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DIPLOMSKO DELO

Valentina Uplaznik Tičič

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Diplomsko delo
PESEM PTIC TRNOVK – VEČ KOT
TRIVIALNA LITERATURA

Mentorica:izr. prof. dr. Michelle Gadpaille

Kandidatka: Valentina Uplaznik Tičić

Študijski program: Angleščina s književnostjo in nemščina s književnostjo

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THE THORN BIRDS – MORE THAN
TRIVIAL LITERATURE

Mentor: dr. Michelle Gadpaille

Candidate: Valentina Uplaznik Tičić

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ZAHVALA

Želela bi se zahvaliti moji družini za podporo pri študiju in pomoč pri izdelavi diplomske naloge: iskrena zahvala gre predvsem možu Darku za potrpljenje in ljubezen. Hvala tudi mojima otrokoma, Teji in Davidu ter moji mami za vso dodatno pomoč.

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Hvala vsem prijateljem za spodbudne besede in za to, da so verjeli vame.

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IZJAVA

Podpisana Valentina Uplaznik Tičić, rojena 17. 8. 1975, študentka Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Mariboru, smer Angleščina s književnostjo in nemščina s književnostjo, izjavljam, da je diplomsko delo z naslovom *The Thorn Birds – more than trivial literature* pri mentorici Michelle Gadpaille, avtorsko delo.

V diplomskem delu so uporabljeni viri in literatura korektno navedeni; teksti niso prepisani brez navedbe avtorjev.

(podpis študenta – ke)

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POVZETEK

V diplomskem delu z naslovom *Pesem ptic trnovk – več kot popularna literatura* je razložen pojem »popularna/trivialna literatura«, njeni začetki in njen razvoj skozi zgodovino do danes.

Predstavljena je avtorica romana, Colleen McCullough, njeno osebno življenje in vpliv le-tega na njena dela.

Diplomsko delo je osredotočeno na pisateljčin roman *Pesem ptic trnovk*. Družinski roman ima mnogo značilnosti popularne oz. trivialne literature. Te so npr. prepovedana ljubezen med mladim dekletom in čednim duhovnikom, dogovorjen zakon, otroci z različnimi partnerji, materina neenaka ljubezen do sinov in hčera... A vendar je roman več kot le-to. Pisateljčino poznavanje avstralske divjine in tamkajšnjega težkega življenja, podrobni opisi pokrajine in neizprosne narave, razkriva tudi avtoričino poznavanje rimokatoliške cerkve; zgradba romana in simboli, metafore ter posebljanja - vse to dokazuje, da je roman več kot samo trivialna literatura.

V diplomski nalogi so podani primeri iz romana ter primerjava vsebine z istoimensko televizijsko nadaljevanko.

Ključne besede: trivialna literatura, Colleen McCullough, *Pesem ptic trnovk*, družinski roman, Rimokatoliška cerkev, prepovedana ljubezen, avstralska divjina, zgradba romana, televizijska nadaljevanka

ABSTRACT

The diploma paper focuses on the Australian author Colleen McCullough and her and most famous novel *The Thorn Birds*.

First, the term popular literature is explained, its history and development through the years.

Colleen McCullough's life and its features reflected in her works are presented. She is introduced as the writer of many genres and even her biggest critics do not oppose it.

The diploma paper focuses on her most famous novel, *The Thorn Birds*. It has been sold in many copies, translated into many world languages and is today still one of the most frequently borrowed library books. The author earned the world fame with it.

It is considered as the popular literature. However, in this diploma paper the main thesis is that it is more than that and many examples from the novel itself are provided as proofs.

The author takes us to many parts of the world and she describes them in much detail, especially the Australian Outback. She shows great knowledge of the Catholic Church, its system and the Church requirements of its priests. Symbols and metaphors are used sparingly, but effectively.

Based on the novel, the miniseries was shot. The differences and the similarities with the novel are also presented in this diploma paper.

Key Words: popular literature, Colleen McCullough, *The Thorn Birds*, family saga, Catholic Church, forbidden love, Australian Outback, style and structure of the novel, TV miniseries

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. A DEFINITION OF POPULAR LITERATURE	3
3. COLLEEN MCCULLOUGH AS A WRITER.....	5
4. <i>THE THORN BIRDS</i>	9
4.1 THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK	10
4.2 CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT	16
4.3 THE FAMILY SAGA.....	24
4.4 THE CATHOLIC CHURCH	32
4.5 STYLE AND STRUCTURE	47
5. <i>THE THORN BIRDS</i> – THE MINISERIES	54
6. CONCLUSION.....	61
7. WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED.....	62

There is a legend about the bird which sings just once in its life, more sweetly than any other creature on the face of the earth. From the moment it leaves the nest it searches for a thorn tree, and does not rest until it has found one. Then, singing among the savage branches, it impales itself on upon the longest, sharpest spine. And, dying, it rises above its agony to out-carol the lark and the nightingale. One superlative song, existence the price. But the whole world stills to listen and God in His heaven smiles. For the best is only bought at the cost of great pain... Or so says the legend.

