

The Thorn Birds

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

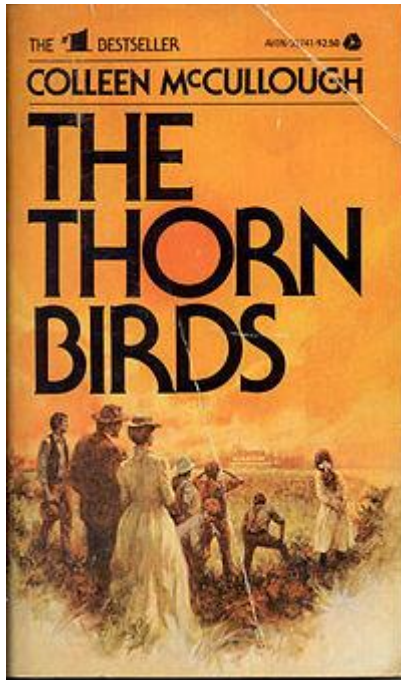
Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)



It has been suggested that [Meggie Cleary](#) be [merged](#) into this article or section. ([Discuss](#)) *Proposed since December 2011.*

For the television miniseries, see [The Thorn Birds \(TV miniseries\)](#).

The Thorn Birds



Author(s)	Colleen McCullough
Country	Australia
Language	English
Genre(s)	Family saga novel
Publisher	HarperCollins
Publication date	April 1977
Media type	Print (Hardback & Paperback)
Pages	692
ISBN	ISBN 0-06-012956-5 (first edition, hardback)
OCLC Number	2886288
Dewey Decimal	823
LC Classification	PR9619.3.M32 T5 1977

The Thorn Birds is a 1977 best-selling [novel](#) by [Colleen McCullough](#), an [Australian](#) author.

In 1983 it was adapted as a [television mini-series](#) that, during its television run 27–30 March, became the [United States](#)' second highest rated mini-series of all time behind [Roots](#); both series were produced by television veteran [David L. Wolper](#).

The mini-series starred [Richard Chamberlain](#), [Rachel Ward](#), [Barbara Stanwyck](#), [Christopher Plummer](#), [Bryan Brown](#), [Mare Winningham](#), [Philip Anglim](#), and [Jean Simmons](#). It was directed by [Daryl Duke](#).

Set primarily on Drogheda, a fictional [sheep station](#) in the [Australian outback](#), the story focuses on the Cleary family and spans the years 1915 to 1969.

Contents

[\[hide\]](#)

- [1 Plot](#)
- [2 List of characters](#)
- [3 Influences on popular culture](#)
- [4 References](#)
- [5 External links](#)

[\[edit\]](#) Plot

The epic begins with [Meghann "Meggie" Cleary](#), a four-year-old girl living in [New Zealand](#) in the early twentieth century, the only daughter of Paddy, an Irish farm labourer, and Fee, his harassed but aristocratic wife. Although Meggie is a beautiful child with curly red-gold hair, she receives little coddling and must struggle to hold her own against her numerous older brothers. Of these brothers, her favourite is the eldest, Frank, a rebellious young man who is unwillingly preparing himself for the [blacksmith](#)'s trade. He is much shorter than his brothers, but very strong; also, unlike the other Clearys, he has black hair and eyes.

Paddy is poor, but has a wealthy sister, Mary Carson, who lives in Australia on an enormous sheep station called Drogheda. One day, Paddy receives a letter from Mary offering him a job on her estate. He accepts, and the whole family moves to the [Outback](#).

Here Meggie meets [Father Ralph de Bricassart](#), a young, capable, and ambitious priest who, as punishment for insulting a bishop, has been relegated to a remote parish in the town of Gillanbone, near Drogheda. Ralph has befriended Mary, hoping a hefty enough bequest from her to the [Catholic](#) church might liberate him from his exile. Ralph is strikingly handsome; "a beautiful man"; and Mary, who doesn't bother to conceal her desire for him, often goes to great lengths to see if he can be induced to break his vows. Ralph blandly shrugs off these attentions and continues his visits. Meanwhile, he cares for all the Clearys and soon learns to cherish beautiful but forlorn little Meggie. Meggie, in return, makes Ralph the centre of her life.

