Draft2\_01.05.2022.mp3**

[Soft music begins playing as Vanessa speaks]

**Vanessa:** [00:00:00] One of the ways that I have come to define a sacred text is that it has to be generative. Something sacred should inspire essays, poetry, conversation, fan fiction. If a text stops our thinking, makes our thinking more single-minded, then it's profane, not sacred. *Jane Eyre* meets this criteria of being generative by leaps and bounds. *Jane Eyre* has been made into eight silent film adaptations in between 1910 and 1926 alone and at least 17 talkies since then. And that's not mentioning the radio plays, the stage adaptations, the TV adaptations, the ballets, and even in one case, the musical. The reason I think that *Jane Eyre* should continue to be on the forefront of our minds is because I think we should measure a book by the conversations that happen around it. And part of the conversation around *Jane Eyre* are its dozens and dozens of adaptations. [Music stops] So that's what the next several episodes of ‘On Eyre’ will be.

[Synth theme music begins]

I will be exploring various adaptations of *Jane Eyre* in conversation with fellow fans, some scholars, and, when we can get them like we could this week, the creators themselves. I'm Vanessa Zoltan and this is ‘On Eyre’ from *Hot and Bothered*.

[Music intensifies with added percussion and fades out]

Today's adaptation is a novel, and it's called *The Flight of Gemma Hardy* by Margot Livesey. Margot is a Scottish writer who now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and teaches at the prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Her latest book, *A Boy in the Field*, is a brilliant exploration of three siblings, all responding to a single trauma, and it has a dog named Lily, and I cannot recommend it more highly. It's out in paperback now.

Warning: I am going to spoil *The Flight of Gemma Hardy* right now, giving you a brief synopsis before we talk to Margot. But to be fair, *The Flight of Gemma Hardy* is inspired by *Jane Eyre*, so there aren't *too* many surprises.

[Soft acoustic music begins]

The book takes place in the 1950s and 60s in Scotland and Scotland at this point is still a country very much in conversation with the war that has just ended. Born to a Scottish mother and an Icelandic father, both of Gemma's parents died by the time she was three-years-old. Upon their deaths, she was taken from Iceland to Scotland by her mother's brother. Her Icelandic name and identity were changed and she becomes Gemma. Her uncle dies, and now she's living with her vicious aunt and cousins. What Gemma wants more than anything is to go to school, and so her aunt sends her to Claypool. Claypool is, believe it or not, even worse than Lowood in many ways. Many of the cooks and teachers who run the school are outright sadistic. And there is a bright line between the students whose parents paid tuition and the charity girls like Gemma. And of course, Gemma's best friend there dies.

The school goes bankrupt before Gemma can graduate properly, and Gemma gets a job as a governess to a girl that's sweet but has gone a bit wild since her mother has died. Gemma's au pair gig is on the remote Orkney Islands, and there she falls in love with Mr. Sinclair, the uncle and guardian to the little girl. Gemma and Mr. Sinclair fall in love and agree to get married. On the wedding day, a secret gets revealed: during World War II, Mr. Sinclair swapped identities with a man who worked on the Sinclair estate. Mr. Sinclair was gonna be sent to the coal mines during the war, but due to a trauma in his youth, has severe claustrophobia so made a worker on his estate go down to the mines in his stead. Mr. Sinclair flew with the Royal Air Force and ended up having a, quote, “good war.” Gemma is heartbroken by the cowardice and the deceit. She runs off. She leaves her purse on the bus and so has to live in churches until she finds a home where she can sleep safely. The St. John she meets is an older mailman who helps her study for college and misunderstands her desire to marry him. And here's where it gets really fun: she runs away *again* – not accidentally finding cousins, but intentionally going in search for them back in Iceland. She finds out her real name. She learns about her parents. On her flight back from Iceland, Mr. Sinclair is sitting next to her assigned seat. They kiss, but their future is unknown. The two plans Gemma has are to go back to school and return to Iceland to visit her family one day. And with that information in mind, here is my conversation with the wonderful Margot Livesey.

[Music ends]

**Vanessa:** So, Margot, my first question is just the very basic one of…you have written books on a wide variety of topics. Why did you decide that *Jane Eyre* was a story that needed retelling or that you wanted to retell?