The Thorn Birds, prologue

1. INTRODUCTION

When Colleen McCullough started writing her most popular and well known novel, *The Thorn Birds*, she probably did not believe that it would be a hit to that extent. Although she wrote it with the aim of earning money, it exceeded the success she dreamt of.

Even today, more than thirty years after it was first published, the novel is known to a wide audience of all generations and is still one of the most frequently borrowed library books and is also among those most often purchased from the internet providers of books (for example, Amazon.com).

Colleen McCullough will be presented as a writer capable of writing many different genres but who is most famous and most respected (also by critics) as the writer of a romantic family saga, *The Thorn Birds*.

The theme of a forbidden love story between a handsome priest and a young, beautiful girl is typical of popular literature and at first glance the novel is popular literature. However, as I shall confirm in this diploma paper, my thesis maintains that this particular story is more than that.

First of all, a definition of popular literature will be introduced; later the features of the novel that are not typical of potboilers and that raise it above others will be outlined and emphasized. Examples from the text will be given as proof.

2. A DEFINITION OF POPULAR LITERATURE

During the 1950s trivial literature was derided as non-art or kitsch, even a cultural pest. More recently the term ‘trivial literature’ (the term is more widely used in German-speaking countries) is being replaced by more positive designations, such as ‘popular literature’. The term popular literature has many synonyms: easy reading, potboilers, penny novels, trash, trashy literature, sub literature, light literature, bestsellers (typical of the USA are the numerous bestseller lists, but they do occur in Canada and Great Britain, too) and many more. The term bestseller is relatively new; it appeared in 1895 when the first ‘bestseller list’ was published by Harry Thurston Pack, the editor of *The Bookman*. Bestsellers lists are often kept and published by newspapers on their ‘Book review pages’.

There is a long lasting debate over the question of whether popular literature is ‘literature’ at all. There are many definitions of popular literature and they differ considerably.

Among the influential definition makers there are two main groups: the opponents and the supporters of popular literature. The first group sees nothing worthy in it; moreover, they find it harmful. They criticize the inartistic means of producing it and the lack of innovation and fear the massive influence on its readership. One of these is Miran Hladnik. His definition states that “popular literature is mass literature of little aesthetic or functional value” (Hladnik 6).

The second group sees this type of reading far more positively – they refer to it as ‘relaxation’, ‘short breaks’, or even ‘therapy’ and ‘life coaches’. John G. Cawelti believes that formulaic stories are “artistic constructions” (2) and adds that “Formula literature is, first of all, a kind of literary art” (8).

From a historical point of view, through mass literature, literature became more available to the masses in the nineteenth century. The rise of the popular press and of literacy meant that writing reached a wider audience than ever before. Writing was now available to upper class and to the middle class in the form of chapbooks.

3. COLLEEN MCCULLOUGH AS A WRITER

Colleen McCullough as an author appears on many bestseller lists. Her novels *Tim*, *An Indecent Obsession* and *The Thorn Birds* touch on taboo subjects, like the mentally challenged in *Tim*, and a priest’s sexual desire in *The Thorn Birds*. Critics believe that her strengths lie in turning clichéd storylines into fresh plots. She often highlights the rebirth of dull or ordinary women into animated and extrovert people. “McCullough takes criticism in her stride, commenting that as time passes, if her novels endure, then they can be deemed to be good literature” (Bloom 219).

She is usually thought of as an Australian author, although she has lived most of her adult life outside Australia, and she has made it a primary setting for only a few of her novels, including *The Thorn Birds*, the novel for which she is most famous and which is presented in this diploma paper (De Marr, 1996, 4). Many details from her personal life have appeared in her fiction, many in *The Thorn Birds* – she is familiar with an Australian way of life, as later described in the novel, her father was a sugar cane cutter, like Luke O’Neill, her mother was New Zealander, as is Fee, Dane’s drowning reflects the death of McCullough’s brother.

McCullough’s writing of *The Thorn Birds* and success with it was a well thought-out plan. She had had it in her mind long before actually writing it, but she started with *Tim*, a short and an uncomplicated novel, to find a publisher and establish herself with it. She was of an opinion, that she could never find a publisher for a relatively long novel and family saga *The Thorn Birds*. As many critics believe, in this way these two works could be called potboilers – since they were written with practical considerations, to find a public, to sell books and to make money. When she did all that, she could focus on writing to please herself and not the others. She is very hard on these two novels and she does not like them very much. She calls them “purple prose”.

