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Livesey review
By Julie Wheelwright
The Independent (2012)

Margot Livesey, *The Flight of Gemma Hardy: A Novel*, HarperCollins, hardback, 447 pages, price?

Rewriting a classic novel as beloved as *Jane Eyre* is a tricky and ambitious project, attempted by dozens of novelists including Clair Holland, Emma Tennant and D.M. Thomas. But Scottish novelist Margot Livesey has produced a delicious treat with *The Flight of Gemma Hardy: A Novel*, with the feisty heroine recast as a 1950s orphaned schoolgirl who finds her Mr. Rochester in the Orkney Islands. Livesey, whose haunting portrait of a motherless daughter in her earlier novel, *Eva Moves the Furniture*, brings the same empathy and imagination to her retelling of this nineteenth century classic.

Gemma's Scottish mother dies of a concussion after slipping on a rock when her daughter is only a year old. When her Icelandic father drowns at sea two years later, she is sent to a kindly uncle in Strathmuir to live with her aunt and three cousins. But worse luck follows and after her uncle dies falling through the ice while skating, her callous aunt despatches Gemma to Claypoole, a boarding school of nightmares. Though only a child, she views the world without sentiment and when the housekeeper bluntly explains why she's being sent away, Gemma realises, 'I had never thought to add up all the things my aunt disliked about me and put them into one small word: hate.' At Claypoole she dwells among the lowest ranks, earning her tuition and board as a 'working girl' – a skivvy.

Though Gemma is exceptionally bright and brave, Claypoole, like Jane Eyre's Lowood, is a brutal place, the headmistresses' 'empire of fear and favour', where she must overcome obstacles that would crush a lesser spirit. What comes through most powerfully is Gemma's sense of loneliness and when she is finally befriended, that too ends in tragedy. Everyone she has ever loved, she observes, has died.

But Jane Eyre's legacy is one of endurance and survival so that an adult Gemma is able to forge her way after leaving Claypoole, finding a position as a teacher to Mr. Sinclair's nine year-old niece, at Blackbird Hall in the Orkney Islands. This place of Neolithic sites, ancient standing stones and sunbathing seals on wild shores brings Gemma closer to her parents, and to the self she lost when they died. In the final part of the novel, Mr. Sinclair precipitates a crisis that compels Gemma to begin her inner search in earnest.

Livesey writes with a remarkable gentleness and sensitivity to children's trauma so that Gemma, because of her own early losses, finds redemption in helping others. She works as temporary child minder to Robin, who has also lost his mother, guessing that her absence 'had been presented as a matter of days, and with no explanation, commuted to years'. Gemma's own journey ends in Iceland where Livesey supplies an emotional completeness for her heroine far beyond Bronte's telling. While Jane must be satisfied with Mr. Rochester, Gemma comes to understand that she was 'someone's daughter' and with that realisation, she can become someone else.

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