

Crow's Nest

by Pat Morrissey

For anyone who hasn't read Richard Power's "The Overstory", can I ask, no, beg that you do give it a try. I have never read a novel like it before and I'm unlikely to ever again. It is comprised of different seemingly disparate stories that combine in the end to make a marvellous whole. It made me think of other tree stories and tree "characters" in books I've read, and then about significant trees and tree stories in my own life.

When I was a kid, the prospect of spending a day indoors was a kind of punishment and like most mothers of their day, my mother was never happier when I was out from under her feet, and then would rage at me coming home filthy and famished from rambling in the woods and fields near our home.

Summers were dam-building, stickleback fishing, nest robbing and tree climbing. The latter often combined in the annual battle to have the best collection. Nowadays, thankfully, egg collecting is outlawed, but sixty years ago it was fairly common amongst the lads I hung about with, and even some adults. In fact my primary school teacher bought mine for two shillings one year - which was a talking point for weeks afterwards.

It's odd to think that magpies were uncommon in the area we lived in the 1960s, but they were and this made their eggs highly prized. It was easier to get a kestrel's egg. So, when I found a nest in a cluster of hawthorn trees next to a local graveyard I was beyond thrilled. Magpies are, as you know, noisy and demonstrative birds and their dome-shaped nests reflect this, but they compensate for their visual obviousness by building them in often quite inaccessible places and this one was no exception.

These were old trees. Their lower branches had been browsed away by cattle over decades and their crowns were thick, tangled and prickly. Shimmying up the trunk for twelve or fourteen feet was relatively easy, but trying to get close enough to the nest entrance was challenging due to the tightly interwoven thin branches, thick foliage and the thorns that scored every inch of exposed skin.

My arms were flayed and my legs (in my flannel shorts) shredded by the time I thrust my hand into the nest and found it occupied by a very angry, aggressive and justifiably enraged adult bird which exploded out of the nest, pecked me once on the forehead and sent out clarion call to its mate which soon joined in the general mobbing.

I was, I think, nine years old. I was, I think, about twenty feet off the ground. I was definitely getting buffeted about the head by two crazed corvids. But I also had in my hand one of the four eggs in the nest and wasn't for giving it up. The problem was that fending off the birds and climbing down the tree required both hands and I had nowhere safe to put the egg, except into - and here I want to pause to celebrate the innocence, inventiveness and naivety of children - into my mouth.

And then the descent. I was getting double flayed, triple shredded and savagely pecked at. The noise, the fear, the jubilation, the pain, and the ecstasy and elation. A heady mix, never repeated and never forgotten. And suddenly I was free of the tangle of thorns and branches. And the birds had left off their attack and I had the simple task of sliding down the remaining ten feet or so of bare tree trunk.

Or so I thought.

With one valiant, vicious, vocal final assault, the female bird (don't ask, I just knew) thrashed into the side of my head. Instinctively I tried to grab at her with both hands and gravity, being gravity, took effect and I fell to the ground.

I had never, up to that point, and hopefully never will again, swallowed a magpie's egg complete, but the jolt of my impact with mother earth caused me to do just that. Unrepeatable and immemorial.

I looked for those trees a few years back, but like so many, they are gone. Grubbed up, built over and gone. They exist only in my mind's eye, on this page, and in my revulsion at the idea of eating raw eggs.

Why don't you have a think about a significant tree in your life, write its story and share it at treelinkstirling@outlook.com?