

A Visual Walk through *The Messenger Bird*

I share here some images that helped inspire *The Messenger Bird* with quotes from the novel. The story began with a piece of music called 'The Maiden's Prayer'. My father often played it on the piano at night when he came in from the paddock. It took me three months after my father's death to build the courage to play his music, and when I played one of his favourite's, 'The Maiden's Prayer', I felt a sense of his presence and thought then how wonderful it would be to write a story showing how powerful music is, how it can heal, maybe even bring someone from the past.

At that moment *The Messenger Bird* was conceived. Years later I found a photo in Burra antique shop that inspired me so much I bought it. Then we moved into an old derelict Cornish farmhouse which my husband began restoring with gusto. When he ripped up some old floorboards to replace them, and found the 160-year-old stairs leading to underground rooms, my writer's mind immediately thought of a story: what could have happened to make a family board up a whole floor of their house?



Their house looks like it stepped out of the nineteenth century. Never seen one so old that's not a ruin, or added onto like the one we're living in. The sign on the old wrought iron gate is ancient – can just read it – Glanville Park. Guess the house was something special once. (Gavin, p.11)

I glanced up at the hill behind me and saw the house half concealed by the olive tree. It looked like a backdrop to an old novel, like Rebecca, the Cornish one Mum gave me. (Tamar p. 28)



You should have seen him the day he ripped up the floor boards and exposed the hidden staircase for the first time. He gave no thought to how the house would react with its secrets bared like white roots in the cold air. (Tamar, p. 20)



*That was the moment I noticed the photo.
I saw a corner of it first and thought it was
just a bit of old cardboard. I brushed it onto the
dustpan and I saw puzzled eyes and a ghost
of a smile at the corner of his mouth.
I picked it up and blew the ash away.
(Tamar, p. 21)*



*'The Maiden's Prayer'. My hands hovered over the
keyboard, mapping out their path before I started.
Then I let my fingers wander gently over the keys.
Outside the wind had blown up in full force.
(Tamar, p. 38)*



*This was my favourite place. No one came
with me anymore, there was just me,
the birds and the water.
The creek trickled into the dam
that housed water birds. (Tamar, p. 27)*



*The wind started up so I shut the book
and walked
slowly back across
the paddock. (Tamar, p. 30)*



Our olive tree is so huge we can't get it to fit in a photo of the house unless we stand at the end of the paddock. It would have been less than half the size when Nathaniel was living in the house.

He was staring at me. His forehead creased and that unsure look settled into his eyes, just as in his photo only intensified.

'The olive tree.' And he sprang to the window. 'I hadn't imagined it.'

'No, 'I said gently.' (Tamar, p. 58)



While we're out I see Tamar Binney. This time she stops. She's coming back from the paddock that has the grave in it. That grave is another weird thing about this place. It's got wrought iron fencing round it and an old pepper tree growing by it. (Gavin, p. 64)



The next morning a wind blew in from the valley, stirring up the trees, making the birds shriek and shaking the olive tree so that the olives fell on the grass. A black and white fantail danced slowly in the shadow of the olive tree, dragging one wing as he circled. (Glanville Park, p. 138)

I was staring at the dark path ahead. There was a rustle above and a willie wagtail gave his nightingale call. Nathaniel stopped at the sound. 'Fantails are like Cornishmen – they

sing because they must.' He turned to me. 'Do you know that the fantails bring news? Bobby told me they were messenger birds. I wonder what this one is saying.' (Tamar, p. 203)



These dolls were my great grandmother's and inspired the dolls Gavin found in *The Messenger Bird*.

'Open it,' Gavin said. I heard the impatience in his voice. He already knew. I lifted the lid. Inside were two tiny dolls. Their arms and legs were attached with thread and their clothes were made of cream lace, delicate like spiders' webs. How small a hook made those? Phillip would say they came from the fairies. (Tamar, p. 190)

I think about the look on Tamar's face when I found those dolls in their underground room. She held them like they were ash and they'd disintegrate if she breathed on them too hard. Her eyes actually shone. That look was worth all the backbreaking work down there in century-old dust. And it was directed at me. I checked – there was no one behind me. Yep. She flashed that smile at me. (Gavin, p. 193)



I love picking up china pieces that make their way to the surface of my 160-year-old garden. I've found six pieces that fit together. Another time I found half a plate in pieces. It's very addictive as Tamar's mother finds.

Mum couldn't drive me. All she did was trail around after Dad and pick up china. She even had a little shovel Dad found for her and she went off fossicking like a gold miner. I wondered why Dad encouraged it. (Tamar, p. 139)



Look, I've even found four pieces that fit.' She started to put some together; she was right, it looked like a jigsaw puzzle. I stared at the two blue doves kissing. Is that what this is all about? Was that what she was trying to do – put the plates together again? That was when I lost it. (Tamar, p. 211)