**Margot:** [00:05:44] Years ago, I had suggested to the wonderful bookshop Newtonville Books that they have a book club in which authors got to discuss their favorite books and when they kindly invited me to do this, I chose *Jane Eyre*, which I first read when I was the same age as Jane is when the novel opens, and because I grew up in Scotland under – with the moors outside my window and my father taught at a boys private school with gossip battlements like Thornfield Hall, I had always thought that part of my love of *Jane Eyre* was because of that early mapping onto a landscape. But what I discovered at Newtonville Books was that everyone in the room loved *Jane Eyre*, even if they had grown up in Luton or Neatham or Chelsea. They love *Jane Eyre*. It didn't have to do with picturing a boys school or imagining yourself wandering over the moors, and I started trying to think about what made the novel so iconic, what made it still speak to us? And I started trying to think about how I might…and not retell the story so much, but reimagine the story. And originally, I thought of setting it much closer to the present, but when I started thinking about it, I realize that part of what I thought as was a feminist story and that for me, a very exciting period of feminism was the late 60s and early 70s. I was coming of age. The pill was coming of age. You know, women were recognizing each other in wonderful ways. So that seemed like a really perfect time to set a reimagining of *Jane Eyre*.

**Vanessa:** [00:07:41] So I would imagine that one of the biggest challenges of trying to reimagine *Jane Eyre* is trying to think of what the twist is going to be, what the big secret is going to be, because if you're making it more modern, I feel like locking up your wife in the attic has just gone, like, downhill as far as appropriate choices. And so how did you conceive of what secret would be at the heart of *Gemma Hardy*?

**Margot:** [00:08:12] You're absolutely right, Vanessa. It was a really hard choice, but I knew right from the beginning that there were going to be no attics in *The Flight of Gemma Hardy* [Vanessa laughs]. The word ‘attic’ would not be used by any character under any circumstances [Laughs]. So that was very, very clear to me. And then I just sort of started trying to – trying to think of various possibilities. And I think right from the time when I decided to give Jay and/slash Gemma an Icelandic background, I realized that the only way for me to write this pleasurably was to feel free to think in very different ways.

**Vanessa:** [00:08:58] And I just feel like instead of the secret really being a crime, it's really about Mr. Sinclair's shame. He doesn't present himself as much of a victim as Rochester does.

**Margot:** [00:09:13] I think that – I think that's right, and I think Jean Rhys and her wonderful novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* was partly to blame for that because I read that at a very – again, at an impressionable age and really took on in her telling…there is shame for Rochester in being the younger son and being sort of married off and being duped. So I think I responded to that and I was also drawing on my own childhood, which I'm happy to say was well after the second world war ended. But people still talked about having a ‘good war’ or a ‘bad war’ and a bad war was when you hadn't got to do something that might be heroic or you – you sort of stayed at home in some rather humble job or…so that was what set me to thinking about Mr. Sinclair and his – his secret. And I will also say that my beloved adopted father, who along with my biological father taught at the boys school, was one of four brothers and one of his brothers was sent down the mines and was really, for many years, broken by it and broken by having three brothers who had all kind of – one fought on the Italian front, one fought in Burma, one fought in North Africa, and he'd gone down a coal mine. You know, it was really… [Vanessa says, “Yeah.”] So that made a huge impression on me.

**Vanessa:** [00:10:53] Yeah. Well, there are two other plot points that I would love to hear you talk about: the difference between *Gemma* and the inspired text of *Jane Eyre…*and the other one is the three days of wandering on the moors. I just think that the way that you handled Gemma's homelessness and poverty and her relationship with the church is so brilliantly updated and you just feel her desperation and the hyper-realism of it, and you have people being kinder to Gemma than they are to Jane. And I would just love to hear you talk about what you were thinking about as you wrote that section of the novel.

**Margot:** [00:11:39] Well, I think one thing I was thinking about was what was plausible in the late 1960s and how could you manage with no money and being homeless? And I just wanted to try to make it something we could all imagine, like…what if we suddenly didn't have our credit cards and our door keys and our identity? And what would we do? What could we plausibly do? And Pitlochry happens to be a town where I had spent many childhood summers and I knew there were a couple of churches that tended to leave their doors open. They're not invariably…because as a child, I was always trying doors to see if they opened. So it came very much out of my wandering around Pitlochry as a child looking for adventures, but then going back as an adult and just sitting and thinking, “Okay. I haven't – I have nothing. Now what?”

