

# **The Thorn Birds Study Guide**

**The Thorn Birds by Colleen McCullough**

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# Plot Summary

*The Thorn Birds* is a sweeping love story set on Drogheda, a sheep station in the Australian Outback. At its heart is the ill-fated romance of beautiful Meggie Cleary and the handsome Roman Catholic priest, Father Ralph de Bricassart. Forced to choose between the woman he loves, and the Church he is sworn to, Father Ralph's ambitions win, and he stays with the Church, eventually becoming a Cardinal in Rome. De Bricassart never realizes that Meggie's bright, compliant young son, Dane, is his child, even when the boy comes to Rome to study for the priesthood. After Dane's tragic death, Meggie must choose between her own comfort, and the independence of her beautiful, willful daughter Justine, a talented actress. McCullough's tome, almost 700 pages in length, details the private lives of three generations of the Cleary clan over 55 years, and paints a convincing portrait of the trials and rewards of life in the Australian desert, and one woman's doomed love for an unavailable man.

Meggie Cleary is a beautiful, but lonely little girl of nine with red-gold hair, when the family moves to Drogheda. Meggie's brothers are all busy with the ranch, and she is soon forced to quit school to care of the younger children. Ralph de Bricassart, a handsome young Roman Catholic priest, befriends the child. As Meggie grows into a beautiful young woman, the two fall in love, culminating in a kiss after a ball, when Meggie is 16 years old. Mary Carson, the clan matriarch, is jealous and ends the romance by bequeathing the enormous sheep ranch to the Roman Catholic Church, ensuring that De Bricassart will be elevated to bishop, far from Drogheda.

Heartbroken, Meggie marries Luke O'Neill, a man who looks like De Bricassart, and moves to Queensland. Meggie's husband has no interest in living with her, and travels around the countryside cutting sugar cane, forcing Meggie to work as a servant for a Queensland couple, Anne and Ludwig Mueller. During one of Luke O'Neill's rare conjugal visits, they conceive their daughter, Justine. Exhausted, and realizing her marriage is not viable, Meggie retreats to the honeymoon resort of Matlock alone, to sort out her future. Anne Mueller sends de Bricassart to join her, and the two conceive a son during a weeklong idyll. Meggie immediately realizes she is pregnant, and contrives to have sex with her husband, so the child will not be nameless. De Bricassart is transferred to Rome, and does not learn that he has fathered a son, until the boy is grown.

Meggie returns to Drogheda, where Justine grows into a fey, willful young woman, and her brother Dane becomes a sunny child. When Dane decides to become a priest, he travels to Rome to study under De Bricassart's tutelage. Meggie refuses to attend young Dane's ordination in Rome, feeling the Church has taken back the little happiness she stole from it. Just weeks later, Dane dies in Greece, while rescuing a drowning woman. Heartbroken, Justine decides to leave her acting career and lover in London and return to Drogheda. In an act of unselfish love, Meggie insists Justine must continue her own life in Europe, rather than submerging herself in Drogheda, as generations of Cleary women before her have done. The title of the novel is drawn from the legend of a bird that sings just once in its life, more sweetly than any other, but only at the cost of great

pain. The title symbolizes the tenderness of the brief, forbidden love affair between Meggie and Father Ralph, resulting in pain and tragedy.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

*The Thorn Birds* is a sweeping love story set on Drogheda, a sheep station in the Australian Outback. At its heart is the ill-fated romance of beautiful Meggie Cleary and the handsome Roman Catholic priest, Father Ralph de Bricassart. Forced to choose between the woman he loves, and the Church he is sworn to, Father Ralph's ambitions win, and he stays with the Church, eventually becoming a Cardinal in Rome. De Bricassart never realizes that Meggie's bright, compliant young son, Dane, is his child, even when the boy comes to Rome to study for the priesthood. After Dane's tragic death, Meggie must choose between her own comfort, and the independence of her beautiful, willful daughter Justine, a talented actress. McCullough's tome, almost 700 pages in length, details the private lives of three generations of the Cleary clan over 55 years, and paints a convincing portrait of the trials and rewards of life in the Australian desert, and one woman's doomed love for an unavailable man.

The story opens on Meggie Cleary's fourth birthday. Meggie receives a precious gift, a delicate doll she immediately names, Agnes. Miraculously, the doll is not homemade or donated, but has actually been bought from the general store in Wahine, New Zealand. Meggie has only been to Wahine once in her life, seven months before, when she first saw Agnes in the store. Jealous, Meggie's rowdy brothers Jack, 10, and Hughie, 9, rip Agnes from her hands and begin to tear her clothes off. The doll's beautiful golden curls tumble down. Meggie's oldest brother, dark, brooding Frank, 16, finally forces them to stop and takes the crying Meggie inside to her mother.

Fiona Cleary, slim and fair, chides Meggie for getting dirty and matter-of-factly plans to mend Agnes' clothes and glue her hair back on, with little sympathy for Meggie's plight. When Paddy Cleary returns, he is angry that Frank has left his blacksmith work to help Meggie. All of the Cleary children, except Frank, have inherited their father's Irish red hair. Frank dreams of adventures in far away places, instead of endless chores at the hardscrabble Cleary sheep farm. Paddy assigns farm chores to each of the boys to complete while he is earning wages plowing fields for farmers that are more successful. After Paddy retires for the night, Frank surreptitiously helps his mother to finish washing the dishes. Fiona tucks in the sleeping children, lingering over the family's pride, their many sons.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The Clearys are a close-knit clan, who work together ceaselessly, just to earn a bare existence from their small farm. Paddy Cleary pays the bills by working as a day laborer for men with larger, more successful farms. His sons accomplish all the endless chores around the farm, caring for the animals, milking the cow, painting the outdoor privy, mending fences, drawing water and chopping wood. The oldest son, Frank, is the only



person discontent with this arrangement. Frank has been hired out as a blacksmith to generate extra income. He dreams, instead of going to war, or finding his own adventures far from the tiny New Zealand farm.

Labor in the Cleary household is strictly divided by gender. Men handle the farm chores outside, and women are responsible for everything within the house, and the care of small children. Fiona, called Fee by her husband, labors to the point of exhaustion every day, cooking three huge meals on a wood stove, cleaning up after six males, boiling water and scrubbing the laundry by hand in a tub. Paddy Cleary is a strict traditionalist, and forbids the boys to help their mother, even if they have the time and inclination. There is no concept of women as weaker or deserving of protection in McCullough's novel. Girls are simply a nuisance that must be endured. Paddy will have no weak or molycoddled females on his farm. Frank is the only Cleary who dares disobey his father. Sons are considered a crowing jewel, and Paddy Cleary's greatest reference is his five, strong boys. By contrast, Meggie, although beautiful, is almost worthless to the family. Her only value is in helping Fee with the housework, and Meggie is not even old enough to accomplish that.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Meggie is considered too young to go to church, and stays home each Sunday with one of her brothers. Paddy Cleary believes that young children do not belong in any house except their own, and that includes God's house. Fiona Cleary was a member of the Church of England before her marriage. Her family, the Armstrongs, were New Zealand aristocrats of a type, patrician pioneers. Fee's marriage to a poor, Irish immigrant was a shocking misalliance, and her family immediately cut her off.

Meggie begins school with her brothers, walking the five miles to the Sacred Heart convent school in Wahine. The head nun, Sister Agatha, canes all five Clearys for being late. Meggie vomits from fright, and is promptly sent home. Sister Agatha continues to discriminate against Meggie, showing preference to the girls from wealthier families. Maggie finds solace in her friendship with Teresa Annunzio, the daughter of a shopkeeper. When Fiona finds head lice in Meggie's beautiful red-gold curls, she cuts it all off. Frank pleads with his mother not to shave Meggie's head, so Fiona douses the 1-inch stubble with kerosene and scrubs it with caustic soap.

Paddy Cleary is determined that his daughter caught the lice from her Italian friend. He confronts Teresa's father in Wahine, calling him a Dago, and horsewhips him. When Paddy tells his friends at the Pub what happened, they throw the entire family into the horse trough, including women and children. The Annunzios leave town in disgrace.

Frank begs to be allowed to join the army, but Paddy forbids it. He insists the family needs Frank's blacksmith income. When Frank runs away to Wanganui, the police capture him and bring him back.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

The Clearys survive on their isolated farm, because they have come to rely on each other. However, there is also a negative side to the insular, clannish life they live. When Meggie catches head lice, Paddy Cleary forbids her to have friends outside the family. This effectively eliminates the possibility of any female company, except her mother. Paddy's authority within the family is absolute. Although Frank longs for the independence and challenge of life away from the farm, Paddy forces him to work, and to donate his entire salary to the family.

Women in New Zealand and Australia in the early 1900s have no identity outside of their family roles. It seems entirely reasonable to Paddy for him to punish the entire Annunzio clan for Teresa having head lice. If Mr. Annunzio had proper control of his females, nothing of the sort would have happened, in Paddy's view.





The Roman Catholic Church is integral to Paddy Cleary's world. The family attends Mass every Sunday, but because Fiona never converted to Catholicism herself, the tiny touches are missing, like prayers before bed and grace before meals. The nun's authority within their domain is as absolute as Paddy's authority at home. No one questions the assumption that frequent canings are required to beat knowledge into their "thick Irish heads," although Paddy does occasionally wish Sister Agnes would be kinder to Meggie.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Father Ralph de Bricassart visits his elderly patron, Mary Carson, in his Daimler. The car, as well as the Father's expensive horse, is a gift from Mrs. Carson. She is the owner of Drogheda, the largest sheep ranch in New South Wales, since her husband died. The demanding widow is perennially unable to keep a station manager. When the most recent manager leaves in a huff, Carson summons her younger brother, an impoverished farmer and sometime sheep shearer in New Zealand.

In New Zealand, the Clearys continue to struggle financially. Fee's latest pregnancy has resulted in the birth of a sickly infant, Harold, whom everyone calls Hal. Doctor bills mount, as Fiona is confined to her bed. Fortunately, Meggie, at 9, is old enough to help with the household and the baby. Mary Carson's letter seems like a boon. The Clearys sell the farm and their furnishings, pack Fiona's spinet piano and the rugs from her family home, and begin the torturous journey by boat and train to Australia.

After a dusty, exhausting weeklong journey, the Clearys arrive by train in Gillanbone, where Father Ralph puts them up for the night. After the gentle emerald swells of New Zealand, the flat, brown Australian landscape is barren and forbidding. Paddy Cleary, lured by the promise of inheriting Drogheda upon Carson's death, arrives with his family, including six sons, in tow. He is soon established in the head stockman's house.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

All of the Clearys, except Meggie, are slightly embarrassed by Fiona's latest pregnancy. Frank, at 21, is humiliated at his mother's swollen form, and regards Paddy as a rutting animal who will not leave her alone. Frank watches delicate, beautiful Meggie tending the weak baby and thinks her life will be wasted, just as his mother's has been. Just as Frank's own life has been wasted.

