

A spellbinding reimagining of 'Sleeping Beauty' set amongst the wild bohemian circle of the Pre-Raphaelite artists and poets.

Bringing to life the dramatic true story of love, obsession and heartbreak that lies behind the Victorian era's most famous paintings, *Beauty in Thorns* is the story of awakenings of all kinds.

Readers' Guide



The Story Behind My Fascination with 'Sleeping Beauty'

Most people know the story of Sleeping Beauty, a girl who is cursed to sleep for a hundred years after pricking her finger on a spindle. She is awoken with a kiss ...

My fascination with this fairy tale springs from my own life story, when I too was awoken from a death-like coma by a kiss.

When I was just two years old, I was attacked by a Doberman in the back garden of my father's veterinary practise on the Pacific Highway in Artarmon. My mother was bringing in the washing and I was riding my tricycle round and around the Hills Hoist when the dog lunged forward and seized my head in its jaws. My mother had to break open the dog's jaws to free me,

then wrapped me in towels and ran inside, the dog chasing after us.

She ran out on to the Pacific Highway, carrying me, my older sister Belinda running beside. A young man picked us up, and took us to the Royal North Shore Hospital. When the triage nurses unwound the bloody towels from my head, he fainted.

The dog's fangs had torn open my skull so that the grey matter of the brain could be seen. My right ear had been almost torn off and my left eye was badly damaged. It took hours of surgery and more than two hundred stitches to repair the injuries.

I did not wake up after the surgery. My temperature soared. I lay on a bed of ice, fans blowing cold air on me. Nothing worked. Ten days after the dog attack, the doctors told my mother that I had contracted bacterial meningitis and that it was unlikely that I could survive. Then the doctors diagnosed meningoencephalitis, an acute life-threatening infection of the cerebral tissues of the brain and meninges.

The inflammation and swelling caused by the infection was crushing the brain tissues, and my mother was told that – if I survived – I would be left permanently brain-damaged. They wanted to insert a cerebral shunt to drain away the liquids, but my

mother – a trained nurse – knew that such procedures were, at that time, always fatal. She refused to give permission. Sitting by the hospital cot, holding my hand, she bent and kissed me, whispering, ‘please wake up, please come back to me.’

And I did. I opened my one undamaged eye and said croakily, ‘I hungry.’

It was twenty days after the dog attack.

I was soon allowed to go home but it was not long before I was rushed back to hospital. The doctors discovered the dog had destroyed the tear-duct in my left eye.



Without a tear-duct, tears cannot drain away properly, causing a constantly watery, irritated eye that became chronically infected. My childhood was spent in and out of the Sydney Eye Hospital in Woolloomooloo, suffering high fevers,

constant pain, and acute swelling of the area around my left eye.

I missed a lot of school. I took refuge in books. Every day my mother brought me a pile of books from the local library. By the time she visited again the next day, I'd have read them all. Stories were ‘my only source of sunshine, my only solace.’



Illustration of ‘Sleeping Beauty’
by Walter Crane (c. 1882)

When I was seven, my mother gave me a copy of Grimm’s Fairy Tales. Burning with fever, half-blind, I read the book from cover to cover, including the tale of ‘Sleeping Beauty’. It became one of my favourite tales.

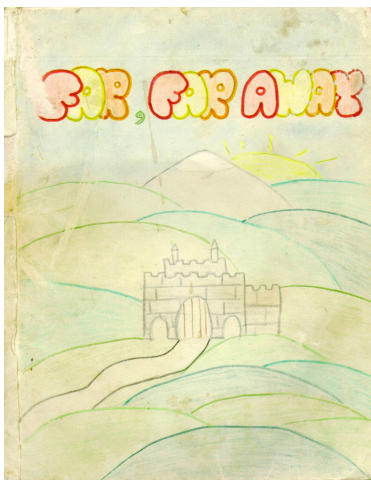
My eye was not the only thing damaged by the dog attack. I was also left with a

profound stutter. Years of speech therapy followed, and every day is still a struggle to defeat it.

When I was eleven, I became the first Australian to have an artificial tear duct implanted. The procedure involves removing a small piece of bone from the nose and inserting a glass cylinder called a Lester Jones tube.

It is an imperfect solution. I still suffer chronic eye and upper respiratory tract infections, and the emergency department at Royal North Shore Hospital is no stranger to me.

However, if I could go back in time I would not try and stop that savage dog attack. Because if I did, perhaps I would never have become a writer!



The cover of a novel I wrote when I was nine

Who Were the Pre-Raphaelites?

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a secret society of young and idealistic artists and writers which formed in September 1848, in the hope of revitalising British art. It was a time of great social unrest, with bloody revolutions sweeping across Europe and uprisings protesting the impact of the Industrial evolution on the lives of ordinary people.



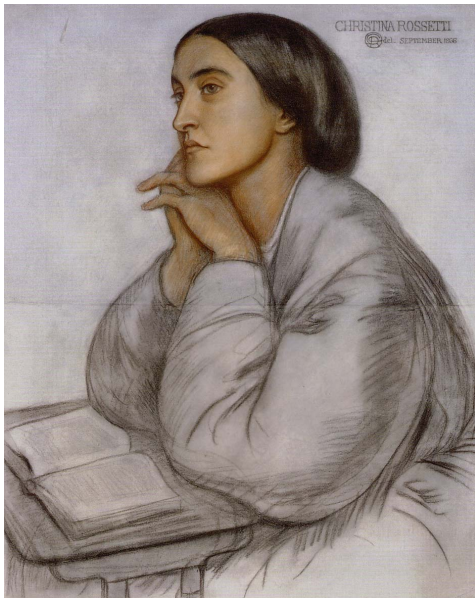
Self-portrait by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1847)

At the heart of the Brotherhood were three artists who were all students at the Royal Academy of Art. Named John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, they wished to discard the heavy brown tones and rough brushwork of most Victorian paintings and return to the luminous colour palette and lapidary

detail of late medieval and early Renaissance art.

Millais, Hunt and Rossetti were inspired by myths, legends, fairy-tales, history and poetry, and – in the beginning, at least – had high moral ambitions, striving to paint with seriousness, sincerity and truth to nature.