Frank's relationship with his father, Paddy, has never been peaceful. The two vie for Fee's attention, and Frank resents the many pregnancies Paddy makes her endure. One day, after Fee, now in her forties, reveals she is again pregnant, the two men quarrel violently and

Paddy blurts out the truth about Frank: he is not Paddy's son. Long ago, Fee had been the adored only daughter of a prominent citizen. Then, she had an affair with a married politician, and the result, Frank, was already eighteen months old when her mortified father married her off to Paddy. Because he resembles her lost love, Fee has always loved Frank more than her other children. To the sorrow of Meggie and Fee, when Frank learns that Paddy is not his father, he runs away to become a boxer. Fee later gives birth to twin boys, James and Patrick (Jims and Patsy), but shows little interest in them. Shortly afterward, Meggie's beloved little brother, Hal, dies.

With Frank gone and Hal dead, Meggie clings to Ralph more than ever. This goes largely unnoticed because Ralph has now been her mentor for several years; however, as she ripens into womanhood, some begin to question their close relationship, including Ralph and Meggie themselves. Mary Carson has also noticed their changing relationship, and from motives of jealousy mingled with [Machiavellian](#) cruelty, she devises a plan to separate Ralph from Meggie by tempting him with his heart's desire: a high place in the Church hierarchy. Although her will of record leaves the bulk of her estate to Paddy, she quietly writes a new one, making the Roman Catholic Church the main beneficiary and Ralph the [executor](#).

In the new will, the true magnitude of Mary's wealth is finally revealed. Drogheda is not the centre of her fortune as Ralph and Paddy have long believed but is merely a "hobby", a diversion from her true financial interests. Mary's wealth is derived from a vast multi-national financial empire worth over thirteen million Pounds (about [A\\$200](#) million in modern terms). The sheer size of Mary's bequest will virtually guarantee Ralph's rapid rise in the church. She also makes sure that after she dies only Ralph, at first, will know of the new will — forcing him to choose between Meggie and his own ambition. She also provides for her disinherited brother, promising him and all his grandchildren a home on Drogheda as long as any of them live.

At Mary's seventy-second birthday party, Ralph goes to great lengths to avoid Meggie, now seventeen and dressed in a beautiful rose-pink evening gown; later, he explains that others might not see his attention as innocent. Mary dies in the night. Ralph duly learns of the new will. He sees at once the subtle genius of Mary's plan and, although he weeps and calls her "a disgusting old spider" he takes the new will to her lawyer without delay. The lawyer, scandalised, urges Ralph to destroy the will, but to no avail. The bequest of thirteen million pounds works its expected magic, and Ralph soon leaves to begin his rapid advance in the Church.

Before he leaves, Meggie confesses her love for him; after the birthday party, Ralph finds her crying in the family cemetery and they share a passionate kiss, but Ralph refuses her because of his duties as a priest and begs Meggie to find someone to love and marry.

The Clearys learn that Frank has been convicted of murder after killing someone in a fight. He spends three decades in prison.

Paddy and his son Stuart are killed; Paddy dies in a lightning fire, and Stu is killed by a wild boar shortly after finding his father's body. Meanwhile, Ralph, unaware of Paddy and Stu's deaths, is on his way to Drogheda and suffers minor injuries when his plane bogs in the mud. As Meggie tends his wounds, she tries to seduce him and is rebuffed. Ralph remains at Drogheda only long enough to conduct the funerals.