Father Ralph de Bricassart is the first person the Clearys meet in Gillanbone. He is warm and friendly, very different from the remote, somber New Zealand priests. Mary Carson, although forty years older than de Bricassart, is obviously attracted to him. She makes generous donations to the church, and buys the priest lavish personal gifts, although he is a wealthy man with an income of his own. Mary Carson is immediately jealous of the attention the 25-year-old priest pays to the young girl, Meggie.

Mary Carson much prefers the status of widow to the prospect of remarriage. As a widow, she owns and manages one of the largest estates in Australia. As a wife, her husband would instantly own all her wealth. Only as a widow can a woman have any degree of autonomy and independence, in the Australia of the early 1900s. One of Paddy Cleary's primary attractions is the fact that he brings six sons to work the land with him, and only one, worthless daughter.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

The head stockman's house on Drogheda features a chipped tub off the veranda and a decrepit water heater, although the privy is still a stinking hole in the ground a hundred yards away. Drogheda is a world unto itself, with a blacksmith shop, innumerable sheds, a sheep shearing shed with dozens of stalls, and a barracks for the jackaroos, or shepherders. The huge rainwater tanks around the sumptuous main house are rumored to hold enough water for the house and gardens for ten years. At the head stockman's house by the river, the tanks hold only enough water for drinking. Cleaning and washing must be accomplished with the dark brown river water.

Paddy and the older boys spend most of their time away from the Home Paddock, camping on the range under the tutelage of two stockmen Mary Carson hired. Although the grey-brown land appears barren, they are surrounded by innumerable birds, kangaroos, and snakes and lizards four or five feet long. Dust and flies are everywhere. Mary Carson generously pays for Meggie and Stuart to attend the boarding school at Holy Cross convent in Gillanbone. Fiona soon learns that she is more comfortable in the unmerciful heat wearing a single layer, without her voluminous petticoats. Fiona is soon pregnant again, a fact that infuriates Frank.

After helping to round up the sheep before a sudden cloudburst, Father de Bricassart is soaked to the skin and covered with mud. Mary Carson insists that he disrobe before entering the house. De Bricassart complies, stripping under Carson's elderly, but impudent eyes. She exclaims over his beauty, but notices his flaccid penis and asks if the priest prefers men. Father Ralph replies that both men and women are too much trouble.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Mary Carson is a demanding employer. She has no qualms about employing her brother and his four older sons at bargain rates, enticing them with promises that Paddy will inherit her immense fortune, in addition to Drogheda, on Mary's death. Paddy and the younger boys love camping out and working the sheep ranch. Only Frank is dissatisfied with the limitations of life in the bush. Mary provides education only for Meggie, and for Stuart, who is too young to work the ranch.

Mary Carson's interest in Father de Bricassart is clearly more carnal than religious. Although she is four decades older, Mary clearly lusts after the handsome young priest. For his part, Father Ralph is willing to flirt with the matriarch, if it brings money to the church. He realizes that only the promise of large donations can advance his career past Gillanbone, where he has been banished by an angry bishop for disrespect.



Although the lives of the male Clearys are much improved by the move to New South Wales, Fiona's exhausting round of housework is almost doubled. The oppressive heat and pervasive dust make housekeeping more exhausting than ever. Meggie, away at boarding school in Gillanbone, can provide no help. Although Mary Carson is extremely wealthy and employs a housekeeper and several maids, her generosity does not extend to sharing her palatial home with the Clearys, or providing a maid for Fiona.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

After the sheep were sheared the annual winter Gillanbone Show and Picnic Races, the district's most important social event arrived. Fiona was not well enough to attend. Paddy drives Mary Carson in her Rolls Royce, while the boys follow in a wagon. driven by one of the stockmen. Meggie and Stuart stay overnight at the presbytery with Father Ralph. Meggie has become a favorite of Father Ralph's Scottish housekeeper.

The boys go their separate ways, while Meggie tours the midway with Father Ralph and Frank. At a large tent, Jimmy Sharman's troupe, a group of professional boxers, offers a purse to anyone who can best one of the prizefighters. Frank leaps to be the first to volunteer. Father Ralph tries to take Meggie out of sight, but she screams not to be taken from Frank. Although he is short, Frank's torso, arms and legs are heavily developed from working at the blacksmith's forge. He channels all his rage and frustration into the fight and defeats three professionals in a row, winning twenty pounds. Every man in the arena is filled with respect for the young heir of Drogheda. Meggie is so frightened by seeing her brother pummeled that she vomits. Father Ralph takes her back to the presbytery to wash and change clothes.

Paddy is escorting Mary Carson through a lavish champagne dinner and on to the horse races. Having had his fill of colonial aristocrats, Paddy retreats to the presbytery, where he finds Frank bruised, obviously from a fight. Without waiting to hear the explanation, Paddy berates the boy for brawling, and they are soon arguing fiercely. Frank infuriates Paddy by calling him "an old he-goat," and Paddy angrily replies, "And you're no better than the shitty old dog who fathered you, whoever he was! Thank God I never had a hand in it!" Paddy apologizes, but Frank storms out to join Jimmy Sharman's troupe of prizefighters on their tour.

Paddy confides the entire story to Father Ralph. Fiona was the privileged, only daughter of a wealthy rancher. When she scandalously became pregnant out of wedlock, her father convinced the dairy hand, Paddy Cleary, to marry Fiona and give the baby a name. In return, Fiona's father provided the cash for Cleary to buy a farm in a remote area. He promised only to keep Fiona away from her family. Much to his surprise, Paddy fell in love with his beautiful wife.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

The source of Frank and Paddy's long-simmering conflict is revealed. Dark, brooding Frank is so different from the other Cleary sons, because he is not related to Paddy Cleary. Paddy bitterly regrets his bitter outburst, but there is no way to make amends to Frank. He welcomes the revelation as proof that he no longer has to allow Paddy Cleary to control his life. He immediately leaves Gillanbone, free to seek his fortune elsewhere.



Frank is Meggie's favorite brother. Ignorant of where babies come from, Meggie naively tells Father Ralph she is going to "grow a baby," so she will not miss Frank so much.

As an unmarried woman who was pregnant, Fiona was a huge source of scandal and shame to her family. She had no choice but to submit to a quick, loveless marriage to a man who was far below her in social status. Being punished with a lifetime of drudgery, and yoked to a man she is indifferent to, was considered fitting for a wayward daughter. Fiona's male partner is considered completely blameless. As the female, the guilt is her's alone.

Father Ralph acts much more like a private citizen than a representative of the church throughout this chapter. He allows Meggie's childish protests to overrule his own good judgment. As a result, she is traumatized by seeing her beloved older brother punched repeatedly. He does little to stop the confrontation between Frank and Paddy. After Paddy's searing words, Father Ralph listens to his explanation somewhat woodenly.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

By August, it is bitterly cold, and Meggie has to quit school and come home. Fiona, in an advanced state of pregnancy, just could not manage all the housework. As soon as Meggie leaves, the gentle, sensitive Stuart began a hunger strike until he, too is allowed to leave school. Stuart remains around the homestead, caring for the vegetable garden and milking the cows. Meggie quickly becomes a mother to baby Hal, with Fiona much too exhausted to pay any attention to the child. The only time Fiona shows any animation is once every six weeks, when the mail is delivered. She always hopes for news from Frank, and sinks back into disappointment, when none arrives.

Fiona was delivered of twins, James and Patrick. The two red-haired boys are quickly nicknamed Jims and Patsy, and became favorites of the spinster housekeeper and maids at the main house. When Father Ralph brings the toddlers for a visit to the big house, Mary Carson looks on with disapproval at the priest's fondness for Meggie.

Two dry winters in a row afflict the ranch. Dry storms roll across the landscape with clouds of dust, thunder and lightning, but no rain. One day, Hal begins to cough and wheeze, rapidly growing weaker. Paddy goes up to the big house and calls the doctor, but he's forty miles away tending another patient. Meggie holds her favorite brother tight while he struggles for breath, his parents praying at his bedside. At midnight, Paddy removes Hal from Meggie's arms and lays him on the bed. Meggie exclaims that he is recovered, because he is no longer struggling for breath, but Paddy gently explains that Hal has found another kind of peace. Fiona puts it more bluntly. Hal is dead. Father Ralph futilely tries to console Meggie. The boys build a simple coffin from boards, and Hal is buried on Drogheda, in the tiny cemetery.

Just before her sixteenth birthday, Meggie notices brown, streaky stains on her underwear. When the bleeding returns six weeks later, she is afraid that she is dying of cancer. Fiona has never thought to explain the mechanics of her own body, or the facts of life to Meggie. Convinced she is dying, Meggie becomes pale and listless. When Father Ralph finally asks her what is wrong, Meggie recounts her symptoms to him. Amused but embarrassed, Father Ralph gently explains that what has happened to Meggie is a normal part of growing up. He stops short of explaining to her where babies come from, silently cursing Fiona all the while.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

There is no doubt that Meggie will leave school to help Fiona with the household responsibilities and the younger children. With the men gone constantly, even with Stuart's help, the three are hard-pressed to complete all the gardening, milking, wood chopping and other chores Fiona has struggled with. There is little wonder that Fiona



has had scant time for Hal. Still, Father Ralph finds it difficult to excuse her of leaving Meggie ignorant of the changes of her own body. Possibly Fiona, imprisoned by biology in a world of infinite labor, subconsciously hopes Meggie will escape her fate.

Hal's death draws the family closer together, and his grave ties them permanently to Drogheda. It is a reminder that even with Mary Carson's huge ranch, the Clearys have little control over the harsh conditions of their lives.

As Father Ralph's visits to the ranch become more frequent, he becomes more of a close family friend than a priest. That pattern is disrupted, when he must say Mass and perform the funeral for Hal.





# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Mary Carson plans a huge party for her 72nd birthday. Before the party starts, she pens a new will. Against Mary's wishes, Father Ralph has purchased riding clothes for Meggie and taught her to ride Mary's finest horses. He insists that, as the only daughter of the heir of one of the largest ranches in Australia, she not drive a buggy like a common country girl. He makes certain Meggie will ride like the wealthy daughters of other landowners.

Mary Carson has provided the money for new party clothes for all the Clearys. Meggie, now 16, has her first formal dress, in a delicate pinkish color called "ashes of roses," embroidered in tiny rosebuds. Mary Carson's stout form is bedecked in white satin, lace and white ostrich feathers. Everyone enjoys the festive dinner party and dancing, except Meggie. She is hurt, because Father Ralph completely ignores her.

