

late night library

Late Night Interview with Margo Orlando Littell – *Each Vagabond by Name*



The small town of Shelk has a problem, one of the oldest. When visitors show up on the town's metaphorical doorstep, break-ins begin occurring. Family heirlooms go missing, along with food and small trinkets. The townspeople can feel something hovering, ominous and unstoppable. Main characters Stella and Ramsy watch as people they've known for years react to the new faces and crimes.

Margo Orlando Littell's novel *Each Vagabond By Name* (University of New Orleans Press) takes us into the very center of Shelk and its problems. Stella and Ramsy are characters who carry wounds, physical and psychological, and the appearance of the visitors pull their own lives into focus. With crisp prose and a setting that feels lived in and true, it is a novel that highlights how we may all feel like outsiders, and often we condemn others with that very word to alleviate the

pain. Margo chatted with Late Night Library about the town of Shelk, the main characters' self-image, and what it was like to win University of New Orleans Publishing Lab Prize.

AUSTIN WILSON: How would you describe Shelk, the small town setting of *Each Vagabond By Name*?

MARGO ORLANDO LITTELL: An Appalachian town in the heart of Pennsylvania coal country, Shelk is a place defined by its locals' loyalty, which makes it a nurturing home for the families who've lived there for generations but also makes it a tough place for outsiders. Like a lot of small towns in the part of Pennsylvania where I grew up, there isn't much to draw outsiders in, and not many opportunities for anyone with their sights set on anything even remotely untraditional. When even an hour's drive seems daunting enough to keep locals from visiting a big city, a kind of comfort with the status quo takes root. But this is what makes Shelk so compelling to me: for an outsider, there doesn't seem to be any good reason to stay in Shelk; but for Shelkians, there's no good reason to leave. There's the question of what makes a place worthy of a lifetime, but it's a question not many Shelkians ask themselves. It's home. That's it. It's what they know, and they don't necessarily want the wealth or professional achievement that so often drives people to seek bigger and better places. Of course they may want wealth in an abstract way, but it's so far from what's possible in Shelk that it's not something anyone would realistically think to pursue.

I say in the book, "Shelk was the kind of town where people were rarely disappointed"—when you don't want too much, life is easy. When I first began writing this novel, a line like that seemed like a condemnation. But all these years later, having lived abroad and across the country, I see it as a kind of love song. The people of Shelk are happy, satisfied with their lives, in a way that the striving, rootless young people from bigger cities are not. In Shelk, a happy, successful life requires family, food on the table, community, steady work. The kind of hometown values that are worth striving for, and protecting.

Shelk isn't perfect. There's a tendency toward vigilante justice, and, as *Vagabond* recounts, overt xenophobia. But there's also a strong community full of traditions and widely accepted standards of family and collaboration. I wanted these attributes to come across despite the uglier aspects of the story.

AW: There are more than a couple of ingredients that could qualify *Each Vagabond By Name* as a folktale, and yet there's a moment where a character

claims it isn't—very overtly, in fact. While writing the book did you think of it as a folktale?

MOL: I didn't envision EVBN as a folktale, but select folktale tropes contributed to the foreboding quality of the story. Just to name a few, there are the deep woods, the mostly nameless outsiders, a traditionally evil ringleader, and elements of quest as Ramsy is confronted with various tests to his honor. That said, I consciously drew from folktale and cliché to build the locals' suspicion of the outsiders. Though the locals call the outsiders "gypsies," the group is mostly just wayward kids. But using this label immediately makes the outsiders threatening by conjuring stereotypical assumptions to stoke fear and anger—for example, the locals gossip about the possibility of the outsiders stealing babies. The outsiders themselves borrow pieces of the stereotypes when they hustle the locals through palm readings and fortune telling. Outsiders are immediately threatening in Shelk, and the locals grasp for a way to see, and judge, them. Positioning the group beyond the bounds of normal life—bestowing on them elements of folktale—is a way to understand them. It's also a way for the locals to avoid any moral obligation they might feel to look for what drives the outsiders' actions, or to help them.