Issued in 1974, *Tim* made a lot of money, an unusual success for a first novel, and it was filmed in 1981. But, the success of *Tim* was far surpassed by *The Thorn Birds*, published in 1977. Even the reviewers remarked on the suffering of the

strong women and confessed themselves engrossed by the story and characters and puzzled by what it was that held them. Also *The Thorn Birds* were filmed and put on TV as miniseries, it was the major event in 1983 and it renewed its sales.

After she gained what she wanted with *Tim* and *The Thorn Birds*, she could focus on writing for herself and her soul, she was able to write to please herself.

None of her later books was as successful, when judged by sales and profits, as her first two novels. The closest came *An Indecent Obsession*, published four years later, in 1981, it profited from the expectations raised by its predecessor. It is the first novel, set outside her native Australia, in a military hospital, but it does have Australian characters. It also contains some romance elements, which readers expected after *Tim* and *The Thorn Birds*, but they are less important than other elements.

McCullough took a complete new turn with her next book, *A Creed for a Third Millennium*. In the book she uses science fiction elements, more precisely dystopia. It is a novel of ideas that addresses contemporary social, political, and environmental issues. "Set in the United States in the year 2032, the novel describes a dystopic future world plagued by an impending ice age, frequent suicide, family size limitations, and the vast bureaucratization of society" (<http://enotes>). Reviewers did not like her new experiments. This novel still remains in print, but it is believed both by critics and the readers that this is only because of the author's name.

McCullough returned to romance with *The Ladies of Missalongo*, a modern variation of the Cinderella story involving a poor woman who convinces a mysterious stranger to marry her by feigning a terminal illness. As in earlier novels, McCullough describes love as a transformative force, though adding a more pronounced moral and ethical dimension. It is a minor book, a novelette rather than a novel, and is thought of as a brief interlude in her career ([http://enotes](#)).

“Since turning to historical fiction with the *Masters of Rome* series, McCullough has won favourable critical attention at the expense of a mass readership. Criticized by some reviewers for the overbearing detail and abundance of difficult Latin names in these novels, many praise the engrossing narrative and the impressive accuracy of McCullough's Roman history” ([http://enotes](#)).

“A novelist with wide-ranging interests and remarkable storytelling ability, McCullough is highly regarded as a leading author of popular contemporary fiction” ([http://enotes](#)).

Jean DeMarr sees Colleen McCullough is an interesting writer and a woman. She seems to impress everybody with her “big” figure, her “loose-fitting and unfeminine attire, her hearty laugh, and her open personality” (DeMarr, 1996, 1). As a writer she likes to point out, that she does not believe in hiring anybody to do any work, considering her writing, for her. She does it all by herself – she does all her research and all her typing. Instead of using a computer, she still uses

typewriters and nicknames them – *Prince, Rex, Spot* and *Rover*. She now lives a peaceful life on the Norfolk Island. She has been very successful as a writer and now the fruits of her success are the power to live and especially to write as she wishes and what she wishes.

4. THE THORN BIRDS

This study will maintain that *The Thorn Birds* is more than merely popular literature and that it has a literary and socio-historical value. McCullough presents the plot in great detail. She gives novel a unique touch. It is a combination of different genres: epic family saga, western and historical novel. It is also autobiographical in some parts and even erotic, but not perverted. It is a perfect bitter-sweet love story. Some features that are not typical of popular literature will be presented in this paper. These include the following themes. McCullough's life and experiences in Australia shine through in the novel's descriptions. She takes us to many parts of the world. Through the three main female characters, women's liberation is made very clear (it is Justine, the representative of the last generation, who finally breaks away for a life of her own). McCullough seems to be an expert on the Catholic Church and the Church hierarchy; in the character of the priest she touches the demands of religious life, the sacrifices required, and the impossibility of achieving spiritual perfection. She shows that man's desires are

no match for an institution like the Church, and she explains factually how the Church works.

Another important theme that distinguishes this book from other ‘potboilers’ is its portrayal of how families deal with crises, especially large social crises (droughts, fire and war) and social class issues. Paddy and Fiona come from different social classes, yet they end up in a successful marriage of convenience.

What ultimately differentiates the novel from other popular novels is the depth of its exploration into the relationships between people – whether it is love, friendship or even hate. There are many different varieties of love described. There is not only the romantic love between a man and a woman, but also love between members of a family – the mature love between a husband and a wife, love between father and son, father and daughter, even love between brothers and sisters has many different colours. There is love between a small girl and an adult priest, love between friends. Love and hate walk hand in hand throughout the book.

