

Texas Book Festival Interviews: An Austin Collection

With the [Texas Book Festival](#) coming up on November 4th and 5th, we caught up with a few authors featured in this year's lineup for some mini-interviews. Deb Olin Unferth, Jardine Libaire, and Owen Egerton are a few of Austin's favorite local writers, while our other interviewees—Amelia Gray, Mary Miller, and Manuel Gonzales—have all recently called Austin home. We asked these six writers to share a few insights about themselves, their books, and the Lone Star State. Also, speaking of the Texas Book Festival, join us Saturday night for Lit Crawl's [American Short Fiction Presents: Ex Libris](#) with Deb Olin Unferth, Mary Miller, Manuel Gonzales, Lindsay Hunter, Min Jin Lee, and Sarah Gerard at Weather Up at 7:30 p.m. sharp.



Deb Olin Unferth, *Wait Till You See Me Dance*

You'll be at the Texas Book Festival in Austin this November with *Wait Till You See Me Dance*. Describe your book in one sentence.

No job is cool.

What drew you to collect this particular set of stories?

They were the good ones! I threw away about a hundred pages of bad ones.

You've called Texas home for a few years now. What's your favorite spot in Austin?

Red Bud Island. A whole island that's a dog park? Whoever thought of it must have been stoned.

Do readings and public events (still) make you nervous?

Yes, especially when the FBI is there.

How often do your own real-life experiences make it into your stories?

Constantly!

Texans love tacos, you know this. If your book were a taco, what kind would it be?

A crunchy street taco grilled with a bit too much oil.

Best book you've read in the past year.

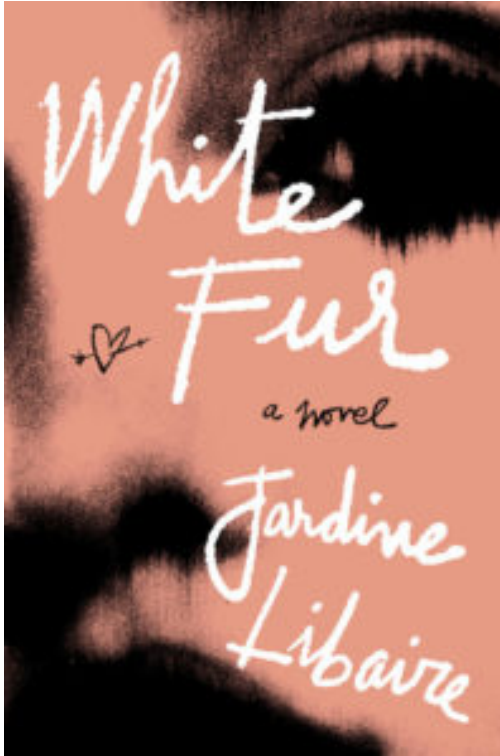
You Don't Have to Say You Love Me by Sherman Alexie. It'll break your heart and make you laugh and change how you see the world.

Austin's a music-loving city. Is there an artist you listened to a lot while writing *Wait Till You See Me Dance*?

Hinds, The Magnetic Fields, Johnny Cash, and Patti Smith.

Random question. Halloween costumes—what's your take? Are you dressing up this year?

With all those monsters and super-villains in the White House right now, it kind of makes Halloween costumes moot? But we'll see.



Jardine Libaire, *White Fur*

We're excited that you'll be at the Texas Book Festival with your novel *White Fur*. Describe your book in one sentence.

Transgressive, psychedelic *West Side Story* love-fable taking place in Reagan-era New York City.

What drew you to this particular subject matter?

A constellation of wanting to write about young love, class in America, Manhattan in the mid-80s, and a big cast of larger-than-life characters.

You've called Texas home for a while now. What's your favorite spot in Austin?

[Justine's](#) will always be my favorite place. For escargot and also for running into all kinds of souls and having long conversations under the stars.

Do readings and public events (still) make you nervous?

Dear heaven, yes! But I love connecting with people and so the reward is massive.

What percent of the book comes from your real life experience?

So much of the settings and certain details comes from life, and at the same time the story and the characters are completely separate from me.

Texans love tacos, you know. If your book were a taco, what kind would it be?

A trashy White Castle taco with a pinch of gold dust and a drop of LSD.

Best book you've read in the past year.