At 3 a.m., Mary Carson announces that she is weary and retires, decreeing the music will continue as long as anyone wishes to dance. On the stairs, Mary bids Father Ralph farewell, assuring him that this is her last party. Mary Carson insists that she is tired of festivities, and will choose her own time to die. Summoning him to her bedroom, she gives Father Ralph a sealed envelope, to be opened after her death, but before her funeral. Mary demands a kiss from the priest, but he argues that, as a man of God, he must decline.

Father Ralph finds Meggie weeping in the cemetery, hurt that he has ignored her all night. The priest assures Meggie that she looks lovely. He only ignored her to prevent rumors of a liaison. He sends her home and goes to bed in Mary Carson's guest room.

The next afternoon, Father de Bricassart is awakened by the housekeeper. Mary Carson has been discovered dead, the body already decomposing in the heat and flies. There is no question of suicide. Remembering his promise, Father Ralph opens the letter Mary has given him. It contains a new will, leaving her enormous fortune, and conglomerate in Sydney, as well as Drogheda to the Roman Catholic Church, naming Father Ralph de Bricassart as administrator. The legacy amounts to thirteen million pounds, a fortune, indeed. The new will replaces one in her solicitor's safe, leaving everything to Paddy Cleary. It stipulates that the Clearys and their descendants will live on Drogheda as long as they like, and will be paid a generous salary.

Father Ralph faces a dilemma. If he destroys the new will, or says nothing, he will be stuck in dreary, dusty Gillanbone for the rest of his life. All his ambitions to become a bishop or even a cardinal will be unrealized. However, he will be near Meggie, whom he has begun to love. If he accepts Mary Carson's bequest, he will surely be elevated to bishop and sent to Sydney, perhaps even Rome. He will be able to adhere to his priestly vows and achieve his ambitions, but in the process, he will give up the woman he loves.



Father Ralph goes to town for the funeral vestments. On the way, he stops by the home of Mary Carson's solicitor, Harry Gough, and shows him the new will. Gough is shocked, and insists he will advise Paddy Cleary to contest the will. Riding before the funeral, Father de Bricassart encounters Meggie. Beside a pond, he tells her that he is going away. Gently, Father Ralph tells Meggie that she must forget her crush on him. He says he loves her as a priest, not as a man. Despite himself, Father Ralph takes Meggie in his arms and kisses her.

After Mary's rose-covered coffin is laid to rest, Paddy Cleary takes the news of his disinheritance well. He insists that he would not want the responsibility for 13 million pounds. Drogheda is all he is interested in, and as long as he and all his descendants have the ranch for life, with a good salary besides, he is happy.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

On the last day of her life, Mary Carson betrays her family. Despite her many promises over the years to Paddy Cleary and his sons, she leaves her huge fortune to the Roman Catholic Church, with Father de Bricassart as sole administrator. With characteristic calm, Paddy Cleary accepts the news. He decides not to contest the will without consulting with his wife. As long as his family is modestly provided for, and his sons are guaranteed jobs on Drogheda, Paddy has no use for Mary's wealth.

Mary Carson continues to control Father de Bricassart from the grave. Jealous of the priest's affection for Meggie, she has realized it is growing into love for a mature woman. Mary tempts the priest by offering him a bequest that will secure his future with the Church, and almost guarantee his ambitions are realized. All he has to do, is leave the woman he loves. In the end, Father Ralph's ambition proves stronger than his love, and he accepts the bequest.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

By the New Year, the Clearys have still not moved into the big house, despite the lure of indoor toilets and fresh, hot water for baths and cleaning. Fiona is determined to redecorate, at least, the drawing room before the move. At the beginning of December, Father Ralph, in his role as administrator, has sent Paddy a check for five thousand pounds. That was almost more than Paddy earned in his entire life.

The second week in January, while packing, Fiona discovered a small news item in an old copy of *Smith's Weekly* that no one had time to read. The item was dated December 6, 1925, more than three years ago. It reported that Francis Armstrong Cleary, 26, a boxer by profession, was convicted of the murder of Ronald Cumming, a laborer. Cleary was sentenced to life in jail. "Asked if he had anything to say, Cleary answered, 'Just don't tell my mother.'" All of Fiona's life and energy drains from her face when she learns the news. She loses interest in daily life and goes about her duties mechanically, allowing the housekeeper and maids to care for Jims and Patsy. Deciding it is better not to try to get in touch with Frank directly, Paddy asks Father Ralph to check that he was as well as could be expected in prison.

Finally, the move is complete, and the family meets in the drawing room Fiona has beautifully redecorated in cream and rose. Father de Bricassart has opened bank accounts for everyone. Each male member of the family is guaranteed two thousand pounds a year, whether they wanted to work at Drogheda or not. Jims and Patsy will be sent to boarding school in Sydney as soon as they turn twelve, and Fiona and Meggie each has an annual income of two thousand pounds. Fiona has agreed to turn her housekeeping duties over to the staff, under Meggie's supervision, and keep the account books for Drogheda. Paddy offers Meggie the job of patrolling the Home Paddock on horseback, and she gratefully accepts. Meggie is excited about the prospect of being outside on horseback all day.

In his powerful new position as administrator of a vast fortune belonging to the Church, the Father has been called to Sydney to serve as private secretary to Archbishop Vittorio Scarbanza di Contini-Verchese, the papal delegate to Australia.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

While packing, Fiona accidentally uncovers news of Frank's incarceration. He has always been her favorite, and overnight, she loses all interest in her other children. The Cleary men, so long unconcerned about Fiona's exhaustion and overwork, become solicitous now that they have enough money for a staff. Father de Bricassart generously pays Meggie and Fiona a salary equal to the stockmen. It was unheard of for married women to have an independent income, or to be granted financial parity with a man.



Father de Bricassart's ambitions within the Church have been realized, through Mary Carson's gift to the church. As the sole administrator of a vast fortune, he has been called to Sydney to work closely with the Archbishop. Father de Bricassart will no doubt become a Bishop, soon.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Life continues peacefully on Drogheda. Jims and Patsy do their correspondence lessons eagerly at the kitchen table. They look forward to being old enough to attend Riverview boarding school in Sydney. Any discussion of the boys leaving Drogheda depresses Mrs. Smith, the housekeeper who dotes on the two boys. Stuart has taken up permanent residence in the Home Paddock again, as the depression brings an increasing number of drifters to the ranch. Tramps know they can always find plenty of hot food, provisions for the road, and a job if they want one at Drogheda.

In August when the big storm breaks, only Paddy is far out in the paddocks, trying to round up errant sheep. He takes shelter in a group of dead tree stumps collected around a massive dead gum tree. A bolt of lightning strikes the gum tree, and suddenly all the stumps are afire. Paddy does not even have time to mount his horse. There are walls of fire all around him, "with no way out of the inferno for himself or his horse." His clothes alight, Paddy runs through the fire, screaming his wife's name.

Everyone else makes it back to the main house and collects in the drawing room. When they see the fire, they believe Paddy is safely on the other side of it. As the massive fire roars through the dry grass, all the men from neighboring stations gather to fight it. All the women collect in the cookhouse, working ceaselessly to feed the firefighters in shifts. The fire roars past, west of the Home Paddock, for three days until finally it begins to rain. With the phone lines down, no one is surprised they have not heard from Paddy.

Finally, the family goes to search for Paddy. Bob, Meggie, Jack, Hughie, Fiona and Stuart each ride in a different direction, looking for him. Stuart goes barely half a mile, when he notices a stand of timber on the fire's very edge. He sees the burnt remains of a horse and two dogs in the stand. Praying, Stuart walks towards the stand, and sees a man's remains hidden behind the horse. Using the group's agreed signal, Stuart fires his rifle into the air three times, then sets the weapon down without reloading it.

Stuart smells the big pig before he sees it. An enraged wild boar as big as a cow comes running out of the brush toward him. Stuart retrieves his rifle from the ground and reloads it, getting off one shot into the beast's chest, just as the animal gores him. Pouring blood, both man and beast fall. The enormous animal falls on top of Stuart, crushing him. As Fiona and Meggie ride towards the stand of burnt wood together, Bob and Jack stop them. They tell the women that Paddy and Stuart are both dead. Fiona insists on seeing the bodies of her husband and son, but Meggie and Jack return to Drogheda for a dray to bring the corpses home.

Father Ralph returns to Drogheda for the first time since Mary Carson's death, to perform the funerals. He and Meggie meet privately in the drawing room. Father Ralph



admits he loves her, but as a priest, he can never act on that love. The rain has turned into a deluge, complicating the burials. Before he leaves, Father Ralph makes Fiona promise to send Meggie to the local dances, so she will meet some men her own age. In the garden before he leaves, Meggie gives Father Ralph a pale pink rose to remember her by. He refuses to give her a keepsake, claiming he wants her to forget him and marry a nice young man. On his return to Sydney, the Archbishop informs Father de Bricassart that he is to become a Bishop.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

The family unites once again when Paddy is missing. Not relying on hired stockmen, Bob, Jack, Hughie, Stuart, Meggie and Fiona themselves search for Paddy amongst the fire-blackened land. When Stuart dies, both men must be buried quickly, because there are no embalming supplies. There is no time to summon Father de Bricassart, but he has heard of the fire, and decided to visit anyway. With Paddy's death, Fiona and Meggie assume status that is more equal with the men in the family.

Father Ralph asks Meggie to call him Ralph, insisting he is not a priest when he is with her. Yet, he uses the Church as an excuse to avoid her advances. Father de Bricassart never refers to his relationship with God or his priestly vows as reasons to avoid an affair with Meggie, but only to his own ambitions.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Within a week after the fire, new green shoots are growing in the pastures, although the land would bear the scars for years. Bob, assuming his father's position as head stockman at 29, shows no interest in any of the young women he meets. He is painfully shy and utterly preoccupied with Drogheda, to Meggie's disappointment. Jack and Hughie become more like him each passing day.

Bob hires a new sheep shearer named Luke O'Neill, who chooses the last vacant stockman's cabin, rather than bunk with the jackaroos. When Meggie first meets Luke, she is struck by how closely he resembles Father Ralph de Bricassart. A few days later, Luke invites Meggie to a dance and insists, over her protests that she attend. He even has the temerity to suggest that Bob lend him the Rolls Royce for the evening, since he will be escorting the daughter of the house. Luke teaches Meggie to dance, and insists she dance with no one else. At twenty-two, Meggie does not know how to refuse his demands, so she goes along.

After escorting her to several dances, Luke kisses Meggie passionately in the car, touching her breast and rubbing himself against her. He insists Meggie's brothers would not approve, unless the two get married. Still ignorant of the facts of life, Meggie innocently assumes that if she is kissing Luke, she may become pregnant. No one is surprised by the marriage, although they are surprised when Meggie forbids anyone to tell Bishop de Bricassart.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

With Paddy's death, Bob grows more like his father each day. Bob lacks Paddy's passion, however, and shyly avoids all women. Jack and Hughie follow his example, and Drogheda becomes wife and family to the three men.