The other members of the brotherhood were Rossetti's younger brother William, who kept a diary of their meetings; the painter and art critic Frederic George Stephens; the sculptor Thomas Woolner; and the painter James Collinson, who resigned after breaking off his engagement to Rossetti's sister, Christina.



Christina Rossetti,
drawn by her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1866)

Although the Brotherhood dissolved in the early 1850s, it was to prove highly influential on a younger generation of artists, including Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris — two divinity students at Exeter College, Oxford— who gave up their studies to pursue careers in art. They hero-worshipped Dante Gabriel Rossetti and forged a close friendship with him that led to a new flowering of creativity.

They painted, wrote poetry, and designed wallpaper, soft furnishings and stained-glass windows and furniture for the company they set up together, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (later called Morris & Co.)



'Sweetbriar' design by Morris & Co (1875)

These three men of the later Pre-Raphaelite circle were also joined together in complex romantic triangles. After Rossetti's first wife Lizzie died, he embarked on a passionate affair with Morris's wife Janey. Morris turned to Burne-Jones's wife Georgie for

comfort. Burne-Jones, meanwhile, scandalously dallied with one of his favourite models, the sculptor Maria Zambaco. Their liaisons scandalised Victorian society as much as their radically different art.



‘Angel’

Edward Burne-Jones (1881)

Beauty in Thorns tells the fascinating story of these three couples – Gabriel and Lizzie Rossetti, William and Janey Morris, and Edward and Georgie Burne-Jones – who lived and loved freely and ardently whilst creating some of the most sublime art the world has ever seen.

The First Flash of Inspiration

When I was nineteen years old, I was an impoverished university student, living out of home for the first time, so poor I could scarcely afford to eat.

I was starved of beauty.

One day I saw a poster hanging in a shop window that stopped me in my tracks. A woman with heavy dark hair and a sorrowful face, loosely dressed in green silk, holding a pomegranate in her hand. The fruit had been split open to show the red pulp within. Behind her, a faint glimpse of light.

In the lower left-hand corner of the painting was a scroll inscribed with ‘Dante Gabriele Rossetti,’ a name I had never heard before.

In the upper right corner was some poetry written in Italian. I recognised the name ‘Proserpina’, another form of Persephone.

She was the goddess of spring, kidnapped by Hades and condemned to spend six months of the year in the underworld after eating just six pomegranate seeds. During her imprisonment, the whole world grew cold and barren. Winter clamped upon the earth for the first time.

It was my favourite Greek myth.



Jane Morris as 'Proserpine'
Painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1871)

The poster was on sale for twenty-five dollars. I opened my wallet and saw that I was one dollar short. It was all the money I had. If I spent it I would not be able to eat for a week. But I knew I had to have it. The man in the shop agreed to sell the poster to me. As he rolled it up, I said timidly, 'She's very beautiful.'

'Oh yes. She was famous for her face,' he told me. 'Rossetti painted her hundreds of times. They were madly in love, but she was married to one of his best friends and so they couldn't be together.'

Beauty. Art. Myth. Poetry. Love.

Heartbreak. It was all there, everything that most drew me, in that one richly-coloured and mysterious painting.

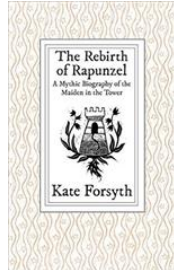
So began my lifelong fascination with the Pre-Raphaelites.

A few weeks later, I bought a biography of Rossetti at a second-hand book sale. It cost me \$17, a huge amount for a poor student. I was so fascinated by the painting, however, I wanted to know more about it. That was the first time I read about the tangled lives of the Pre-Raphaelites. As time went on, I bought more books, and more posters, and even began to dress how I imagined a Pre-Raphaelite poetess would look.

Years passed, and I became a university student again, undertaking a doctorate in fairy tale studies. I wrote a chapter on William Morris and his 'Rapunzel' poem, the first creative response to the fairy tale in the world.

Studying the work of William Morris reignited my interest in the lives of the Pre-

Raphaelite circle, and I began to think about their work reimagining other beloved fairy tales. In late June 2013, I scribbled down a few ideas.



My doctoral exegesis was published as

The Rebirth of Rapunzel:

A Mythic Biography of the Maiden in the Tower

A year later, my doctorate finished, I idly began to play with those ideas. As soon as I read about Edward Burne-Jones's lifelong obsession with the 'Sleeping Beauty' fairy-tale, I knew this was a story I wanted to tell. I bought a notebook and began to explore and read and research and imagine.

Two years later, I finished what proved to be the most fascinating and challenging book I have ever written.



'Study for Briar Rose – The Garden Court'

Edward Burne-Jones (c.1888)

The Story Behind the 'Proserpina' Painting

The woman with the sorrowful face was named Janey Burden, and she was born in a slum in Oxford.

Her father was an ostler at an inn, her mother an illiterate laundress who signed her marriage certificate with an X. Janey lived with her parents and brother and sister in a single room not much bigger than the stalls where the horses were kept.



Portrait of Jane Burden,

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1857)

One evening in autumn 1857, to celebrate her eighteenth birthday, Janey and her sister Bessie went to see a travelling theatre group perform at the local gymnasium. There she caught the eye of an exotic-looking gentleman with ruffled dark curls and paint

under his fingernails. His name was Dante Gabriel Rossetti. He was the eldest son of a fugitive Italian scholar, and the nephew of John Polidori, famous for being Lord Byron's doctor and author of the infamous novel *The Vampyre*. Gabriel (as he was called by his friends) wanted to be both a poet and an artist, and divided his time between writing, drawing and roaming the streets looking for pretty girls.

By 1857, the Brotherhood had fallen apart but Gabriel had found a new circle of friends and admirers who had accompanied him to Oxford to paint some murals on the walls of Oxford Union's debating hall.

Among this new brotherhood were Edward Burne-Jones (then plain old Ned Jones) and William Morris (nicknamed Topsy). Ned and Topsy were best friends who had defied their families to pursue their dreams of art. They hero-worshipped Gabriel and followed his lead in everything.

As soon as Gabriel saw Janey, he was struck by her unconventional beauty. She was quite unlike the Victorian ideal of beauty, being tall as a man and slender as a willow wand, with heavy masses of dark hair, a bee-stung mouth, and a long strong nose. Her looks were so un-English that many would speculate that she had Gypsy blood in her.