4.1 THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK

Thanks to McCullough’s Australian origins, the Australian Outback and also other parts of Australia are superbly described. The various animals,

vegetation, and weather are so clearly depicted there are times you feel you could reach out and touch them. The focus of the novel is in painting an accurate description of life on a sheep station near Gillanbone, New South Wales – Drogheda. McCullough thoroughly details the sulphuric smell of the bore head, the annoyance of flies and dust, and all the other unpleasant things that make Clearys’ lives unpleasant. “And insects! Grasshoppers, locusts, crickets, bees, flies of all sizes and sorts, cicadas, gnats, dragonflies, giant moths and so many butterflies! The spiders were dreadful, huge hairy things with a leg span of inches, or deceptively small and deadly black things lurking in the lavatory” (98).

Long sections of the book lovingly detail the flora and fauna of Australia, especially New South Wales and Queensland. McCullough also devotes space to the social and historical events of Australia, such as the roving shearers and depression era tramps:

All around the edge of the town encroached a genuine jungle. Vines and creepers sprawled everywhere – up posts, across roofs, along walls. Trees sprouted casually in the middle of the road, or had houses built around them, or perhaps had grown up through the houses. Coconut palms taller and straighter than the Drogheda ghost gums waved fronts against a deep, swimming blue sky; everywhere Meggie looked was a blaze of colour.

No brown and grey land, this. Every kind of tree seemed to be in flower – purple, orange, scarlet, pink, blue, white (324, 325).

Throughout the novel, she describes the scenery with much detail. She includes spectacular storms, fires, and describes the devastating drought in such detail that one almost becomes thirsty and hot; variety of landscapes, as well as detailed battle and war scenes, which vividly evoke a time and place which are strange and exotic to most readers:

Thunder came marching from far away with increasing tread, tiny flickers on the horizon cast soaring billows into sharp relief, crests of startling whiteness foamed and curled over midnight blue depths. Then, with a roaring wind that sucked up the dust and flung it stinging in eyes and ears and mouths, came the cataclysm. No longer did they try to imagine the biblical wrath of God; they lived through it (145).

The novel begins in New Zealand where the Cleary family live; it moves from the desert-like setting of the Outback in New South Wales, to the hot tropical forest of Queensland. We also see the desert of North Africa, the jungles of New Guinea, the labyrinthine corridors of the Vatican; we travel from Vatican to the Greek Island of Crete and the broad sweep of the Australian plain.

However, compared to McCullough's detailed descriptions of lizards, kangaroos, droughts and flies of New South Wales, her descriptions of Rome, Sydney and Greece are almost non-existent.

The Cleary family move from New Zealand, leaving a poor life behind them, to Drogheda, near Australian Gillanbone, hoping to inherit the big farm from Mary Carson after her death. Reading the novel, we get as surprised and shocked as they do, staring into the vast, waste and dry landscape of the distant Australia:

In the morning they stared, awed and dismayed, at a landscape so alien they had not dreamed anything like this exist on the same planet as New Zealand. The rolling hills were there certainly, but absolutely nothing else reminiscent of home. It was all brown and grey, even the trees. The winter wheat was already turned a fawnish silver by the glaring sun, miles upon miles rippling and bending in the wind, broken only by the strands of thin, spindling, blue-leafed trees and dusty clumps of tired grey bushes (87, 88).

Drogheda is a farm, yet we feel as if it is a living human being. McCullough gives it much character, and Meggie's and other members' love and passion for it helps us feel as if it were alive. Drogheda is owned by Mary Carson and run by Paddy Carson, her brother; his family, with many sons capable of hard work and only one daughter, is more than perfect for managing the vast farm. McCullough

explains thoroughly how Drogheda is managed. It is a vast farm with more than one hundred twenty-five thousand sheep. “At first the distances staggered them; Drogheda had two hundred and fifty thousand acres. Its longest boundary stretched for eighty miles” (96). Drogheda has to deal with many problems – droughts, a great fire, which destroys most of the pastures and the time of terrible unemployment. Rabbits, as foreigners to Australia and therefore without natural predators, reproduce out of control and together with kangaroos devour most of the land. Yet the Clearys manage it all; even more, Drogheda remains a constant source of money for the Cleary family. After World War II many big properties are subdivided, since “It wasn’t right that so much land should belong to one family...” (490). But Drogheda stays untouched. “Thus, like a giant in a Lilliputian World, Drogheda carried on, all quarter of a million acres of it” (491). The profits after the war are unimaginable, and life is suddenly very pleasant for all of the Drogheda residents.

They love the life they live and none of them misses life in New Zealand. It is as if life on Drogheda is the only life they have ever known, as if New Zealand, their hard work and misery have never existed. “This, thought the boys exultantly, was life. Not one of them yearned for New Zealand; New Zealand was tame compared to this; this was life” (98). It isn’t as if they lead an idle, lazy life; on the contrary, life and conditions are hard, and the work with the sheep and the land for the men and the housework for women never comes to an end. “As one job

finished it became time for another, bred and unbred, shorn and crutched, dipped and drenched, slaughtered and shipped off to be sold” (154).