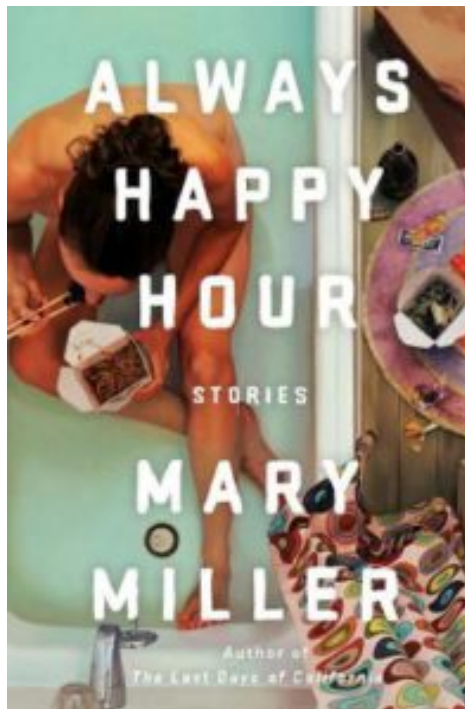
Good Morning, Midnight by Jean Rhys.

Austin's a music-loving city. Is there an artist you listened to a lot while writing *White Fur*?

Prince! Backwards and forwards, over and over, with a broken heart.

Halloween costumes. What's your take? Are you dressing up this year?

I haven't decided what to be! But I believe in ridiculous silly decadent costumes—it's just a matter of executing the daydream.

**Mary Miller, *Always Happy Hour*****Describe *Always Happy Hour* in one sentence.**

Profane, dirty, and difficult to read in public.

Why collect these particular stories in this book?

They deserve each other?

You used to call Texas home. What's your favorite spot in Austin?

This is a tough one because there are so many places and they all remind me of different people, but here are a few: Barton Springs, the bar at the Driskill Hotel, and the Michener Center for Writers house on East Dean Keeton. I also miss Russell's Bakery and Magnolia

Café because memories.

If I had to pick just one, though, it would be Barton Springs. I used to go there in the very early mornings before you even had to pay and paddle around with all the old people and hardcore swimmers.

Do readings and public events (still) make you nervous?

Oh, yes, but I have medicine for that now.

How much of the book comes from your real life experience?

A lot, but many of the stories were written years ago, and I'm not as troubled now. And I do make stuff up. Often the first halves of the stories are true, but then I take a detour somewhere. I hardly even realize it as I'm doing it. Once you set something up as real, with real people in a real place, you can go anywhere.

Texans love tacos, you know. If your book were a taco, what kind would it be?

It would have to be a breakfast taco, a whole mash-up of egg and potato and cheese, but breakfast tacos in Austin are much more than that. They have some special ingredient you can't identify that makes them so amazing—you can't replicate them at home. Complicated, in other words, and hard to describe. But it's probably just lard. It probably isn't complicated at all. This is a one-to-one comparison for the narrators in my book.

Best book you've read in the past year.

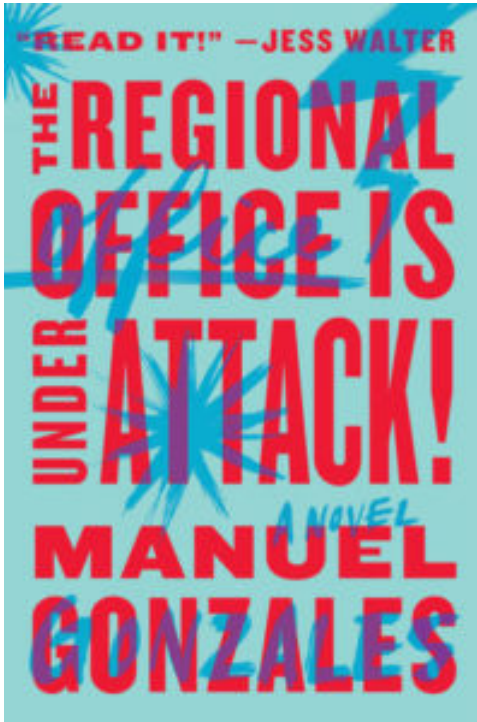
It's a tie: Deb Olin Unferth's *Wait Till You See Me Dance* and Shelly Oria's *New York 1, Tel Aviv 0*. I also loved Chris Offutt's memoir *My Father, the Pornographer*.

Austin's a music-loving city. Is there an artist you listened to a lot while writing *Always Happy Hour*?