Gabriel accosted her at the end of the performance and asked her to come and model for him. After some hesitation, Janey agreed and changed her life forever.

Gabriel was ten years older than Janey, handsome, brilliant and charming. It was little wonder that she should fall in love with him. But Gabriel was not free. He had been entangled in a tumultuous affair with another woman for the past seven years.

Her name was Lizzie Siddal, and she was delicate, highly-strung and thought to be dying of consumption.



Lizzie Siddal

drawn by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (c. 1854)

In all likelihood, her malady was anorexia nervosa but this was a psychological disorder that had not yet been identified, and so her frailty and refusal of food puzzled the many physicians who saw her. Lizzie was an artist and poet too, and had been the only woman to have her work

exhibited in the first Pre-Raphaelite exhibition earlier that year.

Gabriel and Lizzie had become engaged a few years earlier, but somehow the marriage had never taken place. Hearing rumours about Gabriel and Janey, she wrote to him and begged him to come to her. Gabriel obeyed reluctantly. The Oxford set was broken up, the murals left unfinished.



'Clerk Saunders'
painted by Lizzie Siddal (1857)

William Morris, however, stayed in Oxford. He was trying to paint Janey as the tragic queen Iseult.



Jane Burden, 'Iseult'
By William Morris (1858)

One day he wrote on the back of the canvas, 'I cannot paint you but I love you.'

Topsy was stout and rather awkward, but he was also kind and rich. Janey was a slum girl who had been abandoned by her lover. His offer of marriage was not something she could easily refuse. They were married in 1859, after Janey had spent months being taught how to act like a lady.

A year later Gabriel married Lizzie, after promising her on her death-bed that they would be wed if only she would get better. They had been lovers for more than eleven years.

A scant two weeks later, Ned married Georgie Macdonald, a sweet-faced nineteen-year-old who also dreamed of creating art.



Georgie Macdonald

Drawn by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (c.1860)

Topsy built a grand Art & Crafts manor in the Kentish countryside called Red House, and the six couples spent many happy weekends painting murals on the walls, embroidering tapestries, and playing hide-and-seek by candlelight. Together they created the company that is now known as Morris & Co, creating fabrics, wallpaper, stained glass, hand-painted tiles and furniture.

The joyous times could not last, however. Janey gave birth to a healthy little girl in January 1861, but - a few months later - the Rossettis' daughter was stillborn. Lizzie sank deep into postnatal depression. One day Georgie and Ned found her rocking an empty cradle and singing lullabies to a baby who was not there.

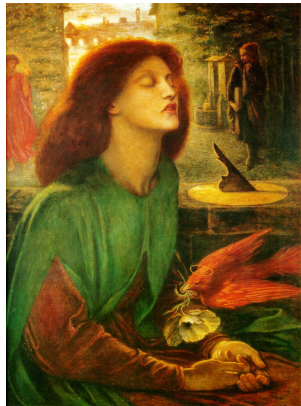


Photo of Jane Morris
with her first daughter Jenny
(taken 1864 by H. Smith)

Six months later, Lizzie died of a laudanum overdose. The inquest found death by misadventure, but rumours of suicide have abounded ever since. Racked with grief and guilt, Gabriel buried his only manuscript of poems with her.

Haunted by her ghost, he began to hold séances in the hope of reaching her. He filled his house with a menagerie of exotic animals – including peacocks, owls, raccoons and a wombat – and rarely left the house in sunlight. He drank too much and began to self-dose himself with chloral hydrate, a highly addictive sedative.

Gabriel also painted his dead wife's face compulsively, most famously in the portrait entitled 'Beata Beatrix'.



Lizzie Siddal 'Beata Beatrix'
drawn by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (c. 1864)

It showed Lizzie's pale face upturned in bliss, her flame-red hair turned into an aureole by the sunset, a red dove delivering a white poppy – the flower of death - into her waiting hands.

In the summer of 1865, Gabriel hosted a party at his grand house in Chelsea. Topsy and Janey were guests. Gabriel had not seen Janey since Lizzie's death. Struck anew by her wild, dark beauty, Gabriel asked her to sit for him once again. Janey agreed at once. He began to paint her as obsessively as he once drawn Lizzie.



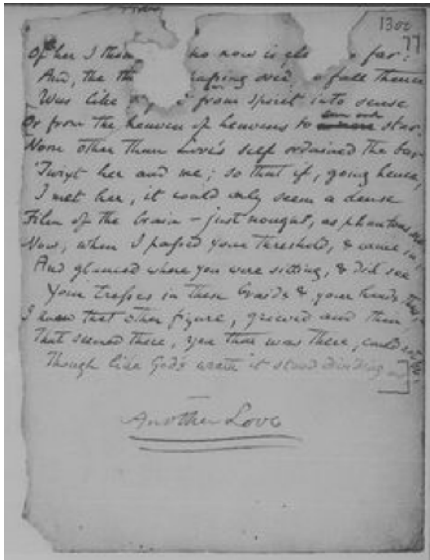
In 1868, he created a magnificent portrait of her in a blue silk dress, a red rose at her waist. The frame was engraved with the words:

"Famous for her poet husband, and most famous for her face, finally let her be famous for my picture!"



Portrait of Mrs William Morris in A Blue Silk Dress
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (c.1868)

By that time, Topsy had won great acclaim with his epic poem 'The Earthly Paradise'. Jealous of his success and in love with his wife, Gabriel began to wish he had not been so impetuous in burying his own poetry in Lizzie's coffin. In October 1869 – seven years after her death - Gabriel secretly obtained a court order to have her dead body exhumed so he could retrieve his manuscript, riddled with wormholes and reeking of rot.



One of the few remaining pages of Gabriel's poetry manuscript which had been buried with Lizzie – now at the British Library

The Victorians had a morbid fascination with death, which they policed with rigid mourning rituals. The news of the exhumation caused a scandal, fuelled by the whispers of Gabriel and Janey's secret affair.

Cuckolded by his idol, betrayed by his wife, Topsy acted with his usual kindness and refusal to bow to convention.

He took out a joint lease with Gabriel on a beautiful Elizabethan manor house on the River Thames in Kent, then travelled on his own to Iceland. Gabriel and Janey and her two daughters, Jenny and May, spent an idyllic summer at Kelmscott Manor, far from the outraged eyes of London society.