It is in their nature to be hard-working, uncomplaining people. The dry, demanding and cruel land demands almost inhuman strength from them. Life is no picnic, even after many years, when times are more prosperous and Drogheda is making more money than ever; the men never stop working. They put themselves fully into the land, neglecting all other needs, including wives and children; eventually that is why Drogheda falls into the hands of strangers.

McCullough’s father was a sugar cane cutter, and in the novel she clearly shows that the life of cane cutters in the tropical forest of Queensland is no mystery to her. That too is described in great detail:

The cane was alive with vermin: rats, bandicoots, cockroaches, toads, spiders, snakes, wasps, flies and bees. For that reason the cutters burned the cane first, preferring the filth of working charred crops to the depredations of green, living cane. Even so, they were stung, bitten and cut. No cutter ever wore gloves. They slowed a man down, and time was money in this game. Besides, gloves were sissy (339).

The macho ethos of Australian outback life is also one of the strongest features in the novel. “It took him [Luke] to harden, and attain the eight-ton-a-day

minimum Arne demanded of his gang members.” (341) Competitions between sheep shearers, cutting as much cane as possible without gloves, fighting and boxing, also as a career, ignoring women and wives, always wanting something “more” from life, those are all “macho” features in the novel. All of the men in the novel have career goals that supersede their personal relationships. Luke O'Neill prefers cutting cane to living with a wife. The uncles prefer working and camping on Drogheda to any relationship with a woman, Ralph de Bricassart wants God more than Meggie.

4.2 CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

There are examples of both flat and round characters in the novel. According to E. M Forster (Forster, 1956, 118), a "flat" character can be summed up in a single sentence and acts as a function of only a few fixed character traits. Flat characters are also known as two-dimensional characters, minor characters or static characters. "Round" characters are capable of surprise, contradiction, and change; they are representations of human beings in all of their complexity. Round characters are also known as major characters, main characters and dynamic characters. "The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it - life within the

pages of a book" (118). Forster's aim, however, is not to elevate the round at the expense of the flat, although he admits that the round is on the whole always a more interesting creation. Instead, he argues that there are compelling artistic reasons for a novelist to employ flat characters (Forster, 1956, 119).

The round characters in the novel are undoubtedly Fee, Meggie and Justine: all three generation of women who are the strong ones in the novel. Of the male characters, Ralph and Dane are the ones that develop most in the novel. Mary Carson, although she occupies only a few pages of the book, plays a crucial part in the plot development and lives of the protagonists. The character, who best fits the category of "flat", is Luke O' Neill, Meggie's husband. Besides him, "flat" characters include Paddy, Vittorio Scarbanza di Contini-Verchese, Frank, Anne and Luddie Mueller, Rainer Moerling Hartheim and Meggie's brothers.

The main characters are the women of three generations; their roles, importance in the novel, and their development throughout the book will be presented in the next few pages.

The novel centres on Meggie Cleary, the only daughter of the numerous Cleary family, which covers three generations: Paddy and Fiona, their daughter Meggie, and her children, Justine and Dane. It includes two (different) fathers of Meggie's two children. The years covered are from 1915 in New Zealand to 1969 in Australian outback.

Fiona, also known as Fee, is a woman disillusioned and worn out by betrayal and overwork. Life has made her tough - too tough, one might think. She never shows her emotions, especially not towards her daughter. She only sees Meggie as a welcome help with the housework and the babies. "What's a daughter? Just a reminder of the pain, a younger version of oneself who will do all the things one has done, cry the same tears. No, Father, I try to forget I have a daughter – if I do think of her, it is as one of my sons. It's her sons a mother remembers" (274, 275).

Her sons appear to be the centre of her life, one son in particular – Frank. From the moment, that her father had "bought" a husband for her and a father for her illegitimate child, Fee became as hard as a rock. She seemed to accept the role that was meant for her – to be a wife of a poor, working shearer and a mother of their numerous children. Life is anything but easy for them, but she is firm. Nothing can move her and no disaster that she has to go through, breaks her. "Do you cry tears, Fee? I've only seen them once." "You'll never see them again, for I've finished with tears forever" (275). After Frank leaves the family for good, Fee becomes even harder. It is as if she has lost all that was important to her and nothing bad can happen to her anymore. Or so it appears, until the moment Paddy dies. That is when she realizes how much she loved him. "Two days ago I realized how much I love Paddy, but it was like all of my life – too late. Too late for him, too late for me. If you knew how I wanted the chance to take him in my arms, tell

him I loved him! Oh, God, I hope no other human being ever has to feel my pain” (275).