Three years later, a new ranch worker named Luke O'Neill begins to court Meggie. Although his motives are more mercenary than romantic, she marries him because he looks a little bit like Ralph, but mainly because he is not Catholic and wants little to do with religion-her own way of getting back at Ralph. She soon realises her mistake. After a brief honeymoon, Luke, a [skinflint](#) who regards women as sex objects and prefers the company of men, finds Meggie a live-in job with a kindly couple, the Muellers, and leaves to join a gang of itinerant [sugarcane](#) cutters in North [Queensland](#). Before he leaves, he appropriates all Meggie's savings and arranges to have her wages paid directly to him. He tells her he's saving money to buy a homestead; however, he quickly becomes obsessed with the competitive toil of cane-cutting and has no real intention of giving it up. Hoping to change Luke's ambition and settle him down, Meggie deliberately thwarts his usual contraception and bears Luke a red-haired daughter, Justine. The new baby, however, makes little impression on Luke.

Father Ralph visits Meggie during her difficult labour; he has come to say goodbye, as he is leaving Australia for Rome. He sees Meggie's unhappiness for himself, and pities her. Justine proves to be a fractious baby, so the Muellers send Meggie to an isolated island resort for a rest. Father Ralph returns to Australia, learns of Meggie's whereabouts from Anne Mueller, and joins her for several days. There, at last, the lovers consummate their passion, and Ralph realises that despite his ambition to be the perfect priest, his desire for Meggie makes him a man like other men. Father Ralph returns to the Church, and Meggie, pregnant with Ralph's child, decides to separate from Luke. She tells Luke what she really thinks of him, and returns to Drogheda, leaving him to his cane-cutting.

Back home, she gives birth to a beautiful boy whom she names Dane. Fee, who has had experience in such matters, notices Dane's resemblance to Ralph as soon as he is born. The relationship between Meggie and Fee takes a turn for the better. Justine grows into an independent, keenly intelligent girl who loves her brother dearly; however, she has little use for anyone else, and calmly rebuffs Meggie's overtures of motherly affection.

None of Meggie's other surviving brothers ever marry, and Drogheda gradually becomes a place filled with old people.

Ralph visits Drogheda after a long absence and meets Dane for the first time; and although he finds himself strangely drawn to the boy, he fails to recognize that they are father and son. Dane grows up and decides, to Meggie's dismay, to become a priest. Fee tells Meggie that what she stole from God, she must now give back. Justine, meanwhile, decides to become an actress and leaves Australia to seek her dream in England. Ralph, now a [Cardinal](#), becomes a mentor to Dane, but still blinds himself to the fact that the young man is his own son. Dane is also unaware of their true relationship. Ralph takes great care of him, and because of their resemblance people mistake them for uncle and nephew. Ralph and Dane encourage the rumour. Justine and her brother remain close, although he is often shocked at her sexual adventures and free-wheeling lifestyle. She befriends Rainer Hartheim, a German politician who is a great friend of both Dane and Ralph's-- unbeknownst to her, he falls deeply in love with her. Their friendship becomes the most important in her life, and is on the verge of becoming something more when tragedy strikes.

Dane, who has just become a priest, is vacationing in [Greece](#). While there, he goes swimming one day and dies while rescuing two women from a dangerous current. Meggie reveals before Dane's funeral that Dane is Ralph's son. Ralph dies in Meggie's arms after the funeral.

Justine breaks off all communications with Rainer and falls into a depressed, hum-drum existence. Eventually, they renew their acquaintance on strictly platonic terms, until Rainer visits Drogheda alone in order to urge Meggie to help him pursue Justine's hand in marriage.

Justine, now the sole surviving grandchild of Fee and Paddy Cleary, finally accepts her true feelings for Rainer. They marry, but have no plans to live on Drogheda.

The book's title refers to a mythical bird that searches for thorn trees from the day it is hatched. When it finds the perfect thorn, it impales itself, and sings the most beautiful song ever heard as it dies.