It was then that Gabriel began his portrait of Janey as Proserpina. In his eyes, she too was condemned to a loveless marriage, their world as bleak and barren as winter. Only in those few sweet heedless months of summer could they both escape and be free to love as they pleased.

It was there that he wrote the sonnet later inscribed upon the painting. It read, in part, 'this ... dire fruit which, tasted once, must thrall me here ... Woe's me for thee, unhappy Proserpina'.

As the long summer days drifted past, Gabriel wrote many love poems for Janey.

He copied them into a small leather notebook for her, each word thrumming with longing and desire: 'all sweet blooms of love/To thee I gave while Spring and Summer sang;/But Autumn stops to listen, with some pang ... Only this laurel dreads no winter days/Take my last gift; thy heart hath sung my praise.'

But the world could not be shut out.



Portrait of Jane Morris
(with Kelmscott Manor in the background)
painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1871)

The scandal intensified, with Gabriel's art and poetry being excoriated in the press. Tortured by guilt, racked with insomnia, Gabriel had a nervous breakdown. In June 1872 – ten years after Lizzie's death – he tried to commit suicide with an overdose of laudanum. He was revived, but was left paralysed down one side. His addiction to whisky, chloral and laudanum grew fiercer. In 1876, unable to bear it any longer, Janey broke off their affair.

In 1882, Gabriel painted Janey as Proserpina for the eighth and final time, except that he gave her Lizzie's mane of fiery red hair.

A few days later, he died.

Janey lived for another thirty-odd years, spending much of her time in the old manor house on the river where she had been so happy so briefly.

She kept his notebook of love poems all her life.

Edward Burne-Jones's

obsession with Sleeping Beauty

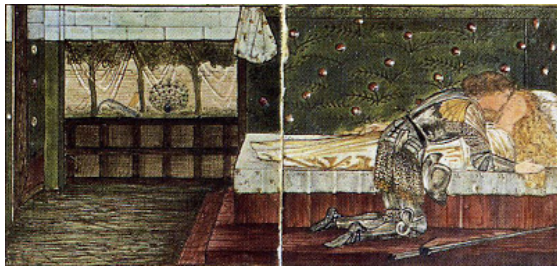
Edward Burne-Jones painted the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale many times over the forty-odd years of his career:

In May 1856, Burne-Jones drew a pencil sketch of his betrothed, Georgie Macdonald, as the Sleeping Beauty to amuse her little sister Louie on her birthday. He was 23 years old and Georgie was sixteen. I believe this is the sketch, though it has not been officially confirmed.



'Study for Sleeping Woman's Head'
Edward Burne-Jones (date unknown)

In 1862, Burne-Jones designed a series of 'Sleeping Beauty' tiles for a client of the Morris & Co decorating firm, of which he was a partner. The princess looks very much like Lizzie Siddal, who had died a few months earlier of a laudanum overdose, and the prince kneeling to kiss her awake looks very much like her grieving widower Dante Gabriel Rossetti.



'Sleeping Beauty' tile
designed by Edward Burne-Jones (1862)
painted by Lucy Faulker for Morris & Co

The peacock (featured on the wall of the boudoir) is a symbol of rebirth and immortality. This tile is one of nine in a sequence that begins with the baby in her cradle and ends with the marriage of the prince and princess. The tiles can be seen at the V&A Museum in Kensington.

In the 1870s, Burne-Jones had a tempestuous affair with one of his models, the sculptor Maria Zambaco, and he painted a very sensual version of her as 'Sleeping Beauty'.



Study of Maria Zambaco as 'Sleeping Beauty'
by Edward Burne-Jones (1871)

The affair ended badly, with Maria attempting to drown herself in Regent's Canal. At one point, Ned planned to run away with Maria but he ended returning to his wife and family so they would not be besmirched by the scandal.



Maria Zambaco, 'Small Briar Rose'
by Edward Burne-Jones (1872-73)

This painting - now in Puerto Rico - was the final in a sequence of three paintings that showed the prince in the briar wood, the king and his councillors asleep in the council chamber, and the princess asleep with her maids.



Margaret Burne-Jones, 'Study for Briar Rose'
by Edward Burne-Jones (1881)

This beautiful drawing is a chalk study of his daughter Margaret (called Margot) that Burne-Jones made in 1881, when he was planning another sequence of painting inspired by the fairy tale. Margot was then fifteen, the age of the princess in the story.



Margaret Burne-Jones, 'Study for Briar Rose'
by Edward Burne-Jones (c.1881-82)

He drew a number of studies of Margot, in preparation for creating his masterpiece, 'The Legend of Briar Rose' (1884-1887), four huge painting which now hang in Buscot Park, in Oxfordshire.



'The Briar Wood'

by Edward Burne-Jones (1881-1890)



'The Council Chamber'

by Edward Burne-Jones (1881-1890)



'The Garden Court'

by Edward Burne-Jones (1881-1890)



'The Rose Bower'

by Edward Burne-Jones (1881-1890)

Edward Burne-Jones painted his daughter obsessively throughout her late teens and early twenties. Margot had fallen in love with a young poet and scholar named John William Mackail, but dared not tell her father for fear of his distress.

'The Legend of Briar Rose' caused an absolute sensation when the paintings were first exhibited in 1890, with queues of carriages along Bond Street. Burne-Jones sold the quartet of painting for fifteen thousand guineas, the most money a British artist had ever been paid, and he was subsequently knighted by the Queen.

His final 'Sleeping Beauty' painting is a small circle, entitled 'Wake Dearest' which he painted for his ever-loving and faithful wife Georgie in the final year of his life (1898).



'Wake, Dearest!'
by Edward Burne-Jones
from *The Flower Book*

I believe Georgie was the model for the princess. This tiny masterpiece - along with 37 other tiny glowing circles - were left to Georgie in his will, and later published as 'The Flower Book'.



Secrets of the Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood

When Edward Burne-Jones was painting his series of small water-colours inspired by the names of flowers, he wrote, 'it is not enough to illustrate them—that is such poor work: I want to ... wring their secret from them'.

This is what I hoped to do with this novel about the women of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. I wanted to wring their secrets from them.