Meggie is initially attracted to Luke O'Neill, because he physically resembles Father Ralph. Luke is much more brash and determined than any of the other young men Meggie has met. When she declines an invitation, he merely orders her to comply. Raised in a world where men have the power to command women, Meggie meekly follows Luke's demands, until she has agreed to marry him.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

The wedding is August 25th at the Holy Cross Church in Gillanbone, a modest affair with dinner at the Hotel Imperial afterwards. Luke has decided they will honeymoon in North Queensland, where he hopes to find a job cutting sugar cane. Luke is an old-fashioned man, who believes he should take title to all his wife's possessions upon marriage. He is pleasantly surprised to learn that she has fourteen thousand pounds in the bank. Hoping to buy their own station, he insists they will have to work hard and save every penny for a few years. Meggie meekly agrees. At the last minute, the wedding is moved to the presbytery, when Luke refuses to convert to Catholicism.

The newly married couple immediately boards the one weekly train to Goondiswindi to connect with the Brisbane mail train and the Cairns express. Maggie is disappointed to learn that Luke has purchased two second-class seats, instead of a sleeper. When Maggie argues that she has 100 pounds from Bob in her purse, and they can well afford a sleeper car, Luke treats her like a willful child. Meggie endures all five days of the desperately uncomfortable journey, sick to her stomach, sweltering, her pink wedding dress covered with dust and cinders. Queensland is far hotter than Gillanbone at its hottest.

That night, Luke finally consummates the marriage. Nothing has prepared Meggie for the awful cramping invasion of her body. Luke uses a dry condom, although Meggie does not understand why. Meggie is in agony each time, although Luke assures her it only hurts the first time. She lies with her back towards him as he sleeps, crying silent tears. When Luke wants to have sex again the next day, Meggie endures it, only because she hopes for a baby.

A few days later, Luke informs Meggie that he has found her a job. Luke has arranged to join a gang of sugar cane cutters, earning high wages by traveling all over Queensland. He will be living in barracks and working six days per week, so he sees no point in them renting a house. He has arranged for Meggie to work as housekeeper on Himmelhoch, for Ludwig and Anne Mueller. Luke will visit on Sundays. Meggie's wages will go straight into Luke's bank account. He has taken the 100 pounds from Meggie's purse and put it in the bank, so she is penniless.

The next day, Meggie's new employers pick her up at the hotel. Anne Mueller walks with a crutch, so she needs help with household duties. She lends Meggie a pair of shorts and a sleeveless shirt, instead of the long dress Meggie is accustomed to. Anne and her husband are kind people who love books, and they soon become friends with Meggie. Luke seldom visits. When he does, he brings his boss, Arne Swenson, and seems more interested in spending time with Arne than with Meggie.





## Chapter 11 Analysis

Everything about Meggie's early training and background has led her to believe the man should be in charge in a marriage. Meggie is initially attracted to Luke, because he superficially resembles Father Ralph de Bricassart, but she stays with him simply because he forcefully commands her. Meggie is disappointed to leave her family in New South Wales, but she is even more hurt by the barbaric conditions of the long train journey. Without any regard for her wishes, Luke has decided they will live and work in Queensland after the marriage. Sex is so unpleasant that Meggie believes the Church surely cannot sanction such a thing. By the time Meggie realizes her predicament, she is a penniless servant, her total salary going into Luke's bank account. Meggie is too proud to call Bob or Fiona and admit that she has made a terrible mistake, begging to come home. The only bright spot in her life is the friendship of her employers, the Muellers.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Meggie writes a monthly letter home, never hinting at the problems in her marriage. The Clearys believe the Muellers are friends of Luke's with whom Meggie is staying until the O'Neills get their own place. Luke spends several days in the hospital with Weil's disease, a malady common in cane cutters. To recuperate, he and Meggie spend a few weeks in the coolness of Lake Eacham. There Meggie learns that the purpose of the condoms Luke faithfully uses is to prevent the conception of a baby. Meggie is shocked at his betrayal over the past two years. Knowing that she only endures sex in the hope of having a child, Luke has plotted against her. Instead, Meggie convinces Luke she cannot become pregnant if they have intercourse with Meggie on top.

When Meggie writes Luke a few months later to tell him that she is pregnant, he is furious. Reluctantly, Meggie finally admits to herself that the marriage was a mistake. She is unable to develop tender feelings towards the baby. Even the unborn child seems reluctant and resentful. When Meggie finally goes into labor, she is in pain for hours. The doctor would prefer to perform a caesarian, but cannot get Meggie to a hospital. Despite her agony, Meggie keeps asking for Ralph, which the doctor assumes is her husband's name.

Bishop de Bricassart has accompanied his mentor, Archbishop Contini-Verchese, to Athens. The Archbishop informs him that when their mission there is complete, the Archbishop will return to Rome, to become a cardinal. Bishop de Bricassart is to be elevated to Archbishop, and become Papal Legate to Australia, in Contini-Verchese's place. By accident, the older man discovers a dried pink rose, pressed between the pages of the Bishop's missal. De Bricassart assures his mentor that it is a token of a chaste love that does not endanger his priesthood.

A taxi arrives, and Anne Mueller assumes it is Luke O'Neill at last, come to comfort his wife. Then, Anne realizes her mistake. Although he looks a bit like Luke O'Neill, it is Ralph de Bricassart, the Archbishop. He sensed something was wrong, and decided to pay a visit to Queensland. Through the Archbishop, the Muellers learn of Maggie's wealthy background for the first time. Almost 24 hours later, Maggie delivers a daughter, whom she names Justine. The baby is scrawny and bad-tempered from the start, a problem aggravated by Meggie's inability to produce milk. The baby develops eyes that are so pale grey they are almost white, with a darker ring around the iris.

By the time Justine is six-months-old, she is quite healthy, but Meggie still has not recovered from the difficult birth. She has come to accept that Luke loves the camaraderie and high wages he earns cutting cane. He will never buy a station of his own, a home of their own, as long as he is able to be a cane cutter. Meggie longs for Drogheda, for a real home with sisters and brothers for Justine. Seeing Meggie's unhappiness, the Muellers arrange for her to take a vacation at Matlock Island, a retreat



popular with honeymooners. It is the off-season, so the resort will not be crowded. The Muellers will care for Justine, whom they adore. Meggie agrees. She will use the time to decide what to do about her marriage.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Justine's birth makes Meggie realize how much she misses her own family. Living in Queensland would be fine, if she had her own home and siblings for Justine, but Meggie realizes that is not going to happen with Luke O'Neill. Meggie is finally realizing that she has options, and can make decisions about her own life, instead of abdicating all responsibility to her husband.

Archbishop Ralph has an uncanny knack for knowing when Meggie is in trouble, and appearing at precisely the best moment. Mary Carson's bequest, along with de Bricassart's intelligence and diplomacy, has ensured his quick rise within the Church. Father Ralph advises Meggie to stay with Luke, who can give her a home and children, two things the priest could never provide.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

As soon as Meggie reaches the cool climate of Matlock, she feels better. She has her own remote cabin at the nearly deserted resort. During the first quiet week at the beach, Meggie begins to accept her regret that she will never have Father Ralph's children. She realizes the future belongs to Luke and their children. Meggie decides to bury the past and forget Father Ralph de Bricassart.

Anne Mueller has decided to try to salvage the O'Neill's marriage. As soon as Meggie leaves for Matlock, she sends Luke a telegram that Meggie needs him desperately. When Luke arrives, he finally gets to see his daughter for the first time. If it were a boy, he would have come when it was born, but there is no use taking time off work for a mere girl. Anne angrily confronts Luke about deserting his wife. When she tries to convince him to join Meggie in Matlock, he insists he has to join Arne Swenson on vacation in Sydney, instead.

When a red sports car pulls up to the Mueller homestead, Anne does not even recognize the man who gets out. He is dressed in the North Queensland uniform of shorts, and shirtless. When Anne recognizes Father Ralph, he explains that he is on vacation, and helps give Justine her bottle. Father Ralph has come to say goodbye to Meggie. He is being called to Rome. Impulsively, Anne tells him how to find Meggie at the resort on Matlock.

When the resort caretaker arrives with a passenger, he calls out to Meggie that he's brought her husband, Luke O'Neill. Meggie steels herself for a confrontation. Instead, Father Ralph gets out of the jeep. After much soul-searching, the two make love. He stays for a week.

The night before he has to leave, Father Ralph tells Meggie that he has been sent to Rome. She tells him that she has decided to go back to Drogheda. She needs a home, to be surrounded by family, and she has decided that Drogheda will probably always be her home. Ralph protests that he does not want her to leave Luke on his account. Meggie lies, and says she had already decided to.

Back at the Muellers, Meggie tells Anne that she has to see Luke O'Neill once more, and sleep with him. Anne is shocked, until Meggie confides that she is sure she is pregnant. Anne is sympathetic, but Meggie insists that if she cannot have Ralph, she wants his child. In order to avoid humiliating both Luke and her child, Meggie needs to make O'Neill think he is the child's father. Meggie joins Luke, and the two have sex. The next morning, Meggie tells Luke that she is leaving him. He can keep the twenty thousand dollars he has accumulated over their marriage, but from now on, her private income of two thousand dollars per year will be in her own account, as well as any wages she earns.



## Chapter 13 Analysis

For the first time in Matlock, Meggie has the leisure to contemplate her life. She realizes she has always been ordered around by men, first her father and then Luke O'Neill. Meggie realizes that she can control her own life. With the private income from Mary Carson's estate, Meggie need not rely on any man financially. Meggie has decided to find a home of her own, but stay with Luke O'Neill and make her own family.

When Father Ralph appears, Meggie's decision changes. She rails against a Church that demands that its priests not be men. Meggie finds it very difficult to accept that she and Ralph can never be together. Still, Meggie is determined to return to Drogheda and make a home for Justine there, among people who care about her. Meggie is elated when she realizes that she is pregnant. If she cannot have Father Ralph, at least she will have his child. She still takes the precaution of sleeping with Luke O'Neill before she leaves, to maintain the fiction that both her children are his.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Meggie returns to Drogheda unannounced, on the mail truck. When Fee asks, Meggie explains that Luke did not want either her or his children. "If he doesn't want you, the you were right to come home. We can look after you here." Her mother replies. Meggie rides the Home Paddock, like always, until her pregnancy makes her too big to sit on a horse. When the baby is born, it's a boy, as sunny and calm as Justine was cold and irritable. Meggie's breasts overflow with milk for the baby, who already looks like Ralph de Bricassart.