At this point, McCullough temporarily ends Meggie’s suffering – like a lull before the storm. When Meggie leaves her husband and comes home after four years, Fee accepts her happily. Sharing the secret of knowing who fathered Meggie’s son brings mother and daughter closer together. Fee enjoys having her daughter back at home, knowing that she is experiencing the same thing with Dane as she did with Frank. “I enjoy you, Meggie, in a way I can never enjoy my sons. A daughter’s an equal. Sons aren’t, you know. They’re just defenceless dolls we set up to knock down at our leisure” (490). As it appears, Meggie will have to go through the same destiny as her mother. History will repeat itself.

Meggie is the novel’s central character. The book deals with her from her early childhood, when she is only four, and despite the harsh life she lives, does not differ a lot from her counterparts. She loves her family, and her brothers, especially Frank. She loves her parents; she has a special loving relationship with her father, whereas her mother is a cold woman, who does not appreciate her daughter.

Even though the book does start with Meggie and hint that she will be the main character, she occupies few pages at the beginning of the book. Her story starts developing after the family arrive in Australia and is noticed by Father de Bricassart at the Gillanbone railway station: “Behind them, all by herself, Meggie

stood gaping up at him with her mouth open, as if she were looking at God. Without seeming to notice how his serge robe wallowed in the dust, he stepped past the boys and squatted down to hold Meggie between his hands, and they were firm, gentle, kind” (89).

As her life unfolds, Meggie experiences one catastrophe after another. She loses the ones she loves one after another: Frank, Hal, her father and Stu. On top of everything, Father Ralph leaves Drogheda after Mary Carson’s death. It is Maggie’s personal defeat, since Ralph is everything to her: her brother, her mother, her father, and as she realizes later, her first and ultimate love. She is left all alone with a mother and brothers who do not notice her; but Meggie needs love and somebody to love, so it is no wonder she gets attached to Luke O’Neill. She believes he can give her everything that people around her somehow failed to. She is wrong again. Luke does not care for her, refuses to give her a family and the life she deserves. After she has a brief affair with Ralph, that results in a son, Dane, it finally seems that Maggie’s life is fulfilled and she has something she had longed for. Her life back on Drogheda is pleasant and peaceful - until destiny strikes again. In a tragic accident she loses her son, Dane, and Fee’s and Anne’s prophecy that she will have to pay for her sins comes true: “You’re going to pay, Meggie. Believe me, you’re going to pay. You won’t get away with it any more than I did. I lost Frank in the worst way a mother could; I can’t even see him and I long to... You wait. You’ll lose Dane too” (489).

Her mother's destiny and her mother's life are becoming hers. The same mistakes, the same traces in life... and eventually it turns out that all the bad in their lives has made them the same. Just as Fee became tough and hard in her life, so does Meggie. Just as Fee forgets she has a daughter, so does Meggie. She behaves the same way towards her as Fee had behaved for ages towards Meggie. "...I suppose mothers are always a little blind about their daughters until they're too old to be jealous of youth. You are about Justine, the same as I was about you" (486). The same way that Fee and Meggie find their peace, so do Meggie and Justine, eventually. Meggie realizes she has not lost everybody and everything, and she is reconciled with her daughter: "My dearest one, a light has gone out. For all of us, a light has gone out. But if you think we here on Drogheda spend our days weeping and wailing, you're quite wrong. We enjoy our days, and one of the main reasons why is that our lights for you still burn. Dane's light is gone forever" (688).

Maggie's children, Dane and Justine are fathered by two different men. Justine is born in a loveless marriage between Meggie and Luke. Meggie desires a child because she desperately needs someone to love and someone to be loved by, but having a daughter makes their marriage even worse. Meggie is disappointed and does not provide her daughter with love Justine deserves.

All that and the fact that Justine's character turns out to be a "powerful soup of Cleary, O'Neill and Armstrong" (431), leads to a relationship between Meggie and Justine a lot similar to that of Fee and Meggie. However, Meggie is never as indifferent towards Justine as Fee was towards her. Meggie shows her emotions, whether anger, disappointment, joy or happiness.

Justine is stubborn, moody, self-sufficient, independent and extremely self-confident from the beginning and knows exactly what she wants from her life.

She walked and talked early, at nine months. Once upon her feet, and in command of a very articulate tongue, she proceeded to go her own way and do precisely whatever she wanted. Not that she was noisy or defiant; simply that she was made of very hard metal indeed. Meggie knew nothing about genes, but if she had she might have pondered upon the result of an intermingling of Cleary, Armstrong and O'Neill. It couldn't fail to be powerful human soup (431).

Justine's behaviour is often just a mask. She hides her true feelings behind it. In reality she is, although well taken care of, often lonely and vulnerable. Since her mother shows no genuine feelings for her, Justine gets much attached to her little brother, Dane. She takes care of him when Meggie cannot, protects him and is a perfect sister in every sense. Meggie is jealous: "This precious little scrap was going to steal her son from her, and there was no way she could avert it. Back to the paddocks, while Justine staunchly guarded Dane. Ousted by her own daughter,

who was a monster. Who on earth did she take after? Not Luke, not herself, not Fee” (451).