John Ruskin wrote: 'Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle, that of absolute, uncompromising truth By always endeavouring to conceive a fact as it really was likely to have happened, rather than as it most prettily *might* have happened.'

This was how I tried to work too. I examined the lives of the women in the circle, trying to understand them and bring them to life as they were, not as people believed them to be.

Briefly, here are some of the key revelations I discovered about each of the four women in the story, and some of my key sources.



Portrait of Lizzie Siddal
by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1853)

Lizzie Siddal Rossetti
(b. 1829 – d. 1862)

One of the difficulties of writing biographical fiction is that the author cannot sit on the sidelines, and say, 'it is believed that ...' or 'it is possible ...' A novelist needs to try and find the explanation that seems most likely, and then bring it to life on the page. This was most difficult in the case of Lizzie Siddal, whose real life is much obscured by myth and rumour.

The story persists that Lizzie was discovered by Walter Deverell, a friend of the Pre-Raphaelites while working in a milliner's shop. However, as the renowned PRB scholar Jan Marsh has found, Lizzie did not passively wait to be discovered but rather went out to meet her future by taking her drawings to Mrs Deverell, the wife of the secretary of the London School of Design, in the hope of pursuing her dreams of becoming an artist. Mrs Deverell's son Walter then went to visit Lizzie at her workplace and, after seeing her, asked her to model for him.



Lizzie Siddal
modelling as 'Viola'
painted by Walter Deverell

That, at least, is the story that Lizzie herself told. It may not be true, but it seems more likely than a busy young man accompanying his mother to her milliner's. There is as much evidence for one as for the other, (i.e. none). This novel was inspired by the desire to give the women of the Pre-Raphaelite

circle a chance to tell their own stories, in their own voices. So it is Lizzie's version of events I have drawn upon.

Lizzie Siddal has not been treated well by the key biographers of the Pre-Raphaelites. She has been called sickly, wan, morbid, passive, obstinate, primitive, stupid, prim, neurotic, hysterical, feeble, and frigid, along with many other similar emotionally loaded words. Many of these biographers were apologists for Rossetti (including his niece), and so were not unbiased.



Lizzie Siddal,
one of the first drawings of her
by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1853)

Her addiction to laudanum is widely known. What is not so well-known is that Lizzie may have suffered from an eating disorder. Nowadays, when we see a young woman wasting away to a virtual skeleton, refusing food, or vomiting after meals, we would suspect anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa.

However, in the mid-19th century such pronounced emaciation was normally attributed to tuberculosis, commonly called 'consumption' because it seemed to consume the sufferer.

The first medical identification of eating disorders was made in 1868 (six years after Lizzie's death), when Sir William Gull, the Queen's physician, delivered a paper describing a digestive disorder with no known cause, which he called 'hysteric aepsia' (aepsia means 'without digestion').

In 1873 (eleven years after Lizzie's death), Ernest-Charles Lasègue, a French physician, published a paper entitled *De l'Anorexie Histerique* which was the first real examination of the idea that the wasting away of these young women could be caused by self-starvation. It was not understood as a mental illness, however, but as a '*maladie imaginaire*'. Sir William Gull consequently undertook further investigation and coined the term 'anorexia nervosa'.



Elizabeth Siddal, study for 'Delia'
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (c.1855-56)

If Lizzie was an anorectic, she and her family and friends would have had absolutely no idea what was wrong with her. Any 'curious perversions of appetite', as Lasègue named them, such as binge eating, secret eating, hoarding of food, purging, refusal of food, or food-related rituals, would have seemed, at best, a hysterical demand for attention.

The possibility that Lizzie might have had an eating disorder was first suggested by Elaine Shafer in a 1985 essay, 'The Bird in the Cage'.

However, it has never been closely examined as a probable cause for her troubling illnesses. Even the most recent biography of her life, by Lucinda Hawksley in 2004, says: 'Much of Lizzie's ill health originated in her mind, stemming from her desire to receive attention and love.'

Lucinda Hawksley does acknowledge that Lizzie may have had some kind of eating disorder, but then says that 'it became common for her to emotionally blackmail (Gabriel) by refusing to eat.'

Anorexia nervosa and other eating disorders are mental illnesses with devastating physical consequences, having the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder. They

cannot, and must not, be dismissed as a form of emotional blackmail (even though they are commonly misunderstood in such a way).

The more I researched Lizzie's life, the more convinced I became that she did have an eating disorder.

Descriptions of her thinness and her inability to eat are constant in the letters and diaries of the PRB.



Lizzie Siddal Reading A Book
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (c. 1856)

In 1854, Ford Madox Brown writes in his diary that Lizzie was 'thinner and more deathlike and more beautiful and more ragged than ever'.

In 1857, Gabriel wrote that she is 'not better in health or eating anything to speak of'.

This was the same year in which Lizzie refused to touch food for two weeks, resulting in her admission to the health spa in Matlock.

In 1861, Gabriel refers to her 'unfortunate lack of appetite which keeps her mostly fasting and prevents her from gaining much strength.'

Then, at the inquest into her death in 1862, he told the court 'she could not sleep at times nor take food'. (Insomnia is a common side effect of anorexia).

Most striking is the visual evidence of Gabriel's drawings and paintings which show her physically dwindling away.



(mid-1850s)



(late 1850s)



(1860)

Lizzie's death is another matter which needed to be investigated carefully.

It is widely believed that Lizzie committed suicide, even though the inquest into her death found that she died 'accidentally and casually and by misfortune' of an overdose of laudanum.

It is not known for sure when Lizzie began to take the opium tincture, though the famous incident of her floating in a bath of freezing cold water while she modelled for John Everett Millais's painting of Ophelia may have been the beginning.



Lizzie Siddal, 'Ophelia'

John Everett Millais (1852)

Laudanum was widely available in the 19th century, and was even given to newborn babies to help them sleep, sometimes resulting in the child dying of starvation.

Laudanum acts to suppress appetite, among other effects. It is common for people with an eating disorder to also suffer from substance abuse problems, and certainly the

opium would have been the cause of, or exacerbated, many of Lizzie's problems.

But did Lizzie take an overdose of laudanum by accident, or on purpose?

The possibility of suicide was first given life by Sir Thomas Hall Caine, who had worked as Rossetti's secretary during the last year of his life.

