

With a tale to tell

Falling in love with a pretty cottage gave this author all the inspiration she needed, writes **Steve Meacham**.

IT WAS, Josephine Pennicott admits, “my Daphne du Maurier moment”. In 2007, she and her husband, fiction writer David Levell, took their toddler, Daisy (now 7), on a family holiday to Tasmania where she’d grown up.

Pennicott was at a creative crossroads. Her trilogy of dark fantasy novels – *Circle of Nine* (2001), *Bride of the Stone* (2003) and *A Fire in the Shell* (2004) – had been published, earning critical approval. But in terms of sales, she says, “they’d hardly set the world alight”.

So she’d switched genres and written what she hoped would be her big breakthrough novel, *The Witches of Paris* – a passionate period drama “combining all the things I love: chateaux, fairytales, the court of Versailles ... it was really my love letter to Paris”.

She’d worked in a frenzy for three years. She felt it was her master opus. Unfortunately, her agent Selwa Anthony wasn’t happy.

“She told me we should sit on it for a while.”

To recover, the family were spending a few days at Stanley, the beautiful fishing village on the north Tasmanian coast dominated by The Nut, a volcanic mountain. The scenery is similar to Cornwall, where du Maurier imagined Manderley, the mansion at the heart of her famous 1938 novel *Rebecca*.

Perhaps Pennicott was thinking of those things – Cornwall, the 1930s, a house and a murder-mystery – when she first saw her

dream cottage. The seeds of her next book had been planted.

“I’m a house tart. I fall in love with houses all the time,” Pennicott says, laughing in the compact courtyard of their terraced home in St Peters. “You can see where we live. It’s very small and the planes are always flying overhead.”

But the cottage in Stanley “ticked all my boxes. Georgian. In a fishing village. Beautiful view of the sea.”

She found herself gravitating to the cottage most evenings, standing outside its gates.

“I just felt the house had a story to tell me. I always knew there would be a body in the cellar and that on a snowy or foggy day a little girl would discover it.”

Then one day she got chatting to an elderly man, Lin Eldridge, who explained he and his wife, Marguerite, had once owned the house when it was called “Poet’s Cottage”. Now she had the title.

The resulting novel owes much to du Maurier and two other English authors Pennicott admires – Agatha Christie and Enid Blyton.

Blyton is the inspiration for Pennicott’s central character, Pearl Tatlow, a famous children’s author of books such as *Kenny Kookaburra* and *Billy Blue-Tongue*. *Poet’s Cottage* begins in the present day when Pearl’s granddaughter, the recently divorced Sadie, inherits the cottage and moves back from Sydney to live in Pencubitt (a fictional version of Stanley).

In 1936 Pearl had been murdered in the cellar of Poet’s Cottage. The



Gypsy ... Josephine Pennicott thought writing was a career for other, better educated people. Photo: David Levell

culprit was never caught. Unlike Blyton (whose many infidelities were not revealed until after her death) Pearl’s scandalous behaviour was notorious. Even Thomasina, the daughter who found her body, felt Pearl was a wicked, abusive woman – though strangely, her other daughter (Sadie’s mother) remembered Pearl fondly.

Poet’s Cottage is told from two perspectives. As Sadie and her anorexic teenage daughter Betty struggle to find the truth about Pearl, there are long flashbacks to 1936 in the form of unpublished pages from a biography of Pearl written by her friend, Birdie Pinkerton, now in her 90s.

“I was obsessed with Agatha Christie when I was growing up and I’ve always been interested in how Blyton’s two daughters published such different opinions of Enid. It all got woven into the story.”

Rather than research on the

internet, Pennicott combed eBay and second-hand book shops for out-of-print biographies, devouring magazines and movies from the period. The novel also benefits from Pennicott’s own upbringing in rural, conservative Tasmania.

Now “in my 40s”, Pennicott became a nurse when she left school. For the next decade, she says, “I was a gypsy, not knowing what I wanted to do. I’d go to new towns, find a job: housemaid, life-drawing model, shop assistant”.

“But looking back, it was a good apprenticeship for me as a writer. I got lots of different experiences, odd-jobbing around.

“To me, writing was a career for other people, better-educated people. I went to writing classes but I just didn’t fit into a world of tweed jackets and leather patches.”

The change came in her late 20s when a friend persuaded her to enrol at Sydney’s College of Fine

Arts. “Getting into COFA broke me open, creatively,” she admits. She graduated with a degree in fine arts. But a car accident that left her arm in plaster made it easier for her to write than to paint. Writing stories, she rediscovered, was a real passion.

Poet’s Cottage was written against the background of her father’s terminal illness. He died last November. As she flew to be by his bedside, Pennicott got a phone call from her agent saying that *Poet’s Cottage* and her second (as yet uncompleted murder mystery, set in the Blue Mountains) had been the subject of a bidding war in Germany.

“I was able to tell my father the news before he died. It was a special moment between us. Apart from David, dad had always been the biggest supporter of my writing.”

Poet’s Cottage by Josephine Pennicott is published by Macmillan, \$27.99.