**Vanessa:** [00:12:44] Yeah. “How do I start over?” [Margot says, “Yes.”] Which – which leads to my – my last, just, plot-based question, which I'd love to hear you talk about, which is the updating of St. John. Because your version of St. John, I find to be much less oppressive. And yet I think that you do such a great job of having Gemma essentially accidentally getting engaged to this man and feeling trapped. And so I'm wondering…yeah, what you were trying to get to the heart of with that?

**Margot:** [00:13:15] I think one thing about trying to re-imagine a novel is that when you're reimagining the brilliant parts, the bar is extremely high [laughs] and you're aware of writing in the shadow of a giant. And then there are parts that actually are a bit less brilliant and I think when you ask most readers about *Jane Eyre*, everybody gravitates up to the parts through the interrupted wedding and the bargaining around Christianity. I think for a contemporary reader it is quite aggravating, to put it mildly. Yeah. And maybe even Brontë’s readers at the time secretly thought, “Oh, come on, we're fed up with this guy.” You know?

**Vanessa:** [00:14:02] Every time he presumes to talk *for* God, I'm like, “What is that confidence like?” “*I* know what God wants.” Like, okay.

**Margot:** [00:14:11] Yeah, I know, it's extraordinary. And his feelings for, I'm forgetting her name, do I mean Rosamond?

**Vanessa:** [00:14:18] [Laughs] Yes, it is Rosamond, yeah.

**Margot:** [00:14:20] Yeah, you could tell that he's fascinated by her, but that he has no idea what that feeling is. It's like an unrecognizable form of food – [Vanessa laughs.] – he doesn't know. So I'm just trying to find a sort of modern counterpart that would be less aggravating yet still represent some sort of temptation.

**Vanessa:** [00:14:46] I think what I love about that relationship in *Gemma Hardy* is how focused it is on getting her into school. And so it actually feels like this other option is rooting for her and her version of life in a way that St. John is trying, to a large extent, to subsume Jane and derail her from her life. To some extent, I just love what that says for feminism, right? That over a hundred and twenty years, our worst case scenario is hopefully someone who's rooting for us, but just not in the best way.

**Margot:** [00:15:21] And I think I was partly there, drawing also on the Brontës’ life story when one of the many schemes they had for raising money, for making a living, was to start a school. [Vanessa hums.] And of course, they were…I mean, three women who were less equipped to start a school would probably be hard to find [laughs], but that it was on their list of ambitions really interested me. So, yeah, education seemed a natural – a natural thing to focus on.

**Vanessa:** [00:15:54] Yeah. Well, I would just love your thoughts, right? *Jane Eyre* gets retold constantly, right, with ballet, with adaptations like Patricia Park's *Re Jane* or, you know, Rachel Hawkins just did *The Wife Upstairs*, and it is a deeply weird, angry, mystical Christian book. Like *Pride and Prejudice*, I'm like, I get it, right, like, you can draw a straight line from *Pride and Prejudice* to Nora Ephron, and I love it and I get it. But *Jane Eyre*, it is my favorite book, and to your point, right? Like, I'm from Los Angeles, I am not from the Scottish Moors. But why do you think that this book carries on so much and women just want to keep adapting it?

**Margot:** [00:16:44] Part of it is that we have an ongoing crush, a very long-going crush on orphans. As readers, as a society, we really respond to orphan stories. So I think there is something about the orphan that – the orphan story is all our stories sort of writ large without a safety net, you know? Okay, your parents vanish, okay, your home vanishes, your school vanishes. You know, things keep – keep disappearing, and Jane keeps reinventing herself and finding allies. She's very good at minding the one ally she needs: Helen Burns, Miss Temple, Pilot the dog. [Laughs] And I think that part of the novel has this really…mythic, deeply, deeply appealing hold on our imaginations. And then maybe a little less of a hold on our imaginations is that you stumble across the moors and end up on the house – in the doorstep of your cousin's house and suddenly inherit money and meet a repressed Christian who seems to be the ideal wife to take to India, where you could die of some terrible disease. [Laughs] I mean, in 1847. No, not yet. But I think that has a lot to do with it. And also Jane herself, you know, she is so outspoken. “I am no bird.” You know, she – she really stands up for herself on so many occasions. And – and she also speaks a kind of poetry. The language in which she and Rochester speak is just way up there in an amazing way.