In 1928, he published a new edition of his book *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* in which he claimed Rossetti had told him of finding 'a letter or message addressed to him lying on the table by her side.'

The rumour was fanned by Violet Hunt in her 1932 biography, *Rossetti's Wife*, in which she declares that Lizzie left a note saying 'My life is so miserable I wish for no more of it.'



Detail of the poppy floating by Lizzie's hand in Millais's painting of Ophelia



Detail of the skull concealed in foliage in Millais's painting of Ophelia

Violet Hunt was born the same year that Lizzie died, and is no relation to William Holman Hunt, though her father Alfred Hunt was a landscape painter who knew the PRB. She had a long affair with Ford Madox Brown's grandson, Ford Madox Ford, and claims to have heard all the inside gossip from him. Her biography is considered unreliable, at the very best. At its worse, it is malicious and deliberately misleading.

William Rossetti's daughter, Helen Rossetti Angeli, published an article in rebuttal of Violet Hunt's book, which said 'Lizzie's last message, as reported, is touching and romantic, but she did not write it.'

Seventeen years later she published her own biography of her uncle, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Friend and Enemies*, in which she said that Lizzie was found with a note pinned to her nightgown, saying 'Take care of Harry', who was her feeble-minded brother.

The note did not survive, and so it is impossible to know if Helen Rossetti Angeli's account is any truer than Violet Hunt's. It has been argued that Angeli may have been trying to refute a consistent rumour that Gabriel had murdered Lizzie; or, at the very least, driven her to suicide by his cruel behaviour (Oscar Wilde told everyone that Gabriel had pushed the bottle into her hands and told her to 'drink the lot' before storming out of the house).

Then we have Lizzie's last poem, 'O Lord, May I Come?', written in 'a shaky and straggling hand' which William Rossetti thought must have been 'written under the influence of laudanum.' It is possible that Gabriel was referring to this poem when he told Hall Caine of a message to him left by Lizzie's bed.

When I began writing *Beauty in Thorns*, I believed that Lizzie had committed suicide. As I researched more deeply, I changed my mind. The day before her death, Lizzie had told her friend, the poet Bessie Rayner Parkes, that she was pregnant. Lizzie had been devastated by the stillbirth of her daughter a year earlier, and it is known she and Gabriel were trying for another baby. I do not think she would have willingly killed her unborn child.

Bessie Rayner Parkes was always adamant that Lizzie's death was an accident, for that very reason, and I came to agree with her.

In regard to Gabriel, it has been alleged that he was a compulsive womaniser and sexually betrayed Lizzie on many occasions. Yet his foremost biographer, Jan Marsh, does not believe this to be true. The evidence indicates he was not unfaithful to her until after their relationship breakdown in 1856-57, which occurred around the time of his meetings with Fanny Cox (later called Fanny Cornforth) and Jane Morris.



Fanny Cornforth 'Bocca Baciata'
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1859)

If you would like to read more about Lizzie, the best books are *Lizzie Siddal: The Tragedy of a Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel* by Lucinda Hawksley (2004); *The Legend of Lizzie Siddal* by Jan Marsh (1989); and *Elizabeth Siddal:*

Pre-Raphaelite Artist by Jan Marsh (1991), which is wonderful if you want to see Lizzie's paintings and read her poems. Jan Marsh has also written a magisterial biography, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Poet and Painter* (1999). The biography of Gabriel that I read when I was a university student was *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Alien Victorian* by Brian and Judy Dobbs (1977).

The key texts for my research into eating disorders included *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* by Joan Jacobs Brumberg. I also read many memoirs of anorectics, including *Small Acts of Disappearance* by Fiona Wright, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* by Marya Hornbacher, *Unbearable Lightness: A Story of Loss and Gain* by Portia Rossi, and *Elena Vanishing: A Memoir* by Elena Dunkle.



'Self-Portrait in Oils'
Lizzie Siddal (1852-53)



Portrait of Jane Morris
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1878)

Jane Burden Morris
(b. 1839 – d. 1914)

Jane Morris's sorrowful face, her heavy ripples of hair, and sensual mouth were what first drew me to the Pre-Raphaelites.

I was fascinated by her story – a girl from the slums who married a rich young man who loved her but could not paint her, and then her secret and ultimately tragic affair with one of his best friends.

Reading about Janey led me to read about William Morris, and I discovered his poetry and his philosophies and his designs, all of which I loved. 'Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful' is one of my life mantras.

Janey rarely spoke about her childhood. She kept it well-hidden, even famously refusing to allow John Mackail to include a drawing of the house in which she grew up in his biography of her husband. One of the few things she ever admitted is that she used to pick violets on the Iffley Road, outside St Clements. It is most likely she picked these flowers to sell.



Jane Morris
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1879)

It is believed that Janey was the inspiration for the character of Anne Brown in Vernon Lee's 1884 novel *Miss Brown*, which in its turn inspired George Bernard Shaw's 1914 play *Pygmalion*, in which the flower seller Eliza Doolittle is plucked from the streets and taught how to speak and act, just as Jane Burden was by William Morris. Interestingly, Shaw was very close to the Morris family, living for some years in a ménage-a-trois with May Morris and her husband.

It is necessary to understand what life would be like for a child growing up in a 19th century rookery. Janey lived with her parents and brother and sister in a single room not much larger than a loose-box. Her life would have been hard and brutish and hungry, and she would have seen much that the other women in the book would have been protected from. It is known her father could be violent, as he was charged with assault on a neighbour, that he was unable to pay the parish poor rate, and that her parents separated after Robbie Burden refused to pay for his wife's debts. Janey went to the local parish school till she was twelve, and then would have worked as a laundress, seamstress, or scullery-maid.



Jane Morris, 'Daydream'
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1880)

Yet she was to later teach herself Italian, learnt to play the piano, and read unusually widely. Where and how Janey was taught to be a lady is not known, though there is one reference to friends of William Morris rowing to Godstow to 'see Topsy's Stunner'. I invented her teacher, Miss Leigh, and their skivvy, Violet, the only made-up characters in the novel.

To help me imagine Janey's childhood, I am grateful to Margaret Fleming for her essay, 'Where Janey Used to Live' published in *The Journal of William Morris Studies*, Winter 1981, and for *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopædia of the Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work, and Those That Will Not Work*, by Henry Mayhew (1862). *The Old Cotswold Dialect* by Charles Gardiner was also helpful to me in imagining how Janey and her family might have spoken.