Having a role model in her mother, whose marriage was a disaster, she is afraid to be loved, and to be hurt, and refuses to marry the man she loves. Meggie realizes this is the time for her to do the best and the only right thing for her daughter. She swallows her pride, forgets what she needs and wants and finally does something for Justine and her needs. She makes Justine realize where she belongs and what is best for her. Ironically, as much as Justine was insignificant to Meggie in comparison to how important Dane was, she is the one on whom the entire Cleary clan depends. She suddenly becomes the most significant link. She is necessary to bring to a conclusion the cycle of pain of three generations of Cleary women.

Male characters play supportive roles in the novel; they have interesting stories. All of them are subsidiary to the women, but their stories are included to explain the motivations of Fee (Paddy, Frank), Meggie (Ralph, Luke and Dane) and to a lesser extent to Justine (Dane and Rainer).

Dane is Meggie’s son, and after the realization that Ralph will never be hers, the centre of her life; his role in the novel will be fully presented in section *The Catholic Church*.

Meggie is an old woman when the book ends, together with her mother she survives it all and everybody. All the men are either dead or disappear into the woodwork. Women seem to live forever.

4.3 THE FAMILY SAGA

Colleen McCullough is a writer of many genres: romance, historical novels, science fiction, parody of romance, and novels with elements of mystery. Nothing, however, beats her in a genre, most famous for her: family saga.

The family saga is a genre of literature which chronicles the lives and doings of a family or a number of related or interconnected families over a period of time. In novels (or sometimes sequences of novels) with a serious intent, this is often a thematic device used to portray particular historical events, changes of social circumstances, or the ebb and flow of fortunes from a multiple of perspectives. The typical family saga follows generations of a family through a period of history in a series of novels (<http:// Wikipedia – Family Saga>).

Saga features include multiple generations, inter- and intra- generational conflict, one strong, dominant family to impose coherence and a sense of family identity,

pattern of inheritance (genetic as well as monetary), a pattern of non-inheritance, non-transmission, patterns of repeated behaviour, secrets hid and revealed.

Undoubtedly *The Thorn Birds* is a family saga, but it does have elements of romance. If we start with the multiple generations, the novel covers three generations. It has a large number of characters, which often create a mystery that set up conditions that influence the lives of the next generations. Paddy and Fiona Cleary represent the first generation. Meggie Cleary, later O'Neill, is their daughter and represents the second generation; the third generation are Luke O'Neill and Justine O'Neill. As is usual in family sagas, there is more than one intergenerational conflict present. It starts with a conflict between Paddy and Frank. Paddy is a man, who believes in old traditions, in hard work to earn money and traditional roles of men and women. He, being a Catholic, believes in "having as many children as God gives them". Frank cannot stand it, because he sees it differently. He cannot stand his mother to be pregnant all the time. He finds it hard to see how hard she works from dusk to dawn, and having new babies all the time. "You are disgusting, you are worse than a ram in the rut! Couldn't you leave her alone, couldn't you keep your hands off her?"(127).

Another reason for conflict between them is how Frank wants to earn his money. At the fair he takes a challenge and fights against a boxing champion. Being a prospect, he is offered to join the crew of boxers. Frank accepts it, seeing

no other alternative, finding no other option, after the events that follow at home. Frank is namely not an actual son of Paddy's, but Frank does not know that. It is revealed to him later, in the quarrel. "And you are 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" (127). This is the turning point in the novel for Fee and for Meggie, especially for Meggie. Fee loves this son more than she loves her other children, since he is the son of her true love. She, nevertheless, is a strong woman, who has hardened throughout the years and she takes it well, or at least she does not show how hard it is for her. However, it is hard for Meggie. She is a young girl, a gentle soul, who obtains no love from her mother. Frank is her older brother, her mentor, her hero, and after she loses her little brother Hal, now she is losing Frank too. This is another step in Meggie's suffering. As it turns out later in the novel, Meggie is not too young to understand that her father is not also Frank's father, but she keeps a secret until old age. Having secrets and revealing them is another family saga features. First, the secret is revealed to Frank, at the same time Father de Bricassart and Meggie find it out. Congruent with another feature of this genre, Meggie repeats her mother's "mistakes". She too has children of her own with two different fathers, and the same as Fee could not marry and spend her life with her true love, so could not Meggie. Her true love is also married to another "woman" – the Church. Both Fee and Meggie steal from their men something to have for their own, something that they believe, no one

else can have – the children. Fee gets Frank, Meggie gets Dane, but they both lose them. What they stole they must give back. They cannot beat the destiny. They reveal the secrets to each other in one of their honest conversations that they have after Meggie leaves Luke for good. Their relationship is strong and mature, better than ever before. They share their thoughts, feelings and secrets. They talk openly to each other and Fee finally does her job as Meggie's mother. She tells Meggie that eventually she will have to do hers to Justine too. That happens too. Meggie loses Dane, but she is left with a daughter with whom she has absolutely no relationship, since she lives a life totally different from Meggie's. Since Justine feels the guilt for Dane's death, she wants to give up her career as an actress. That is where Meggie finally steps in and explains to Justine that Dane's death is not her fault and she must not give up her life on Meggie's account.