Stella herself operates at a slight remove from reality, and in some ways her persistent hope of finding Lucy—regardless of how much she actually believes in this possibility—means she sees her own life as a kind of folktale. This frustrates Ramsy, who traffics solely in realism, prompting him to tell her, "This isn't a folktale, Stella." Part of Stella's journey is coming to terms with the truth of her life—and part of what gives EVBN what I feel is its particular heartbreak is that even after her reckoning, even after she's confronted with the futility of hope, she still returns to the comfort of her fiction: that Lucy is out there, and that Stella might find her. It's the only way she can go on—to keep looking for that happy ending, to keep engaging in magical thinking. She's created a story of her life that's different from reality, and ultimately Ramsy's acceptance of this is what allows them to be together.

AW: How would Ramsy describe himself if someone were to ask him who he was? And Stella, the other main character?

MOL: Ramsy sees himself as a cowboy and would be perfectly content roaming the West, cooking over a fire, and keeping to himself—he learned long ago that no good can come from worrying about other people, and that love, if there is such a thing, is more trouble than it's worth. At least, that's what he'd claim. In reality, he's spent his life searching for connections, but he always stops short of allowing

himself to open up to other people enough to truly form a relationship. He'd say it's because he'd rather stay clear of other people's troubles; but the women who know him best—Stella and Liza—would say he's afraid. Their unique understanding of Ramsy is what allows them to break through his reticence and form genuine bonds.

Stella would describe herself as a bereft mother—the loss of Lucy is the core of her self-identity—who is weak enough to grieve her ex even after the atrocities he committed. But Stella has a spine of steel that isn't readily visible to the people who see her day in and day out, who view her through a lens of grief and loss and, yes, emotional instability. She has the strength of hope. She has the strength to pursue love from a recalcitrant man and see beyond his brusque exterior. Most important, she has the strength to offer help to a young girl who needs it, without fear of repercussions. She probably wouldn't describe herself as strong, but Stella's steely determination is what finally drags Ramsy out of passive concern onto a path of honorable action.

AW: Loss and theft are massive themes running through the book. How rare (or universal) is it for us to be defined by the loss or absence of something? Or is it the act, the fact of something having been taken, that causes more damage?

MOL: The threat of loss is intense for the people of Shelk. What the thieves take from their homes is inconsequential by most standards—a little money, jewelry of modest value, silverware. Yet the reaction from the victims and others in town is startling. There's fear, of course, especially after the thieves start lashing out physically when their crimes are interrupted. But more important is a primal rage that goes beyond the loss of treasured belongings. And this, I think, is a universal feeling of protectiveness. A home invasion is devastating for reasons that have nothing to do with what's stolen. It's a trespassing. It's a violation. And in a town like Shelk, it's a transgression of the code the locals live by—a code of respect, honor, and pride. At one point Ramsy tells JT (one of the young thieves), "They don't have much, but they'll fight for what's theirs."

The loss of small things—gold necklaces, coins—also gives the locals a glimpse of the possibility of larger losses, real threats to their homes and way of life that are touched on only briefly: fracking; economic devastation; a progressiveness in the larger world that doesn't embrace the clannish isolation of towns like Shelk. The feeling wrought by modest losses portends greater heartache, which is, for many people, untenable. It's significant that the final, terrible actions of the novel are

precipitated by the outsiders' appearance at a spaghetti dinner in town. Stealing jewelry and cash is one thing; violating the sanctity of that community space is another. It is, finally, unforgivable, and the men react in the only way they know how—turning inward, lashing out, to protect the things and people they love.