It is not known whether Janey and Gabriel had an affair when they first met in Oxford, when she was only seventeen. However, he had made for her a bracelet of interlinked rosettes engraved with the dates *September 1857 – April 14 1868* which at the very least indicates the importance of those dates to them both.

Then his studio assistant Thomas Henry

Hall Caine wrote in his memoirs that Gabriel had confessed to him one night that '(he was) a man who, after engaging himself to one woman in all good honour and faith, had fallen in love with another, and then gone on to marry the first out of a mistaken sense of loyalty and a fear of giving pain.'

I have written what I believe most likely happened, but of course I cannot be sure. Maybe one day a lost packet of letters will be found that proves me right (or very wrong).

The other great unknown about Jane Morris was her ill health. Once again she has not been treated with much kindness by her husband's biographers. It has become fashionable to think of all Victorian-era women as hypochondriacs and hysterics, and Janey has not escaped this slur. E. P. Thompson's 1955 biography of William Morris says explicitly: 'Janey seems to have entered a settled melancholia and hypochondria (the symptoms mentioned include lumbago, sciatica, neuralgia, migraine, sore throats, fevers.)'

This has been repeated by all following biographers, including Fiona MacCarthy who, in her brilliant 1994 biography of William Morris, writes: 'There remains the mystery of the ill-health of Mrs Morris, who

took to the sofa at the age of twenty-nine, and never really left it.'

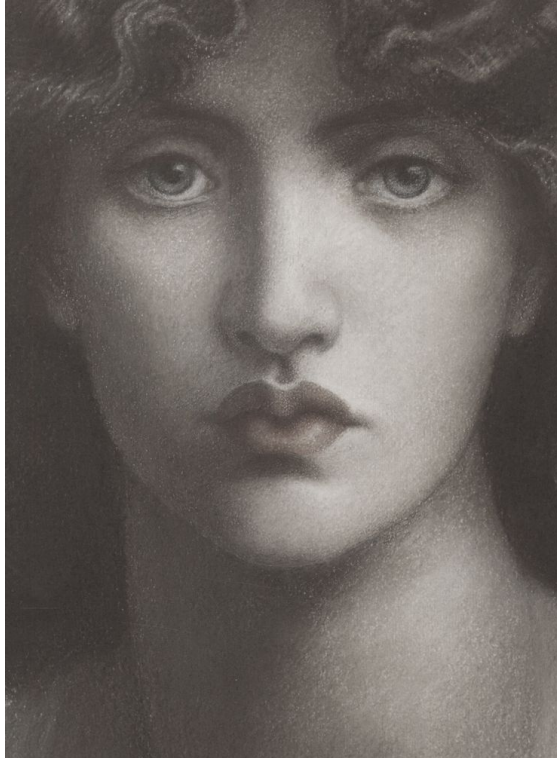
Even Jan Marsh, the most sympathetic of all the Pre-Raphaelite historians, entitles her chapter on the subject 'Jane Discovers the Benefits of Invalidism' (*Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story 1839-1938*, published in 1986).



Jane Morris, 'Astarte Syrica'
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1877-79)
(The angels were modelled by May Morris)

This is despite the evidence that Janey worked for Morris & Co as an embroiderer, was a notable housekeeper and cook, and went on numerous adventures to Broadway Tower in the Cotswolds, to Kelmscott

Manor in the country, and to Italy and Egypt. Her letters are cheerful and full of a self-deprecating humour.



Study of Jane Morris for 'Mnemosyne'
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1876)

It seemed poor Janey was only ever sick whilst in London. Quite apart from the smog, and the Great Stink of the sewage in the Thames, recurring outbreaks of cholera, smallpox, scarlet fever and measles, and the lack of antibiotics, no-one has ever investigated the possibility that Jane Morris may have been suffering from chronic arsenic poisoning from living in close quarters with wallpapers and fabrics known to be saturated with the poison.

Janey's ill-health began once she moved to Queen Square in London, where the Firm's workshops were at that time situated. Apart from the fumes from the kilns and the leading of stained glasses, every room in the apartment was furnished with early William Morris wallpapers. Nine of the first eleven wallpapers made by the Firm have since tested positive for arsenic.

Topsy's father's company, Great Devon Consols, was then the largest arsenic producer in the world. In 1862, a medical health officer established that three children in the Limehouse district had died as a result of arsenic poisoning from their wallpaper. Their symptoms were the same as Janey's: headaches, fatigue, nausea, abdominal cramps, weakness or trembling in the limbs, and chest and upper respiratory tract complaints.



A 1905 photograph of Janey Morris (in the hammock) with her daughters May and Jenny
Photographer unknown

In 1875, the Firm announced it was no longer using arsenic in its wallpaper, and the next year William Morris resigned from the board of Great Devon Consols (and famously sat on his ceremonial top-hat to squash it). However, arsenic was still being found in the Firm's wallpapers in the mid-1880s – and it was particularly strong in the 'Trellis' wallpaper which was used in the master bedroom at Kelmscott House in Hammersmith, where the Morris family lived after 1878.



It has been argued that there is no evidence that arsenical wallpapers – produced by William Morris & Co or not – were poisonous, but the World Health Organization has just recently shown the dangers of long exposure to low doses of arsenic. Interestingly, in light of Jenny Morris's epilepsy diagnosis, seizures are also a side-effect of arsenic poisoning.

To read more about arsenic poisoning in Victorian times, read *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work & Play* by James C Warburton or *King of Poisons: A History of Arsenic* by John Parascandola.

After Gabriel's tragic descent into madness and paranoia, Janey broke off the affair to protect her children. She wrote later: 'he wanted me to go away with him altogether, to leave my children & everything. But you know I (could) not do that.'

If you'd like to read more about Janey, the best books are *Jane & May Morris: A Biographical Story 1839-1938* by Jan Marsh (1986), *William Morris* (1994) by Fiona MacCarthy, and *Jane Morris: The Burden of History* by Wendy Parkins (2013), which dismantles many of the unkindest myths circulated about her.