In Rome, Father Ralph confesses to Cardinal Contini-Verchese, who guesses Ralph's affair is with the same woman who gave him the rose he has kept pressed in his missal all these years. Father Ralph assures the Cardinal that his fall was a single event, and will not be repeated.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Meggie is reminded of the importance of family, when she returns to Drogheda. Although no one approves of a wife deserting her husband, when Fiona learns Luke is indifferent to the children, even she cannot condemn Meggie. The brothers welcome Meggie back with open arms, and give her back her old job of patrolling the Home Paddocks on horseback. Dane is a delight, a bright, sunny baby beloved by everyone, even his older sister.

Although Meggie has taken steps to assume control over her own life, divorce is not an option. She will not subject her children to the shame of a broken marriage, especially of a divorce initiated by a woman. According to Anne, Australia has a higher percentage of deserted wives than any other country. Meggie refuses to add controversy to the burdens her children already have.

In Rome, Cardinal Contini-Verchese quickly guesses that Father Ralph has sinned with the woman the Cardinal calls "Rose." Far from condemning the Bishop, once he is assured that the affair was an isolated event, the Cardinal feels it makes the seemingly perfect priest better able to understand and forgive other people's sins.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

All of the men were home at Drogheda on Sunday September 3rd, when the Prime Minister declared war on Germany. All of the Cleary men want to enlist immediately, but Bob prevails as the voice of reason. He reminds them that wool is essential to the war effort, as are other Drogheda products like beef, tallow, glue and lanolin. Finally, Bob agrees if Meggie works full time and two stockmen stay on, two of the brothers can enlist if the war intensifies. Jack and Hughie clamor to go, but Bob points out that as the least experienced stockmen, Jims and Patsy should go. The twins are only sixteen, but they are sure in another year they will look old enough to enlist. Meggie says a silent prayer of gratitude that Dane is only an infant.

By 1941, the twins are fighting in Egypt. Home on leave, everyone is publicly astounded how tall the twins have grown, and privately astounded how old they look. Jims talks for hours about North Africa, the people, customs, food, weather and sights, but refuses to say a word about combat. Patsy has always let Jims do the talking.

In Rome, Archbishop de Bricassart argues with the Cardinal, believing the Pope is too supportive of the Germans. Walking through St. Peter's Cathedral at night, the Archbishop encounters a young German soldier, praying. The lad introduces himself as Rainer Moerling Hartheim. He is a Bavarian orphan, terrified of two things: being sent to Russia, and being accused of having Jewish blood. The Archbishop agrees to pray for the young man, and makes Rainer promise to stay in touch.

Jims and Patsy are disappointed when their regiment is sent to New Guinea, where the fighting is all but finished. Two weeks after their arrival, the troops take a day off. Walking through the jungle, the boys see a budgie exactly like those on Drogheda.

Suddenly, machine gun fire rips across Patsy's body. He is bleeding from his waist to his knees. He is rushed on a stretcher to the hospital, where a medic tells Jims his brother was lucky. No major organs were hit. Patsy should recover fully, except for some nerve damage to the urethra and perineum. The doctor averts his eyes, while he tells Jims that his twin likely will have little sensation in the genital area for the rest of his life. Patsy seems undisturbed by the news, telling Jims he was never keen on marrying, anyway. Patsy is more concerned about being shipped home, while Jims remains in action.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

When World War II starts, all of the men are eager to enroll, but Bob insists they consider what is best for the country, and for the family. Only Jims and Patsy can be spared. The twins are inseparable, fighting almost like one man. Perhaps Patsy accepts his disability better, because he already has such a close relationship with another



human, in his twin. The separation of the twins seems more of a tragedy than Patsy's injury.

Archbishop Ralph feels the Pope does not do enough to stop the war, or denounce the Germans. He thinks the Pope, with close ties to Germany, believes the Germans are a civilized people, who would never kill Jews. The Archbishop is more inclined to believe the news stories on the radio, and wants the Pope to denounce the Germans. The Cardinal reminds him that the Church can help no one if they are all under house arrest.





# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

The war ends on September 2, 1945. On that exact day, the rains come, ending the longest drought in Drogheda history. The tanks have proven that they do, indeed, hold enough water for the household for ten years. Fee asks Meggie how Luke is. Meggie replies that he is the same Luke, saying he is just going to cut cane for a few more years to accumulate a bit more money for a station of his own. Fiona asks if Meggie will join Luke when he buys a station, and Meggie answers, "never!" Fees asks her why she does not divorce Luke and marry again, but Meggie primly responds that it is against the laws of the church.

Fiona and Meggie watch Justine and Dane at play. The two children could not be more different in temperament, but they are devoted to each other. Fiona remarks that Dane is the image of his father, Ralph de Bricassart. Meggie is amazed her mother has guessed that Dane is not Luke's child. Meggie asks Fiona about Frank's father, and Fee says he was a married man, who she loved passionately.

With the end of the war, Ralph de Bricassart is elevated to Cardinal in Rome. In December, mid-summer, he returns to Drogheda for a visit and meets Dane for the first time. Dane is entranced by the older man, refusing to call him Ralph and insisting Justine kiss his ring. Father Ralph is entranced by the boy, but has no idea he is Dane's father. Ralph is hurt to think that Meggie returned to Luke O'Neill after she left him. Despite his pain, he joins Meggie in her room that night, and they make love.

Father Ralph has brought news of Frank. Ever since Fee noticed the article in the paper about his conviction, Father Ralph has stayed in touch to monitor Frank's well being. Now, Frank is being released, after serving almost 30 years in jail. Fee meets Frank's train alone, and finds her spirited son a broken man. Frank moves into one of the small stockmen's cabins and takes care of the gardens surrounding the big house.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

The rains at the end of the war symbolize renewed life, as the land recovers from the long drought. For the first time, Meggie and Fiona are able to talk together as two women, something they never had time for, when Meggie was younger. The two find a new closeness, as each realizes the other has a son from an illicit affair. Fiona urges Meggie to divorce and marry again, but Meggie has decided that Drogheda is her home, and the Clearys are her family.

Meggie cites the Church's laws on divorce as the reason she won't marry again. In truth, it is the man Ralph, not his Church, that prevents Meggie from taking another husband. Although she accepts that they cannot be together, Meggie is faithful to Ralph, in her own way.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Justine announces her plan to become an actress instead of attending college. Meggie objects, but Fiona is surprisingly supportive. Her first step on returning to Sydney is having her freckles removed, a process that takes a year to complete. Justine finds her apartment in Bothwell Gardens more entertaining than her acting lessons, with an odd assortment of characters for neighbors. When she finally decides to lose her virginity, she chooses an experienced, older man. He's a married actor.

Back at Drogheda, 18-year-old Dane confides to his mother that he wants to become a priest. Meggie is shocked. After all that she's been through fighting with the Church, now it's going to win again! When it is time for Dane to start Seminary, he is accepted into a school in Rome, partly due to Cardinal de Bricassart's influence.

Justine receives an offer of an acting job in London, and Meggie helps her pack up everything in her apartment to move. Justine and Dane still spend vacations together, meeting in Rome to tour Europe. In Rome, Justine meets Rainer Hartheim, an old friend of Cardinal de Bricassart's, and the two become fast friends. After a harrowing wartime experience in Russia, Hartheim married a wealthy German widow in a civil ceremony. Using her money as capital, he quickly amassed a fortune. Divorcing his wife with the Church's blessing, Rainer payed her twice what her deceased husband's business was worth. Rainer wonders at Justine's coolness, until he realizes she expends all her passion onstage.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Justine and Dane remain the closest of friends, as each pursues a career. Justine is a different generation than her mother, and many of Australian society's expectations of women have changed. Justine finds it far easier to pursue her own career, and make her own decisions. Fiona encourages Justine to pursue her dream of acting, and helps Meggie to see that Justine will never be fulfilled, unless she tries to be an actress. Perhaps Fiona is thinking of Frank's thwarted desires to forge his own destiny, when she encourages Justine.

Meggie approves of Dane's career choice even less than Justine's. Meggie feels the Church has already stolen Ralph, a man who was rightfully hers, from her. She feels that the Church is taking her son in retaliation for the few stolen days she spent with the priest. Symbolically, Meggie stole Dane from the Church, and now the Church is stealing him back. The Church is no impediment to Rainer Hartheim marrying again, because he was married in a civil ceremony, which the Church does not recognize.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

It was easy for the family at Drogheda to imagine Dane and Justine were still in Sydney, instead of away in Rome and London. They return for a month every year, in August or September. Both are still friends with Rainer. The Uncles come to Rome for Dane's ordination. Fiona is too old and infirm to travel so far. Only Meggie's chair was vacant.

At the reception afterwards, Dane teases Justine about being in love with Rainer, which she hotly denies. After seven years, they are no more than good friends, Justine protests. Walking back to the hotel, Rainer seizes Justine and kisses her. She runs away, frightened not of the kiss, but of how right it feels. Justine wavers, writing an apology note to Rainer and inviting him to dinner in London. At dinner, she tells him she has always avoided falling in love, because she feels her lover is sure to be disappointed in her. They make love.

Dane vacations on the Greek island of Crete after his ordination, looking forward to a month at Drogheda and seeing his Mum. He feels lucky to be ordained and wishes there were some way he could suffer, as our Lord has suffered. Dane is a strong swimmer and swims far out in the current. Two German women, admiring the handsome young man, go into the shallows. One of them begins to drown, and Dane rescues her. It takes all his strength to fight against the strong current, and he is exhausted. Dane turns the German woman over to some Englishmen in shallow water and lies back on the current, resting. He drifts into deeper and deeper water. Suddenly, Dane feels a terrible pain in his chest, like a spear in his heart. When the onlookers on the beach realize he is in pain, unable to move, they run to the nearby United States Air Force Station for help, but it is too late.

The authorities at Australia House inform Justine that her brother has died. By the time Meggie can be informed by telegram and fly to Rome, the body has been buried in an unmarked grave in Crete. Meggie appeals to Cardinal de Bricassart for help in having the body returned to Australia, finally telling him that Dane was his son. After Father Ralph conducts the funeral service at Drogheda, he makes love to Meggie for the last time.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

The Cleary/O'Neill clan is still close, and everyone, except Meggie, who is able to travel attends Dane's ordination in Rome. Although Justine and Dane have created lives far from the Australian Outback, they still return in times of stress. Dane is looking forward to spending a month or two on horseback on Drogheda, sorting out his future plans.

Meggie refuses to attend Dane's ordination, because she feels the Church has stolen the only two men she has ever truly loved. She refuses to be a party to the loss. After



Dane's death, Cardinal de Bricassart is reluctant to intervene with Greece to have Dane's body disinterred. In order to convince him to help, Meggie finally tells the priest he is Dane's father.

Justine has many more options than her grandmother or mother, but is still considered an old maid at the age of 23. Meggie despairs of the Cleary clan ever having more children. Justine is torn between her thriving stage career in London and her tempestuous love affair with Rainer.