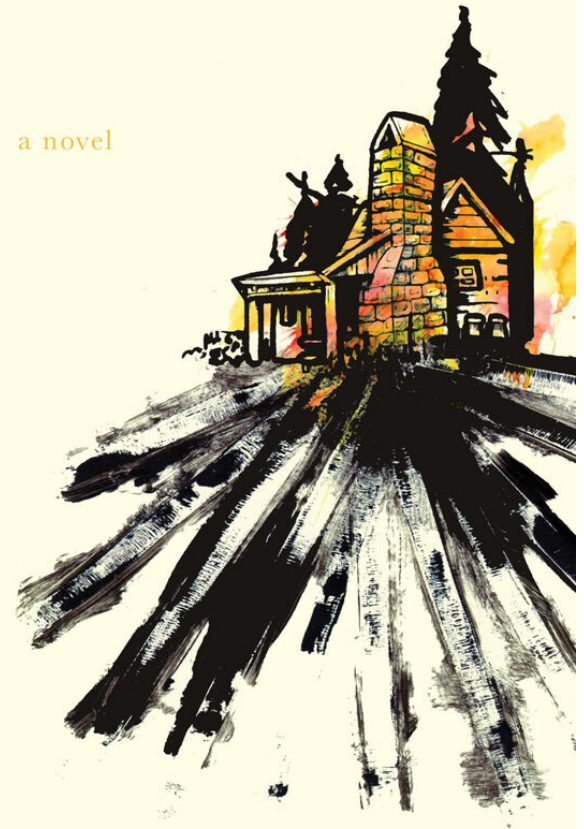
AW: Did the use of the word “gypsy” give you pause during writing? The locals weaponize it quite a bit. Are Shelkians aware of its racial connotations?

MOL: I approached the term “gypsies” carefully in this novel, and how characters use it—or don't use it—is meant to reflect their view of the world. The outsiders in this novel aren't actually Roma, a fact that matters little to the locals—their use of the term “gypsies” is ugly, meant to signal otherness and criminality. They refer to the outsiders exclusively as “gypsies,” never as kids or runaways. This reflects their mindset: they're unable to see beyond the threat these newcomers bring to their homes and way of life. For most of the novel, they're unable to see their humanity. At the pigeon shoot, which precipitates the violent climax of the book, they actually call on one another to pretend that birds are gypsies. Later, when Ramsy summons the courage to remind the men that they were shooting birds, not gypsies, they shrug off the distinction as irrelevant.

Ramsy starts off using the term as well, but as soon as JT enters his life, his language shifts. Stella, too, changes her language automatically as she gets involved with Adrienne. Part of the soul of this novel is the idea that language *is* a

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a novel



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weapon—it shapes people’s thinking, and it can be either divisive or unifying. Still, Shelkians use the term “gypsies” reflexively, if not unaware then at least unconcerned with its racial offensiveness. But my goal certainly isn’t to portray the Shelk locals as unambiguously hateful. There are many challenges to morality and moral code in *Each Vagabond by Name*, and the use of this term contributes to some of those questions.

AW: Each chapter opens with a robbery in progress. These moments have a manic sense, more so than the rest of the book; even in tense scenes throughout the chapters, there is a relaxed feel. What did you focus on for this? Word choice, sentence structure? And do you think formatting the text in italics aids the sensation?

MOL: These scenes do differ quite a bit from the pace and tone of the chapters themselves. I think what contributes most to this is that the space and timeframe are condensed pretty dramatically—each robbery takes place in a single home, or even a single room, and lasts just a few minutes. I tried to pack a lot into those scant moments: details of the homes and bounty, and enough of the thief or thieves’ mindset to give an idea of their strategy and feelings about what they’re seeing and doing. Making the thieves sympathetic was the point of these scenes, even though they consist of just a couple of paragraphs. I think that dual purpose—creating a vivid image of a robbery-in-progress while also humanizing the thief—is what contributes to the tense, fizzy quality of the scenes.