[\[edit\]](#) List of characters

- **Meghann "Meggie" Cleary** — The central character, the only daughter in a large family of sons. The novel takes her from early childhood to old age.
- **Father Ralph de Bricassart** — Meggie's true love, a handsome Irish Catholic priest.
- **Padraic "Paddy" Cleary** — Meggie's father, a kind and simple labouring Irishman.
- **Fiona "Fee" Armstrong Cleary** — Paddy's wife and Meggie's mother, an aristocratic woman who has come down in the world.
- **Francis "Frank" Armstrong Cleary** — Meggie's eldest brother, Fee's illegitimate first son. A favourite with Meggie and Fee both.
- **Mary Elizabeth Cleary Carson** — Paddy's immensely wealthy older sister; Father Ralph's benefactor; owner of Drogheda.
- **Luke O'Neill** — Meggie's husband during an unhappy three-year marriage; father of Justine.
- **Dane O'Neill** — Son of Meggie and Ralph, Meggie's pride and joy, drowned in Greece at the age of twenty-six.
- **Justine O'Neill** — Daughter of Meggie and Luke, an intelligent, independent girl. At the end, she is the only surviving grandchild of Paddy and Fee Cleary.
- **Luddie and Anne Mueller** — Meggie's employers during her marriage to Luke. They become lifelong friends.
- **Bob, Jack, and Hughie Cleary** — Meggie's older brothers. They all resemble Paddy and live out their days, unmarried, on Drogheda.
- **Stuart "Stu" Cleary** — A quiet, kindly boy who resembles his mother and is closest to Meggie in age.
- **Harold "Hal" Cleary** — Meggie's cherished baby brother. He dies when he's four years old.
- **James and Patrick "Jims and Patsy" Cleary** — Twin boys, Meggie's youngest brothers.
- **Rainer "Rain" Moerling Hartheim** — Friend of Ralph and eventually Dane. Member of the West German Parliament and eventual husband of Justine.
- **Archbishop (later Cardinal) Vittorio di Contini-Verchese** — Ralph's mentor, friend to Rainer and Dane.

[\[edit\]](#) Influences on popular culture

In *The Sopranos* episode "[College](#)", [Carmela Soprano](#) and her priest, Father Phil Intintola, watch *[The Remains of the Day](#)* on [Tony Soprano](#)'s stolen DVD player and skirt dangerously close to forsaking Phil's priestly and Carmela's marital vows, while Tony, [Meadow](#), and [AJ](#)

spend the night elsewhere. The next morning, Tony expresses suspicion after learning that Father Phil has spent the night, to which Carmela sarcastically responds, "Do I look like the friggin' thornbird over here?"

In the television show [Reba](#) there is an episode in which the character Barbra Jean has a crush on her reverend, whom she refers to as Reverend Yummy-Pants. She sends him a copy of The Thorn Birds as a hint.

[\[edit\]](#) References

[The Thorn Birds on ABC, 1983, TV Show](#), [tvguide.com](#)

[\[edit\]](#) External links

- [Photos of the first edition of The Thorn Birds](#)

View page ratings

Rate this page

[What's this?](#)

Trustworthy

Objective

Complete

Well-written



I am highly knowledgeable about this topic (optional)

[Categories:](#)

- [1977 novels](#)
- [Australian novels](#)
- [Novels by Colleen McCullough](#)
- [Family saga novels](#)

- [Log in / create account](#)

- [Article](#)
- [Talk](#)

- [Read](#)
- [Edit](#)
- [View history](#)



- [Main page](#)
- [Contents](#)
- [Featured content](#)
- [Current events](#)
- [Random article](#)
- [Donate to Wikipedia](#)

Interaction

- [Help](#)
- [About Wikipedia](#)
- [Community portal](#)
- [Recent changes](#)
- [Contact Wikipedia](#)

Toolbox

Print/export

Languages

- [Български](#)
- [Deutsch](#)
- [Español](#)
- [ىف ارس](#)
- [Français](#)
- [한국어](#)
- [Italiano](#)
- [עברית](#)
- [Norsk \(bokmål\)](#)
- [Polski](#)
- [Português](#)
- [Русский](#)
- [Slovenčina](#)
- [Srpskohrvatski / Српскохрватски](#)
- [Svenska](#)
- [Tiếng Việt](#)
- [中文](#)

- This page was last modified on 17 January 2012 at 21:46.
- Text is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License](#); additional terms may apply. See [Terms of use](#) for details.
Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the [Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.](#), a non-profit organization.
- [Contact us](#)