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

Rainer reads of Cardinal de Bricassart's death in the Bonn paper. Rushing to Rome to be at Cardinal Contini-Verchese's side, he learns that de Bricassart has been deteriorating steadily in the months since Dane's death. He sends a cable to his lover, Justine, demanding to know why she has not told him of de Bricassart's death when it occurred, weeks ago. Justine writes back that she felt grief is ugly, and did not want to be ugly around Rainer. The Cardinal died on Drogheda, just a few hours after Justine left. Later, Rainer finds he has been appointed administrator of the Carson fortune, including Drogheda, in Cardinal de Bricassart's will. Rainer accepts the responsibility on the condition that it is anonymous.

Justine is wracked with guilt over Dane's death. She thinks that if she had joined him on vacation in Greece, as she usually did, somehow she could have prevented his death. Instead, she remained in London to act and be with her lover, Rainer. Justine decides to give up Rainer and her career and return to Drogheda permanently, to atone for her sins. Rainer realizes Justine will never be happy living on Drogheda, because she is doing it for all the wrong reasons. Before Justine returns, Rainer meets with Meggie on Drogheda and urges her to give Justine up. He insists Justine will never be truly fulfilled on Drogheda. She must enjoy Justine's visit, but insist that after a month or two, the young woman return to her career in London, and probable marriage to Rainer.

After much soul-searching and talking it over with Fiona, Meggie writes Justine a letter advising her to come to Drogheda for a visit, but not to return permanently. Justine runs to Rainer's arms. Soon afterwards, the family at Drogheda receives a telegram that Justine and Rainer have been married in a private ceremony at the Vatican, with Papal blessings. The two will enjoy an extended honeymoon on Drogheda, but will make their home in Europe.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

In her final act of family solidarity, Meggie finds that she must convince Justine not to bury herself on Drogheda permanently. With Rainer's urging, Meggie realizes that Justine thrives on the unpredictability and fame of her theatrical career, and will wither without it. Ultimately, Meggie realizes that family is more important than the beloved ranch.



# Characters

## Meghann "Meggie" Cleary O'Neill

Meggie has beautiful red-gold hair, blue eyes, and smooth white skin without freckles. She is a beautiful but lonely child of nine when Father Ralph de Bricassart first sees her. Initially she attends a convent school, but must soon leave school to help her mother with the growing family. Growing up on a sheep ranch with 8 brothers and a mother completely preoccupied with household chores, Meggie is curiously naive. She has no idea what menstruation is, and when she begins to bleed at the rather advanced age of 15, she believes she is dying from a mysterious internal cancer. As a young girl, Meggie believes babies are started when a married women wishes for one. In her late teens, Meggie begins to realize some physical contact with a man is required, but believes it is kissing that starts babies.

Meggie is shocked on her honeymoon to learn that Luke expects sexual intercourse, not just once, but several times. The procedure continues to be painful for Meggie, but she endures it, hoping to conceive a child. Meggie is entirely ignorant of the fact that the condoms or "French letters" Luke uses are meant to prevent pregnancy. Luke is almost as ignorant of biology as Meggie, and she convinces him that by having sex with the woman on top, it will be impossible for her to become pregnant. The two quickly conceive their daughter Justine in this way, much to Meggie's delight. Father Ralph de Bricassart

Father Ralph de Bricassart has been banished to the remote New South Wales town of Gillanbone by the Bishop for unspecified acts of disobedience. De Bricassart is ambitious, and does not intend to rot in the Outback forever. He quickly cultivates a flirtation with Mary Carson, the district's wealthy widow. Realizing that bringing substantial donations to the Church is the only solution to his problem, de Bricassart encourages Mary's romantic interest.

When Mary realizes that de Bricassart is growing to love her young niece, as the girl matures, she is wracked with jealousy. Wily and conniving, Mary conceives a plan that relies on de Bricassart's own ambition to thwart the romance. Presented with the choice of advancing within the Church to Bishop and perhaps beyond, or staying near his beloved in Gillanbone, de Bricassart chooses ambition. De Bricassart's ambitions are realized over the course of the novel, as he becomes a Bishop, Archbishop and eventually a Cardinal in Rome.

De Bricassart is a very strange type of priest. He seems to have no qualms about breaking his vow of chastity, and no relationship with God. Instead, Father Ralph treats the Church like any corporate hierarchy. He is solely concerned with advancing within the power structure and achieving higher status.



## Mary Carson

Mary Carson is Paddy Cleary's older sister. She left Ireland for Australia as a teenager, and married well, inheriting a fortune when her husband died. She has no desire to marry again and turn her fortune over to her new husband. As a wealthy widow, Mary has autonomy most Australian women can only dream of. Mary is a martinet, unable to keep a manager for her sheep ranch, Drogheda. Finally, she lures Paddy Cleary and his sons to work for low wages, by promising that Paddy will inherit Drogheda on her death. She is rude and belittles the Clearys, especially Fiona. Despite her wealth, Mary requires that the Cleary live in a stockman's house, where they must use dirty brown river water to wash clothes. Mary would never dream of making Fiona Cleary's life easier by lending her a maid. Instead, when Fiona is overwhelmed by housework, her daughter Meggie leaves school to help her mother.

In her sixties as the novel opens, Mary lusts after Father Ralph de Bricassart, who is only twenty-five. When she is unable to entice Father Ralph into a relationship, she becomes intolerably jealous of his affection for little Meggie Cleary, even when Meggie is a child. Ultimately, Mary forces Father Ralph to choose between his ambitions and his growing love for Meggie. Knowing the priest is intensely ambitious, Mary bequeaths her vast fortune to the Roman Catholic Church, with Father Ralph as administrator. Mary throws an elaborate party for her 72nd birthday, and wills herself to die that very evening, forcing de Bricassart to leave Drogheda forever.

## Luke O'Neill

Father Ralph de Bricassart urges Meggie, at the age of 16, to forget him and marry someone else. A few years later, her attention is captured by Luke O'Neill, a stockman and expert sheep shearer who physically resembles de Bricassart. Luke is ambitious, and his ambition has led him to woo several other female heirs to large ranches, without success. When he learns that Meggie is the only daughter of the wealthy Drogheda station, he manages to get a job there. The girl's beauty and malleability are bonuses, in Luke's eyes.

Luke captures Meggie, simply by being more forceful and authoritative than other suitors. He will not take no for an answer, when he invites her to a ball. When Luke kisses Meggie and fondles her breasts after a dance, he convinces her they have to marry to preserve her honor.

Luke is entirely uninterested in having a wife. Meggie's lure for him is the 14,000-pound fortune she possesses. He insists that Meggie sign over everything she owns, and her future income, to him. Luke plans to use the money to achieve his lifelong dream of owning his own sheep station. He moves the two to humid, jungle-like Queensland, where land is cheap. There Luke takes work as a sugar cane cutter, living in a barracks. Seeing no reason to waste money on a house, Luke secures a job for Meggie as a live-in housekeeper at another ranch. Luke soon comes to prefer the camaraderie of the barracks to his infrequent visits with his wife.



## **Fiona "Fee" Armstrong Cleary**

Fiona is the beautiful, fair daughter of the aristocratic Armstrong clan. She becomes pregnant out of wedlock after a brief affair with a married man. Fiona's father arranges a marriage for her, before she can bring scandal on the entire family. He pays an older dairy hand, Paddy Cleary, to marry the girl. Despite Fiona's exhaustion from the constant housework, she loves Paddy. Only when Paddy is killed in a fire on Drogheda does Fiona truly appreciate what he has come to mean to her.

## **Paddy Cleary**

Paddy Cleary was an Irish immigrant, a dairy hand on a large ranch in New Zealand belonging to the aristocratic Armstrongs. When Fiona Armstrong, the beautiful young daughter of the family, becomes pregnant by a married man, Paddy is offered money to marry her. Paddy takes the cash and buys a small sheep ranch in the hills near Wahine, New Zealand. Although his well-born wife knows nothing about keeping house or cooking, Paddy falls passionately in love with her. After her son Frank is born, the Clearys have 8 children together, much to Frank's embarrassment.

As patriarch of the Cleary clan, Paddy rules with an absolute authority. He decrees that no one will help his wife in her household chores, and the children will have no friends outside the family.

## **Archbishop Vittorio Scarbanza di Contini-Verchese**

Papal Legate to Australia, the short, dark, Italian Archbishop is impressed with Ralph de Bricassart's talents and quickly becomes his mentor. Both the Archbishop and his protygy are eventually elevated to Cardinal.

## **Teresa Annunzio**

Teresa is Meggie's close friend at the convent school in Wahine, New Zealand. When Meggie comes home with head lice in her beautiful red-gold hair, Paddy Cleary blames those "Dagos" and chases Teresa's family out of town. Paddy forbids Meggie to have friends outside the family from that point on.

## **Frank Cleary**

Short, dark and brooding, Frank is the only Cleary brother, who longs to seek his own fortune away from Drogheda. When Paddy Cleary angrily reveals that Frank is not his son, he joins Jimmy Sharman's boxing troupe to get away from Gillanbone.





## **Justine O'Neill**

Justine is the beautiful, willful, distant, actress daughter of Meggie and Luke O'Neill. Justine has flame-orange hair and eyes of the palest grey. She loves and protects her younger brother, Dane, passionately.

## **Dane O'Neill**

Dane is the son conceived by Father Ralph and Meggie in Matlock. Meggie never tells Dane his true parentage, and only tells Father Ralph after the boy's death.

## **The Uncles**

Bob, Jack, Hughie, Jims and Patsy are the surviving Cleary brothers, collectively known to Justine and Dane as the Uncles, or Unks for short. They are all short men with red hair, who grow to resemble one another in personality, as working Drogheda becomes their life focus.

## **Rainer Moerling Hartheim**

Rainer is a young German soldier, an orphan from Bavaria, when Father de Bricassart first meets him at the Vatican. The young man is traumatized by the war, and terrified the Germans will decide he has Jewish blood because of his dark coloring. After the war, Rainer becomes a German cabinet minister, confidant of Cardinal de Bricassart, close friend and eventual husband of Justine O'Neill. After the Cardinal's death, Hartheim is appointed administrator of Mary Carson's estate, including Drogheda, a fact he conceals from the Cleary family.



## Objects/Places

### Drogheda

Mary Carson lures the Cleary clan to work Drogheda, her 250,000-acre sheep ranch in New South Wales, by promising to leave the ranch to her brother, Paddy Cleary, in her will. This is a promise that Mary ultimately breaks.

### Wahine, New Zealand

At the beginning of the novel, the Cleary's own a small, struggling sheep ranch in Wahine, New Zealand, a land of emerald green rolling hills reminiscent of the emerald in Fiona's engagement ring, and Paddy's native Ireland.