I don't listen to music while I write. I need silence. I need some windowless corner of a library or coffee shop, though in Mississippi it's hard to avoid people conducting their Bible studies in public. This makes me very angry.

Halloween costumes. What's your take? Are you dressing up this year?

I love Halloween. I like carving pumpkins and scary movies. I like candy, the color orange, cheesy plastic skull and spider decorations, etc. But I never dress up. I don't have anything against it. If some enterprising soul came over to my house and put me in an outfit I would be amenable to it, but I'm not going to go out of my way. This describes my personality in its entirety.



Manuel Gonzales, *The Regional Office Is Under Attack!*

You'll be at the Texas Book Festival with *The Regional Office Is Under Attack!* Describe your book in one sentence.

The Regional Office trains at-risk young women to fight the forces of darkness that threaten the planet at nearly every turn, and then one day, as is implied by the title, it is under attack.

What drew you to this particular subject matter?

Ummm . . . I've been studying at-risk women who fight forces of darkness for years, ever since undergrad? And so it just seemed like a natural fit?

You used to call Texas home. What's your favorite spot in Austin?

HEB. Especially that one in Mueller, the new one, although I guess by now it's not so new, but every time we come back to Austin, my son asks if we can go visit that HEB.

Do readings and public events (still) make you nervous?

No. They've rarely made me nervous. Because I'm a megalomaniac.

What percent of the book comes from your real life experience?

Surprisingly, a lot. Maybe 80%?

Texans love tacos, you know. If your book were a taco, what kind would it be?

It would have pork belly on it. Or brisket. Or both. Or maybe it would be something al pastor-ish. It would be a pork belly, slow-cooked brisket, pork al pastor taco, with maybe some sweet potato on it. Jesus, I miss tacos.

Best book you've read in the past year.

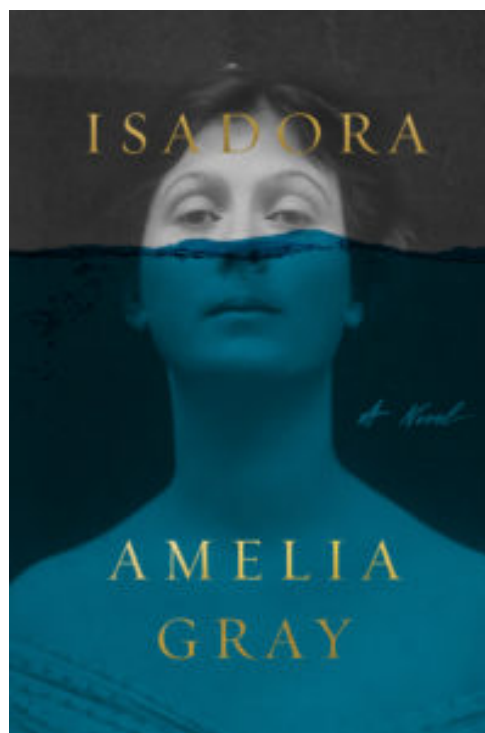
It's a tie, I think, between two polar opposite novels: *A Separation* by Katie Kitamura and *Borne* by Jeff Vandermeer.

Austin's a music-loving city. Is there an artist you listened to a lot while writing *The Regional Office Is Under Attack!*?

Many of the early drafts of this novel were written at Epoch on North Loop, usually beginning at 4 in the morning when my allergies would have kicked into high gear and woken me up, and I'd go find the nearest 24-hour coffee shop to make use of that awake time and to make sure I didn't wake up my family with all my sneezing, and so the soundtrack to those early drafts was always the weird-ass music DJ'd by the third shift coffee guys. But on my own, it was usually Mingus, Black Saint, and the Sinner Lady.

Halloween costumes—what's your take? Are you dressing up this year?

I'm supposed to be dressing up as a magical beast, as if from the Harry Potter world, because my kids want us to family-costume—they always want us to family-costume and I always fall short of everyone's expectations. I'm all for costumes, in general, clever and interesting costumes, at least, and then always forget about them, specifically when it comes to me, and usually I just wind up throwing on some kind of headgear and calling it a day. One year I wore bunny ears at the last minute and told everyone I was a sexy bunny. Another year I threw on my son's Darth Vader mask, which was convenient because he went as Luke Skywalker, but I just wore the mask and my regular clothes and walked around the neighborhood with a beer in my hand because that's what dads do, even Darth Vader.