**Vanessa:** [00:18:45] Yeah. Something that I think about a lot because I make a podcast about romance novels is…I think romance novels are deeply feminist. I think it is essentially women writing what they would like to demand from men and from the world and imagining out loud what they think that the world should look like. And yet there is something about some romance novels that I am very concerned about what it is that we're passing on, and there's obviously a lot of that wrapped up in *Jane Eyre*. And I'm wondering if there are parts of *Jane Eyre* that you know, that you decided to keep out of *Gemma Hardy* because you didn't feel like they were part of a productive form of feminism or that you think we should make sure to problematize as we continue to talk about it.

**Margot:** [00:19:33] That is such a great question, Vanessa, and such a hard one. I will confess when I first sat down to write the novel, I made Jane thirty-eight and Rochester twenty-two [Margot laughs, Vanessa gasps] but I found that I couldn't make it work because I really did want to have the childhood, the orphan childhood, and it just was too cumbersome. But I still sort of have a little pang of regret about that because I did worry about the age difference and more particularly the power differential between them. And rereading *Jane Eyre* as an adult, I don't think anyone can not be aware of how mean at certain points Rochester is and how, you know, he teases her about Blanche and tricks her and manipulates her while all the time hiding this huge secret. You know, so not many points there for Rochester. So, you know, I did think that I had to make my character nicer and a person of more integrity and who would be perhaps more aware of the power difference. And of course, I mean, one realizes that this was a fantasy for Jane. I mean, for Jane and for Charlotte. I mean, very, very, very few governess married landed gentry. Right? It was not a normal career trajectory. “Oh, I think I'll be a governess. And then the Duke of Bath will marry me.” No, no, no.

**Vanessa:** [00:21:13] [Laughs] Which Jane says in the novel right? She's like, “I would say this to any other governess. Like, be careful if your master likes you.” Like she doesn't say this, but she's like, “It's going to end in pregnancy. And like, that's essentially all it will end in.”

**Margot:** [00:21:29] Yes. So, you know, I tried to write back against that, as it were, and I also tried to bring forward some of the independence that Jane really manifests throughout the novel, but gets a bit hidden behind the romantic screen as it were.

**Vanessa:** [00:21:48] Yeah. So can you tell me your thoughts on this theory that I have that I get laughed at for having? So I think Rochester does all of these horrible things in the name of attempting to get consent. I think that he thinks if he comes on to Jane, he's her boss, she would have no choice but to say yes. And he wants her to come to him. So he pretends to be marrying Blanche Ingram and pretends – feigns disinterest and – in order to sort of force Jane's hand so that she will come to him, is that a defensible point of view? Why or – why – why do you think that he goes so far in being so horrible? I feel like that is the live question in the post Me Too movement with this novel of like…at the end of the day, this is a forty-year-old boss marrying an eighteen-year-old employee.

**Margot:** [00:22:43] Yes. And really only getting to marry her much later when he's blind and maimed and has lost much of his fortune. [Vanessa says, “Right.”] And she has come into her own fortune. And I do think that's a defensible position. And I think, you know, I read it in the tradition of romance novels where the hero and heroine, if we're going with traditional roles, are separated either physically or psychologically or in what – in some important way for a couple of hundred pages and then are allowed to get together. But I also think it sort of bears a relationship to plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Twelfth Night*, you know, where they can't come to each other as their true selves without this kind of *Pilgrim's Progress* through this world of disguise. There's some sort of analogy for me with what Rochester does. [Vanessa says, “Yeah.”] And I also think although it's absolutely nowhere in the text that I like to think that perhaps he does have some thoughts about the fact he's already married. [Laughs] I mean, just a – just a small detail.

**Vanessa:** [00:24:04] Yes, he definitely. I mean, I just reread the wedding scene this morning, and the part that always strikes me is that he's silent for 10 minutes. The priest, Jane, the solicitor and Mason are all just standing there, watching him think it through in silence for ten minutes.

**Margot:** [00:24:27] I had forgotten that. Yeah.

**Vanessa:** [00:24:29] First of all, I just, like, can't imagine everyone sitting around silent for that long. But also what I always imagine him thinking about is, “Is there any way I can dig myself out of this?” Because it's after that that he's like, “Yes, it's true.” He says, “Bigamy is an ugly word,” right? Like, that's how he breaks the silence. And so it feels like he's just, like, trying to figure out a way to justify it. And he's like, “Nope, I can't. I can't think of one. I guess I've got to confess.”