### New South Wales

After the beautiful green hills of New Zealand, the Clearys are shocked by the sere, grey-brown dust, heat and flies of New South Wales. The temperature can easily reach 115 degrees Fahrenheit during the day.

### Gillanbone

The nearest town to Drogheda, Gillanbone is the site of the annual Picnic Races, where Frank Cleary decides to leave his family. It is also the home of Holy Cross Church and Father Ralph's presbytery.

### Queensland

Luke O'Neill decides he and his new bride, Meggie, will move to Queensland, a sweltering, humid country of jungle-like vegetation swarming with snakes and vermin.

### The Mueller's Ranch

After Meggie's marriage to Luke O'Neill, he forces her to work as a servant to Ludwig and Anne Mueller on their ranch in Queensland, while Luke cuts cane and lives in a barracks. The Mueller's become kind friends, and Meggie finds solace in their home, although she still longs for a house of her own.



## Meggie's First Formal Dress

Meggie has a beautiful dress handmade in Gillanbone for Mary Carson's 72nd birthday party. Meggie is just 16, and it is her first formal dress. The formal is a popular pale grayish pink color called "Ashes of Roses" that compliments Meggie's coloring. The dress, with a low-cut neck and back, has tiny rosebuds embroidered all over it. Meggie wears the same dress months later on her first date with Luke O'Neill, simply because she has nothing else suitable.

## Ashes of Roses

Ashes of Roses is the name of the pinkish grey hue of Meggie's first formal. It is while Meggie is wearing that dress, that Father Ralph realizes that she has become a woman and is in love with him. The color remains one of Meggie's favorites throughout her life. Ashes of Roses is also the phrase Father Ralph uses to express his sorrow, when he chooses ambition over love.

## The Pale Pink Rose

One of the bushes in the rose garden at Drogheda has blooms the exact color of Meggie's first formal dress, the color she and Ralph call "ashes of roses." Meggie gives one of these roses to Ralph shortly before he leaves Drogheda, and he keeps it preserved in his missal forever.

## Matlock

The private retreat of cabins on Matlock in a cool, refreshing climate is a popular honeymoon destination. Meggie goes there alone to sort out her future after Justine is born. When Meggie's friend Anne Mueller realizes Luke O'Neill is worthless as a husband, she sends Father Ralph to Matlock to visit Meggie.



## Social Concerns And Themes

The author's most popular book is her most purely entertaining, with few overtly moral messages, as it traces three generations of an Australian family from 1915 to 1969. It does, however, show the subjugation and lack of freedom for the women who are dependent on men and have few options without them. They register some prefeminist protests, but only the woman of the third generation breaks away for a life of her own, and it is not satisfactory either until she marries, which is the last event in the novel.

The central character, Meggie, carries a lifelong love for an ambitious priest, Ralph de Bricassart. It is briefly consummated, resulting in an illegitimate son (who later becomes a priest); she also has a daughter by a man she marries (unhappily) mainly because he resembles Ralph. The forces that keep Meggie and Ralph apart dominate the story, including the priest's inevitable placing of his job (and his incredible and successful ambition) ahead of his love.

In the character of the priest, Ralph de Bricassart, the novel also touches on the demands of the religious life, the sacrifices required, the impossibility of achieving spiritual perfection. We see Ralph loving and desiring Meggie, but knowing that he is best suited to the high offices in the Church that he eventually holds.



## Techniques

What keeps *The Thorn Birds* from being a potboiling soap opera is the author's gift for atmosphere and description. She details animals, plants, and city and country life of Australia through several generations and contrasting regions. She includes spectacular storms, fires, and a variety of landscapes, as well as several detailed battle and war scenes, which vividly evoke a time and place which are strange and exotic to most readers.

Through McCullough, we see the desert of North Africa, the jungles of New Guinea, the labyrinthine corridors of the Vatican, and the broad sweep of the Australian plain.

In addition, and as noted by critics such as Walter de la Mare, the novel's dialogue is very dramatic and even declamatory. While it can be said to be unrealistic, it can also be said that the relentless drama of the dialogue and the almost *deus ex machina* nature of events serve to keep the novel's pace moving through several hundred pages and fifty-four years of history.



# Themes

## Family

The overarching theme of *The Thorn Birds* is the importance of family. As the novel opens, the Clearys are an impoverished but loyal New Zealand family. Only Frank, who is secretly not a Cleary, feels the pull of distant adventures. The Cleary siblings protect and torment each other. Isolated on their sheep station, they have few friends outside the family. When the Clearys do form outside friendships, they have disastrous consequences, such as Meggie's ill-fated relationship with Teresa Annunzio. Although life is always hard for the Clearys in New Zealand, they face their problems together and know they can depend upon one another.

When Mary Carson intervenes in their lives, the Clearys learn that family assistance is not always kindhearted. Mary generously offers to make Paddy Cleary heir to Drogheda, one of the largest sheep stations in Australia. In return, however, Paddy and all his sons must work for meager wages for the remainder of Mary Carson's life. Carson is a hard taskmaster and exacting employer. The terms of her offer mean all the Clearys, except the youngest, twins Jims and Patsy, must abandon their educations.

Mary Carson betrays the family by bequeathing her fortune of 13 million pounds, including Drogheda, to the Roman Catholic Church. She does so out of jealousy. Mary realizes that Father Ralph de Bricassart is in love with young Meggie Cleary. Mary lusts after the priest herself, and cannot tolerate competition from the young, beautiful girl. Deciding that she will keep the two apart permanently, Mary offers Father Ralph the culmination of his ambitions, successfully using the priest's ambitious nature to tempt him away from Meggie Cleary. In a final act of family devotion, after her son and the only man she truly loved have died, Meggie urges her daughter Justine to pursue her own career and life away from Drogheda.

## Church

The Roman Catholic Church is an important force in *The Thorn Birds*. The novel concerns itself, not with religion or spirituality, but with the conventions and hierarchy of the Church. As a naive young girl, Meggie does not realize that Father Ralph has taken a vow of chastity and can never marry her. She is unaware that priests cannot simply quit their jobs. Once Meggie realizes the consequences of her forbidden love affair with Father Ralph, she feels the Church is a rival who has stolen the man she loves. When the Church also steals their son Dane, Meggie is doubly infuriated. Ultimately, she accepts Dane's death as the price she must pay for trying to steal some happiness from the Church.

To Father Ralph de Bricassart, the Church is a hierarchy much like an American corporation, rather than a spiritual or religious obligation. Father Ralph initially becomes



involved with Mary Carson only because, as a lonely but wealthy woman, she can make the substantial donations that will end his exile in the backwater of Gillanbone. De Bricassart does not hesitate to have an affair with Meggie because of his vows, or because he believes it is a sin, or will damage his relationship with God. He hesitates, because he feels it will damage his career, and ultimately chooses ambition over love.

Dane O'Neill is the only character who seems to have a relationship with God. He is portrayed as a Christ-like figure, universally beloved and infinitely good, without human failings of any kind. The novel suggests that the price of a relationship with God is death.

## Gender

Paddy Cleary loves his wife passionately, but forbids any of the boys to lift a hand to help her with the exhausting household labors. One of Frank's acts of defiance is drying the dishes for his mother, after his father has gone to bed. In Paddy Cleary's world, men are the head of the family and wield absolute power. Stoicism is prized, so any expression of pain or exhaustion, especially by a woman, is humiliating. Boys are valuable, because they can carry on the family name, inherit the ranch and provide free labor on the ranch. Girls are considered worthless, because when grown, they leave the ranch to work for their husbands. In this context, female children are seen as an unnecessary expense.

Women of Fiona's generation worked endlessly cleaning the house, tending gardens, and cooking meals over a wooden stove. Clothes had to be scrubbed clothes in tubs with water hauled from outdoors and heated on the stove. The women often milked the cows, raised and slaughtered chickens, and chopped wood as well, with the men riding to remote paddocks every day. None of the woman's labor was valued as highly as the labor of men, caring for sheep and performing farm chores, although it was probably as demanding. This may have been in part, because the men's labor earned cash income, while nothing the women did brought in money.

When Meggie marries, it never occurs to her not to follow her husband's orders. Luke O'Neill determines everything from where the couple will live and work, to the location of their honeymoon, without consulting Meggie. As a good wife, Meggie signs over her modest fortune and private income to her husband, although the legislature has recently granted women the right to own property, along with the vote.

All of the men in the novel have worldly or career goals that supersede their personal relationships. Luke O'Neill prefers cutting cane to living with a wife. Father Ralph prefers becoming a Bishop to being with Meggie. The Uncles prefer working and camping on Drogheda to any relationship with a woman. McCullough seems to argue that an essential difference between men and women is that men value ambition over personal relationships.

# Style

## Point of View

*The Thorn Birds* is written in the third person past tense, with an omniscient point of view. Each of the 7 books focuses on a single character, and is told primarily from that character's point of view, although the inner thoughts of other characters are also occasionally included. McCullough employs internal information and shifts in point of view to introduce material or thoughts to develop character and plot. Some of these shifts are inevitable, as in Book 6, where after Dane's death the point of view shifts to Justine. Others are employed to introduce new material for major or minor plot points, which the book's primary point of view character is unaware of, as in Book , page 55 where Paddy's thoughts are shown too illustrate his understanding of his difficult son Frank. Near the end of Book 2, the point of view shifts from Ralph to Mary Carson, to explain her reasons for leaving her fortune to the priest instead of her family.

McCullough manages the point of view shifts gracefully, without causing the reader disorientation, by maintaining a slight distance from each character. Employing an objective stance, with only occasional thoughts from the point of view character, makes the point of view shifts less distracting to the reader. Shifts in point of view are more pronounced and occur more frequently as the novel progresses, perhaps because the plot becomes more complicated, or due to McCullough's increased skill with the technique.

## Setting

*The Thorn Birds* is set primarily on Drogheda, a sheep ranch in the Australian Outback, an area McCullough is fond of and has extensive knowledge of. Long sections of the lengthy book lovingly detail the flora and fauna of Australia, especially New South Wales and Queensland, often for pages. McCullough also devotes space to the social and historical events of Australia, such as the roving shepherders and depression era tramps. Compared to McCullough's detailed descriptions of the 5-foot long lizards, kangaroos, droughts and flies of New South Wales, her descriptions of Rome, Sydney and Greece are almost non-existent.

The focus of McCullough's work is in painting an accurate description of live on a sheep station near Gillanbone, New South Wales. McCullough thoroughly details the sulfuric smell of the bore head, the annoyance of flies and dust, as well as the numerous gates that must be opened and closed manually to travel by car or buggy from Gillanbone to Drogheda, the Cleary's ranch.