Amelia Gray, *Isadora*

We're excited to have you back in Austin with *Isadora* at the Texas Book Festival, even for just a few days. Describe your book in one sentence.

A woman loses her children to an accident and wanders in grief across four or five countries; at some point, a horse also dies.

What drew you to this particular subject matter?

An intense and prolonged desire for self-punishment.

You used to call Texas home. What's your favorite spot in Austin?

The stage at the Spiderhouse Ballroom.

Do readings and public events (still) make you nervous?

It depends who's reading.

What percent of the book comes from your real life experience?

82.2% if you're allowing that dance, history, place, and children operate metaphorically. 12.9% if we are bound to reality.

Texans love tacos, you know. If your book were a taco, what kind would it be?

Papas and cheese with doña from [Tacodeli](#).

Best book you've read in the past year.

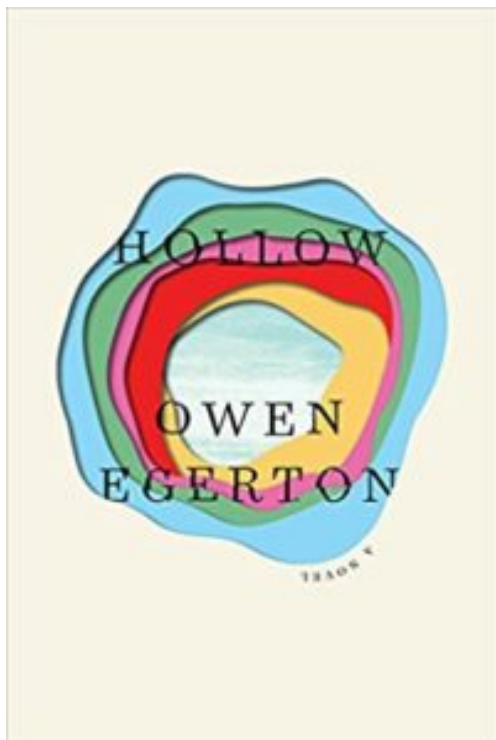
Nobody Move by Denis Johnson.

Austin's a music-loving city. Is there an artist you listened to a lot while writing *Isadora*?

[Swans](#).

Random question. Halloween costumes—what's your take? Are you dressing up this year?

Yes. As a crew member for the original 1981 Broadway production of *Cats*.



Owen Egerton, *Hollow*

You'll be at the Texas Book Festival with *Hollow*. Describe your book in one sentence.

When Oliver Bonds' son dies, he loses his wife, job, and faith until he discovers a possible path to hope in the unlikely community of proponents of the pseudo-science of Hollow Earth Theory.

What drew you to this particular subject matter?

I grew simultaneously obsessed with the Book of Job and Hollow Earth Theory, the once-popular theory that the Earth is hollow and inhabited. This novel is the crossroads of those obsessions. It's that and everything that's bruised my soul for the past decade.

You've called Texas home for a while now. What's your favorite spot in Austin?

I do love Barton Springs. It's a slice of soul. I also love the corner table on the back deck of [Once Over Coffee](#). I'm often there sipping coffee and typing away.

Do readings and public events (still) make you nervous?

Sure! But in a really fun way. It's like a sweet buzz!

What percent of the book comes from your real life experience?

You know, it's a bit like dreaming. You have all the elements of your life but in mixed up order and absurdly twisted. My novels are packed with the people and places and questions of my life but not in a recognizable way. My novels aren't self portraits, but all the paints come from my life.

Texans love tacos, you know. If your book was a taco, what kind would it be?

Mole.

Best book you've read in the past year.

Too hard to answer! I adored John Pipkin's *The Blind Astronomer's Daughter*, loved Dan Chaon's *Ill Will*, but if I had to pick a top I'd go for George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Oh my goodness, that book tattooed my mind.

Austin's a music-loving city. Is there an artist you listened to a lot while writing *Hollow*?

I often listen to Charles Mingus and Graham Reynolds while writing. Both pop and ponder with compositions pushing notes to brilliant discomfort. I'd love to write prose with the same abandon and craft as those two compose music.

Random question. Halloween costumes—what's your take? Are you dressing up this year?

I love Halloween! My family builds a Spooky Path around our house each year. We get plenty of eager visits. I think I'll be a yeti. I dig yetis!

Uriel Perez is an intern at *American Short Fiction* and a bookseller at BookPeople. He lives in Austin, Texas.