**Margot:** [00:24:57] I think one of the reasons we, um, give Rochester a certain leeway is because Jane sees herself as his equal. She does not see herself as inferior and right from that first meeting when he falls on the ice at her feet, you know, we feel that equality between them. I mean, that's part of what's so appealing.

**Vanessa:** [00:25:24] Yeah. And yeah, the proposal, right? “You are my equal and my likeness…” To have a forty-year-old wooly landed man say that to an eighteen-year-old poor girl is like a really beautiful thing. Are there any other last thoughts that you just want to make about anything I didn't ask you about *Gemma Hardy* or that you would like to say about why we continue to tell the story of *Jane Eyre*?

**Margot:** [00:25:49] I suppose I'd say that, and perhaps this is only my perspective, but I think women are still really searching to find convincing images of themselves in books and films and popular culture that I know in my own reading that it's just quite rare for me to find a book that I feel actually represents what living in a woman's body can be like. [Laughs] And I still find that women very, very frequently get stereotyped. They – they get killed, they get made overly beautiful, they get made plain, they get made lacking – too lacking in confidence or alternatively bitchy and overconfident. I mean, women seem to get pushed into these roles and stereotypes. And so I think when we read *Jane Eyre*, we feel the full complexity of her character, and it feels like the space in her character for ours.

**Vanessa:** [00:27:03] Yeah, one of my favorite things about Jane as a character is that she contradicts herself in ways that make total sense to me. Right? She says at one point, right when she's leaving Rochester, she says, “I must respect myself,” and then to St. John, she says, “I'd rather be happy than dignified.” And it's like, those are contradictory ideas that come at different phases in her life. And I find both to be really valuable points of view that I feel like I have sort of depending on my mood. I also love how angry she is, like she's an angry young woman, and I find that very relatable.

**Margot:** [00:27:43] Yeah. And what do you find from the people – I mean, you take people on these, on these tours. Do you find that people respond to her for the reasons we're talking about?

**Vanessa:** [00:27:55] Yeah. I think people – people do still love the romance and love Rochester, including myself, right, like, I get to the proposal scene and forget every bad thing he's ever done and just swoon over all the gorgeous things he says. But I also think that there's a lot of catharsis through that anger. The moments where Jane stands up to Aunt Reed, to Mr. Brocklehurst, defends herself to Miss Temple, stands up to Rochester…I feel like those are the moments that I find that women love the most, which I agree. They are fantastic.

**Margot:** [00:28:35] Me too.

**Vanessa:** [00:28:37] Well, Margot, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. Everybody who is listening, who hasn't yet read *Gemma Hardy*, obviously, go read it and read Margot's latest book, *The Boy in the Field*, which is also wonderful. It was a *New York Times* notable book, and much deservedly so. Thank you so much for taking the time.

**Margot:** [00:29:00] Thank you so much, Vanessa, for this wonderful conversation. It's just a delight to talk about one of my favorite novels, and you know the staggering fact that the novel was published in 1847 and I don't think it's ever been out of print since then. It really is kind of marvelous that we have this book that just passes from generation to generation. So thank you.

**Vanessa:** [00:29:25] Thank you.

[Upbeat piano begins to play.]

**Vanessa:** If we're trying to answer the question of why does this book, *Jane Eyre* continue to inspire after all these years, Margot definitely got to part of it: it's so personal. For Margot, it was because she grew up at a boarding school in Scotland and would walk through heather. She felt the book was written for her. For me, I felt like an angry kid. And so reading about a fellow angry kid was just such a relief. So as we have these conversations about adaptations, I think we've figured out part of why we keep going back to this story. And that's because we always bring ourselves to it.

[Music stops. Synth theme music begins.]

**Vanessa:** You've been listening to ‘On Eyre’. We are in between seasons right now, but are getting ready to hopefully do a deep dive into *Pride and Prejudice* starting in March. If you'd like to help us get there, please consider supporting us on Patreon at patreon.com/hotandbotheredrompod. And if you love the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you are listening to my cold-infused voice right now. My co-host during our regular season is Lauren Sandler, and she will be back with us in March. We are Not Sorry Productions, a feminist production company. Our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman, our associate producer is Molly Baxter, and we're distributed by A Cast. Thanks again this week to Margot Livesey. Be sure to check out her new book, *The Boy in the Field*, and then email me with all of your thoughts about it. And also thanks to Laura Glass, Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Stephanie Paulsell, and all of our patrons. We will be back in two weeks with another adaptation conversation.