Jane Morris (c. 1900)
Photograph by Harry F. Phillips



Photo of Georgie Macdonald, before her marriage to Edward Burne-Jones (c. 1856)

Georgie Macdonald Burne-Jones (b. 1840 – d. 1920)

Georgie has never attracted as much attention as Lizzie Siddal or Jane Burden, yet her story is just as fascinating. Born into the large family of a devout Methodist minister and his wife, she married Ned when he was a desperately poor young artist who had never had a proper drawing lesson in his life.

She supported him steadfastly through every crisis of faith, ill health, and infidelity, managed his business affairs, and put aside her own dreams of art and creativity to support her husband's. The scandal of Ned's affair with the tempestuous and unbalanced Maria Zambaco tested her courage and faithfulness to the utmost.

Her friend Rosalind Howard wrote in her diary: 'her love is the deepest I ever met with. She is centred in her husband, the whole romance of her life is bound up with him from when she was eleven years old – more than romance, every feeling she has. She longs for him. He cannot know what she has endured.'



Portrait of Maria Zambaco
Edward Burne-Jones (1870)



Maria Zambaco as 'Summer'
Georgiana Burne-Jones as 'Winter'
Edward Burne-Jones (c. 1870)

Yet Georgie was by no means the passive, long-suffering wife that she is sometimes painted to be.



Georgiana Burne-Jones as 'Cinderella'
Edward Burne-Jones (1863)

She pursued her own interests, and had many strong friendships with intelligent and forward-thinking women such as Rosalind Howard and Marian Evans (better known as George Eliot). She became a Socialist, against her husband's inclinations, and was voted in as a parish councillor in Rottingdean at a time when women still did not have any voice or votes in politics.

Most interestingly, the Memorials she wrote of Ned's life are, I think, the most readable and engaging biography of Victorian times.

Wherever possible, I have tried to let Georgie speak in her own voice. For example, when Georgie speaks of 'the cloven hoof of fashion', that is a direct quote from her book.

Elsewhere she describes the 'brown sugar' of a beach, or Ned's 'cloud-scattering laugh'. Her nephew Rudyard Kipling once said that ink ran in the veins of the Macdonalds. I think that he was right, and that it is a shame that Georgie never wrote that novel she dreamed of creating.



Portrait of the Artist's family
By Edward Burne-Jones (c. 1880)

The best books on the life of Ned and Georgie are *A Circle of Sisters: Alice Kipling, Georgiana Burne-Jones, Agnes Poynter and Louisa Baldwin* by Judith Flanders (2001), *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones & the Victorian Imagination* (2011) by Fiona MacCarthy, and the two volumes of *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* by Lady Georgiana Burne-Jones (1904).



Portrait of His Daughter
By Edward Burne-Jones (1880)

Margaret Burne-Jones
(b. 1866 - 1953)

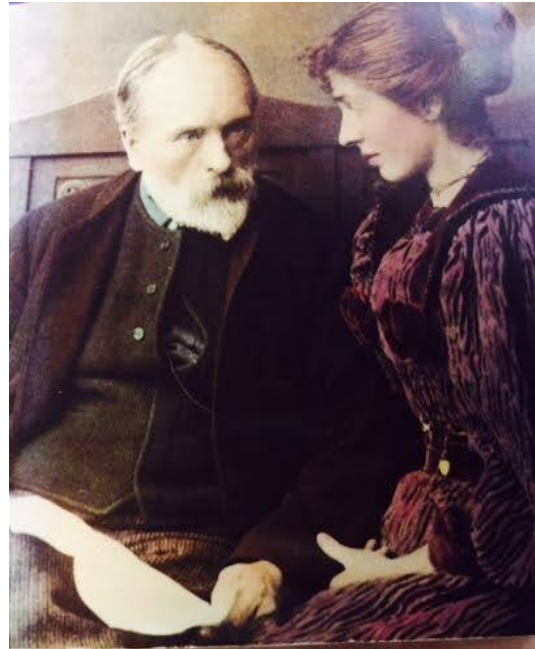
Of all the women in this novel, Margot's interior life was the most difficult to imagine, simply because so little has been written or published about her.

I had only a few small details to help me try and find her voice.

The first is that we share a birthday. Even more interestingly we were born exactly 100 years apart. Margot was born on 3rd June 1866, and I was born on 3rd June 1966. Given the princess in the fairy tale sleeps for 100 years, this seemed strangely significant.

Otherwise, there are only a few primary sources that attest to her character. Her father's obsessive love for her has been well-documented. It has been suggested that his feelings were incestuous, but there is no

evidence to support this. His letters and drawings for her are full of tenderness and an idealised view of her childhood innocence.



Edward & Margaret Burne-Jones (c. 1890)

A childhood friend Graham Robertson wrote of her: 'Margaret is very difficult to know. She is still almost as shy as she was a child, and has the Macdonald reticence and reserve developed to an abnormal degree.'

There are hints in Georgie's *Memorials* and letters that Margot struggled during her adolescent years, perhaps with depression or anxiety. She writes about Margot's 'restraint of manner', and – just after her eighteenth birthday – confided to a friend that Margot's 'old trouble' had returned and she needed 'strict care'.

Another first-hand account of Margot comes from Lady Cynthia Asquith, who knew her as a young woman: 'as witty as she was beautiful – few have a more individual flavor in talk – she had a magic touch with children.'

Her daughter, the novelist Angela Thirkell, recalled that Margot told her wonderful stories, and her cousin Rudyard Kipling, who called her 'Wop', encouraged her to try her hand at writing, saying 'your epistles show me that you have a style about seven and a half times better and more powerful than mine.'

Margot never did write a novel, but two of her three children were authors: Angela Thirkell and Denis Mackail. Angela's sons, Graham McInnes and Colin MacInnes, were also writers.



Edward Burne-Jones with Denis & Angela (c. 1894)

In regards to understanding Edward Burne-Jones's paintings of Sleeping Beauty, I am indebted to the research of Kirsten Powell,

'Burne-Jones and the Legend of the Briar Rose', in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, Volume 6, 1986, and 'Smite this Sleeping World Awake: Edward Burne-Jones and The Legend of the Briar Rose' by Andrea Wolk Rager in *Victorian Studies*, Spring 2009.

Nearly all the letters in the books are word-perfect copies of real letters written by the Pre-Raphaelites.



A Pilgrim's Search for the Heart of the Rose
Edward Burne-Jones (1898)