McCullough's extensive knowledge of the inner workings of the ranch is essential to the novel, and account for much of its success. The author details everything from the way





a housewife in the Australian Outback stacks dishes to drain on her kitchen worktable, to the cemetery. When a fire threatens the ranch and kills Paddy Cleary, McCullough describes the logistics of mobilizing the district to fight the fire in great detail, down to the menu of the meals served to firefighters in the barracks.

## Language and Meaning

McCullough's novel relies heavily on description and detail to evoke a strong sense of place in the Australian Outback. The author describes thoughts, feelings and actions of characters more often than she reveals character through dialogue. Scenes and detail, especially detail of everyday life in the Australian Outback, are used effectively to propel the action of the novel. Many words and phrases native to the Australian Outback are used, from calling kangaroos "kangas" to using the term "jackaroos" for itinerate ranch hands. In particular, the term "squatters" designates the landed gentry of New South Wales. Some of McCullough's most evocative language emerges when discussing the land, flora and fauna, especially in New South Wales and Queensland.

McCullough occasionally includes the text of letters or other documents to advance the plot of the novel. The entire text of Mary Carson's controversial will bequeathing her 13 million pound fortune to the Roman Catholic Church is included, as is the text of the telegram to Drogheda announcing Justine's marriage to Rainer. A particularly evocative item is the small newspaper story of Frank Cleary's conviction and incarceration, discovered by Fiona three years after the fact, while packing to move to the main house after Mary Carson's death.

In general, *The Thorn Birds* avoids overly complicated language or literary allusions to tell the love story of a woman for a priest, and a family for a ranch, in straightforward fashion. McCullough seeks to tell her sweeping saga in language that does not intimidate the average reader, but makes the novel more accessible.

## Structure

Almost 700 pages in length, *The Thorn Birds* is divided into 7 books of varying lengths. The novel tells the story of the Cleary clan chronologically from 1915 to 1969. Each book focuses on a major character, and events are portrayed primarily in scenes involving that character.

The first book, Meggie, covers the period of 1915-1917, and starts when the protagonist of the novel is 4 years old. The novel opens on Meggie's fourth birthday, in fact, and covers her early years in the green, rolling hills of New Zealand. The second book, covering the period from 1921-1928, focuses on Father Ralph and details the Cleary family's move to Drogheda, Meggie's growing maturity, and Mary Carson's death and



controversial will. In Book 3, from 1929-1932, the novel covers Paddy Cleary's reaction to Mary Carson's will, up to Paddy's death and funeral. Book 4, from 1933-1938 focuses on Meggie's unhappy marriage to Luke O'Neill. Book 5, from 1938-1953, details the war years on Drogheda and the childhoods of Dane and Justine. Book 6, from 1954-1965 includes Dane's ordination and his death. In this book, as well, Justine begins an affair with Rainer, a man who has been a close friend for more than 7 years. Book 7, from 1965-1969, contains the final resolution of the novel, in which Justine marries and Meggie convinces her daughter to pursue her own goals in London, rather than stagnating on Drogheda.



## Quotes

"'No!' Meggie hugged the doll close again tears forming. 'No, you'll break her! Oh, Jack, don't take her away - you'll break her!'" Chapter 1, pg. 5

"I have a lot of respect for the nuns and I know it isn't our place to question what they do, but I wish they were a bit less eager with the cane. I know they have to beat the three R's onto our thick Irish heads, but after all, it was wee Meggie's first day at school." - Paddy Cleary, Chapter 2, pg. 38

"Oh, really? My dear Fiona, you've come down in the world, haven't you?" - Mary Carson, Chapter 4, pg. 99

"What else are you? You're disgusting, you're worse than a ram in rut! Couldn't you leave her alone, couldn't you keep your hands off her?" - Frank Cleary, Chapter 5, pg. 127

"'And you're no better than the shitty old dog who fathered you, whoever he was! Thank God I never had a hand in it!' Shouted Paddy, and stopped. 'Oh, dear Jesus.'" Chapter 5, pg. 127

"Ashes of roses, ashes of roses. My Meggie, I have forsaken you. But can't you see, you've become a threat? Therefore I have crushed you beneath the heel of my ambition; you have no more substance to me than a bruised rose in the grass." Chapter 7, pg. 201

"When the little boys are grown up, the estate will guarantee each of them a yearly income equal to a full working member of Drogheda, even if they don't want to work on Drogheda." Chapter 8, pg. 227

"Stooping, he groped for the rifle, remembering it wasn't loaded. The boar stood perfectly still, its little reddened eyes mad with pain, the great yellow tusks sharp and curving upward in a half circle. Stuart's horse neighed, smelling the beast; the pig's massive head swung to watch it, then lowered for the charge." Chapter 9, pg. 261

"She looked down at her purse. 'Luke, did you take my hundred pounds?'" Chapter 11, pg. 332.

"Nothing in her seemed to be functioning, not legs or mind or heart. This was Ralph come to claim her, why couldn't she feel? Why wasn't she running down the road to his arms, so utterly glad to see him nothing else mattered? Chapter 13, pg. 405

"The pain, the pain! Thou are so good to me. Let it not be long, I asked, and it has not been long. My suffering will be short, quickly over. Soon I shall see Thy face, but now, still in this life, I thank Thee." - Dane O'Neill, Chapter 18, pg. 633



"The cable said: HAVE JUST BECOME MRS RAINER MOERLING HARTHEIM STOP PRIVATE CEREMONY THE VATICAN STOP PAPAL BLESSINGS ALL OVER THE PLACE STOP THAT IS DEFINITELY BEING MARRIED EXCLAMATION WE WILL BE DOWN ON A DELAYED HONEYMOON AS SOON AS POSSIBLE BUT EUROPE IS GOING TO BE HOME STOP LOVE TO ALL AND FROM RAIN TOO STOP JUSTINE."  
Chapter 19, pg. 692

## Adaptations

The 1983 ten-hour miniseries of *The Thorn Birds* was one of the top-rated television events of its year and one of the most popular miniseries yet made, with Richard Chamberlain, who had been popular in his miniseries role of John Blackthorne in the miniseries of James Clavell's *Shogun* a few years earlier, receiving much publicity for his portrayal of Ralph. Rachel Ward portrayed Meggie, Mare Winningham portrayed her daughter Justine, Philip Anglim played the role of Meggie and Ralph's son Dane, and Ken Howard played Rainer (the young German soldier Ralph meets and who, in a nottoo surprising coincidence, meets and later marries Justine). Other characters, such as Fee, were de-emphasized, and McCullough's vivid settings were not fully utilized. The relatively short role of Mary Carson was built into a panting emotional showcase for veteran star Barbara Stanwyck, who won an Emmy award for her work.

The mini-series spanned the time between 1920 and 1962 but omitted the years around the time of World War II when Meggie was raising her children and Father Ralph was in Rome. The 1996 CBS four-hour film, *The Thornbirds: The Missing Years*, starring Chamberlain, Amanda Donohoe and Maximilan Schell, returns to the war years, when Meggie's estranged husband (Schell) returns to Drogheda to rekindle the passion and anger of their tormented marriage. Father Ralph is torn between his love for Meggie, his love for God, and his love for the glamour and power of the church.



## Key Questions

The *Thorn Birds* contains much material on the ways that families deal with crises, especially large social crises like droughts, war, social class issues, and spiritual and personal subordination, but also more intimately related issues, such as emotional crippling, unplanned pregnancy, and death. As *The Thorn Birds* has been criticized as a "potboiler" type of book, a good discussion might begin by examining how realistic these issues are as they are presented in the novel, especially as they are presented in light of their chronological context.

1. Discuss the role of Fee and Paddy Cleary. Are they good parents? Could or should they have been better?
2. Is Mary Carson a completely evil or bad character, or does her desire for Ralph humanize her in any way?
3. Is Dane's death from drowning an expected event? Can you see it foreshadowed in the novel? Or is it simply a convenient plot device?
4. Why does Meggie tell Ralph that Dane is his son, and why does it have the effect on him that it does?
5. Ralph De Bricassart is a Catholic priest, and eventually a cardinal. Yet he breaks his vows and fathers a son with Meggie. Does this make him a bad person? Does it make him more human?

Robert D. Whipple, Jr.



## Topics for Discussion

Mary Carson convinces her brother and his sons to move to New South Wales and work on her ranch for low wages, by promising they will inherit the ranch. Does she keep her promise?

Why does Mary Carson bequeath her 13 million pound fortune to the Roman Catholic Church? Whom does she name as administrator?

Father Ralph could have simply destroyed Mary Carson's latest will, and Paddy Cleary would have inherited everything. Why did he choose not to?

How often does Father Ralph think about God's will, or his spiritual relationship with God, in the novel?

How often does Dane O'Neill think about his spiritual relationship with God?

In your opinion, does it make sense for Roman Catholic priests to not be allowed to marry? Why, or why not?

Why does Meggie marry Luke O'Neill?

Why does Luke O'Neill marry Meggie?

How are the roles of men different from those of women in Australia during the time of Fiona's marriage to Paddy?

How are the roles of men different from those of women in Australia during the time of Meggie's marriage to Luke O'Neill?

Why do none of the Cleary brothers - Bob, Jack, Hughie, Jims and Patsy - marry and have children?

How does World War II affect Jims and Patsy?

Why does Meggie ultimately urge her daughter Justine not to move back to Drogheda permanently?

## Literary Precedents

The *Thorn Birds* was generally referred to as an Australian *Gone With the Wind* (1936), hence the frequent comparisons of Ralph to Rhett Butler.

Meggie, however, bears no serious resemblance to Scarlett O'Hara — except perhaps that both women are survivors. Her family is only faintly reminiscent of the aristocratic Georgia families such as the Wilkses or O'Haras. Meggie has Drogheda, like Scarlett has Tara; both women bear a deep love for the land — their land.

In a situation reminiscent of the famous play and movie *The Hasty Heart*, and faintly recalling *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), a newcomer into the group stirs up conflicts, repressed sexual passions in both sexes, resulting in breakdowns, violence, and three deaths.



## Related Titles

An Indecent Obsession (1981) combines several elements of *Tim* (1974) and *The Thorn Birds* but is more melodramatic and perhaps more unpleasant than either. It concerns a nurse, significantly named Honour, caring for six men who suffer various psychological and physical disorders in a tropical hospital ward at the end of World War II (and falling in love with, and having a brief love affair with, a newcomer to them). As in *Tim* there is much talk of brain and mental handicaps, and the central situation of a reserved woman who "thaws." As in *The Thorn Birds*, she (like Ralph de Bricassart) is torn between love and duty. In fact, she comes to feel that duty is "the most indecent obsession of all."

*The Thorn Birds* perhaps presages the Roman novels with its partial concentration upon the focus of one family caught up in the great sweep of world history. However, except for Ralph, and unlike most of the Roman characters, the Cleary family are not major actors in history, but instead are largely acted upon, whereas the Romans are largely causers and instruments of their own fates.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994