I utilized italics to clearly separate the thieves’ sections from Ramsy’s. But, thinking about my own reading, I do approach italicized text with the expectation that it will be somehow dreamy, or different, or slanted in some way. And I hope this comes across in *Each Vagabond by Name*, since those scenes pull back the curtain of the young thieves’ untraditional lives in a way the rest of the novel does not.

AW: There are some physical descriptions of characters within the book, but they are spare. Do you find yourself naturally limiting these, or was that dictated by the story?

MOL: A crucial component of this novel is the difference between how others see the main characters, and how they actually are. For example, Ramsy’s missing eye is his defining physical feature—it’s what everyone sees, and it’s mostly *all* they can see. Similarly, Stella’s grief defines how people see her; Stella would appear to be younger than her years if she were in another town. And no one bothers to look

too closely at the young thieves—even at the end, it doesn't matter much which kid is in shooting range. The ringleader, Emilian, is the one who draws the most attention in town, and he's the outsider I describe in the most detail.

In this way, the spare physical descriptions are dictated by the story. But this is also a matter of the prose style I instinctively turned toward in this novel, which in EVBN is spare and a little tough—born of the rough mountain landscape, the harsh winter, and the men's clear moral code. I tried to give enough detail—the key details—and nothing more.

AW: What is one image from the book you would use to entice possible readers?

MOL: One of the things readers have commented on consistently is how much they love Shelk, the town of *Each Vagabond by Name*. To entice new readers, I'd want to give them a glimpse of this place, and one of the images that conveys so much of what Shelk is like is the pigeon shoot. In this scene, local men—hunters, all—gather on the main street of Shelk to shoot pigeons out of an abandoned building that's been overrun with the birds. If you took a film still of that scene, it'd look like this: a row of men with shotguns on a cracked sidewalk, aiming at frantic birds crowding the colorless winter sky. The key elements of Shelk are all here: the violence that's part of daily life, the sense of community, the men's proclivity for decisive action, the blighted landscape of the town.

After the shoot, they shovel up the carcasses and then go en masse to celebrate with a spaghetti dinner at a local church, a cherished community tradition. This is Shelk. I hope more readers feel compelled to explore.

AW: How did you find out about the University of New Orleans Publishing Lab Prize? What was the process leading up to your win like?

MOL: I found out about the Publishing Lab Prize through an online community of writers, and I entered because I was always looking for possible homes for *Each Vagabond by Name*. This novel had come so close to publication for so long—it was shopped around to the big houses (unsuccessfully) several years ago by an agent who left the industry shortly after that, leaving my novel an orphan; and it was a finalist in a handful of novel contests. It was always a hopeful bridesmaid, never a bride, and there was a lot of heartbreak. I think I'd stopped expecting anything to

lead to a “yes.” But: something felt different about the Publishing Lab Prize. I loved the idea of a group of graduate students rallying behind the winning book, and I thought they’d be receptive to my dark, quiet story.

And then there was St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. I’m a selective Catholic, but when I found out my novel was a finalist, I thought that if anything called for a novena to St. Jude, this was it. A novena is a cycle of nine prayers said for a particular intention, and I began saying the prayers, one per night. On the day of the final prayer, I found out I won—my novel would be published by UNO Press. Coincidence? Perhaps. But for me it’ll always be part of this publication story.

[Margo Orlando Littell](#) grew up in a small southwestern Pennsylvania town. After fifteen years of living in New York City, Barcelona, and Northern California, she now lives in northern New Jersey with her husband and two little girls. She holds an MFA from Columbia. Her debut novel, *Each Vagabond by Name* won the University of New Orleans publishing lab prize. Author photo by Kathryn Huang.

[Austin Wilson](#) writes comics and prose, his first graphic novel, *Re*pro*duct* is now available for [pre-order](#) from Magnetic Press, and he has a short story in the *Mythic Indy* anthology. Favorite authors include Nora Ephron, Michael Chabon, and Ray Bradbury. Find him on twitter at: <https://twitter.com/austinRwilson>.

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