

Author Hazel Prior on her debut novel

Novelist's debut is an unexpected romantic tale anchored in the realities of modern life

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JAMIE PORTMAN



MARTIN DEARMUN

British novelist Hazel Prior has learned and accepted that writing is a mysterious process.

It was very strange — one of those magical muse things that happens with writers. Something appears ready-made in your head, so you just start writing.

Ellie and the Harpmaker Hazel Prior Viking Penguin

LONDON Eighty-six plums ... 69 sandwiches ... 27 birch trees ... a 17-step staircase ... and a pheasant named Phineas.

The assembly of words casts a kind of spell — and that seems appropriate as Hazel Prior's publishers attempt to define the uniqueness of her enchanting new novel, *Ellie and the Harpmaker*.

"Those words are being used as a blurb for the book," Prior says with a smile. "But I'm not sure that it fits easily into any genre."

She tries to explain why. The novel is driven by several passions: Harps. Trees. The untamed wilderness of England's Exmoor region. The quirkiness of life. The delights of the unexpected. And a cat named Purrsy who was her constant companion as Prior tapped away on her computer. And on a more personal level, her completion of the book signalled her release from a long and debilitating illness.

The novel has the elements of a fairy-tale romance between a lonely housewife named Ellie and a reclusive harp maker named Dan, who carves his exquisite Celtic instruments in the seclusion of a moorland barn, cocooned from a wider world that can terrify him.

But it is also anchored in the realities of contemporary life. Ellie has a jealous, controlling husband named Clive and his obsessiveness and paranoia will have devastating consequences. And Dan, incapable of functioning in the most ordinary of situations, is a sweet-natured but vulnerable human being whose social skills are limited. Is Dan autistic? Prior won't say. "I leave that for the reader to decide, because I don't really like to pigeonhole people," she tells Postmedia over tea in a London hotel. "I think most people would say that he was somewhere on that spectrum. He obviously functions very well in his particular space, but he has these quirky ways of doing things and making and speaking. His obsessive-compulsive disorder affects various things — counting numbers, making sandwiches, creating harps...."

Prior, a harpist herself, admits she has written a love letter to the instrument.

"I started playing as a student, and I really taught myself although I had a couple of lessons to start me off. Then I kind of lapsed and didn't get back into it seriously until recently. I was seriously ill for a long time."

Then, as her health began to improve, she began to recognize the importance of having goals in life.

"I realized I seriously wanted to write and perform music. I realized that life is too short not to do these things, so I started writing and playing the harp in earnest."

Prior's illness, undiagnosed for five years, left her in constant pain. "It has a very complicated technical term," she says. "I couldn't function. I couldn't play the harp. It was hard for me to write more than a couple of sentences because it was so painful. I turned into a really whimpering creature. Then they finally whipped me into hospital to deal with it, and suddenly I could do things again."

When she started performing again, people kept approaching her after a concert to express the wish that they could play the harp, too. "That started me thinking about making dreams come true. So many people have these dreams but don't actually pursue them — and then I thought of all the barriers thrown in your path once you begin to pursue your dream. That's how the plot started to evolve in my head."

In the process, Prior was fulfilling her own dream of becoming a writer. The character of Ellie was entering her mind — this Exmoor housewife, who writes in secret, loves poetry, and takes solitary walks. One of those walks leads to Dan's barn, where Ellie is captivated by his collection of harps, and feels a burning need to learn to play herself. Dan, the kindly and non-judgmental soul that he is, spontaneously gives her an exquisite cherrywood harp to match her cherry-coloured socks. A very special friendship is underway.

As she worked away on her first novel, Prior came to accept the often mysterious processes of writing.

"I have no idea, really, where Dan came from," she says. "He's just a product of my imagination, because I don't know anyone remotely like him. It was very strange — one of those magical muse things that happens with writers. Something appears ready-made in your head, so you just start writing."

The character of Ellie turned out to be the tougher challenge. “Extra bits of her character kept grudgingly coming through,” Prior says. “She’s a kind person. I like her. But when it comes to her marriage she’s a bit of a doormat, You sometimes want to grab her by the shoulders and give her a good shake.” So Prior sought out a wider background story — including low self esteem thanks to a mother who “always put her down” as a child.

Ellie’s past history affects her relationship with Clive, her husband. “She tries to find a good side to him and it takes time for her to realize how awful he is. I’ve seen such relationships in real life. Really strong women can be undermined so much by someone who appears to be nice but really is quite nasty. These are not weak people — Ellie has, real strength underneath — but they just have a blind spot about a person because they want so much to believe that he’s good.”

Prior and her husband, a lighting technician, live in England’s Southwest, on Exmoor, the untamed area that is also the novel’s setting and a formidable character in its own right. Much of the early feedback she’s been receiving has to do with her evocation of the countryside. That pleases her. “I love Exmoor very, very dearly.”

Indeed, the presence of that book of a lovable pheasant called Phineas is a product of that world.

“We always have a lot of pheasants wandering around, so I decided I wanted a pheasant in the story somewhere.”

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