There comes another intergenerational conflict between Fee and Meggie, and later a more obvious one between Meggie and Justine. Fee is a woman who, like Paddy, believes in traditional roles between men and women. Meggie gets married and 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. She wants children, as expected from her as a woman but at the same time she already

is the representative of the “birth-control” generation. She, even more her husband, does not believe in “from God’s given children”. After abandoning Luke, she has no intention of divorcing him, for there is no need to. She has no intention of marrying again, or having any more children, since she, unlike Fee, does not believe that a woman needs a husband by her side at any cost. “Half of you is me, and I’m not a Catholic.” “Don’t give me that, Meggie. If you really wanted to marry, you’d divorce Luke” (482). The other reason for not wanting to marry again is her desire for a man she can never have.

An even bigger conflict occurs between Meggie and her daughter Justine. Meggie does not believe in having a husband by woman’s side at any cost, but she also does not approve of Justine’s liberal way of life. “Don’t you want to get married?” Justine looked scornful. “Not bloody likely! Spend my life wiping bloody noses and cacky bums? Salaaming to some man not half my equal even though he thinks he’s better? Ho ho ho, not me” (528). Meggie sees an artist in Justine and wants her to study art at university, but Justine is a stubborn, strong-willed girl from the beginning. As she grows up, that becomes even more obvious, partly because she wants to spite her mother: “Look, Justine, I hate to be a spoilsport and truly I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, but do you think you’re – well, quite physically equipped to be an actress?” (526).

Meggie makes similar decisions, mistakes and actions in life as Fee did. They both want the men they cannot have; they both get pregnant; they both think they

can trick destiny, and at last they both lose their sons. Repeated behaviour and repeated history is also a family saga feature.

There are also some patterns of inheritance. Dane takes after his father, Ralph. Meggie chooses to marry Luke O'Neill partly because he resembles Ralph physically. After Dane is born, everybody sees a resemblance to Luke O'Neill, but Fee cannot be fooled. She knows the minute Dane is born that his father is Cardinal de Bricassart. "Do you take me for a fool, Meggie? I don't mean Luke O'Neill. I mean Dane is the living image of Ralph de Bricassart" (484). Also Ralph's friend, Vittorio di Contini-Verchese knows immediately who the boy's father is. "Poor Ralph. He had never seen himself walk, never watched expressions on his own face, never caught an upward flight of his own left eyebrow. Truly God was good, to make men so blind" (565). Another of Dane's features is inherited from his father: he wants to become a priest, just like him. He has this desire in him from, as far as he can remember, but after meeting Ralph, he becomes even more determined to become, like Ralph, as he believes, a perfect priest.

Not that I haven't thought about it, or wanted wife and children. I have. But I can't. Because there isn't enough room to love them or God as well, not the way I want to love God. I've known that for a long time. I don't

seem to remember a time when I didn't, and the older I become the greater my love for God grows. It's a great mystery, loving God (549, 550).

There is also a pattern of non-inheritance in the novel. Justine is a person of her own; she resembles nobody: neither Meggie, nor Luke. The only thing she takes from Meggie's family is red hair. Paddy and Meggie's brothers, Jims and Patsy have it, and Justine has it: red hair and freckles. Also her character is her own. Meggie often tells Justine she is just like Luke, but she does not believe it. Justine is just Justine, from the beginning. "Whenever I displease you, I become just like my father. Well, I'll have to take your word for it, since I've never laid eyes on the gentleman" (529).

In the novel there is another important feature of non-inheritance. Mary Carson is a rich widow, with a vast property, a successful business, but is childless and, as she lets Ralph believe, without relatives too, with lots of money in the bank. Ralph believes that she will leave all the money to the Church, but is unpleasantly surprised, although he does not show it, that she has a brother with a large family. Mary does have every intention of leaving all the money, the business, the property to her brother. "When I die he'll inherit Drogheda and Michar Limited, as he's my only living relative closer than some unknown cousins back in Ireland" (75). At least that is the case until she meets Meggie and sees what an impact she has on Ralph. She is determined to split them up, but she puts the decision into

Ralph's hands. What will win? The love for a woman or the ambition? Knowing Ralph, she believes that he will take the money for the Church, since it will enable him to fulfil his ambition, never minding the price that Clearys will have to pay. They will be good provided for, but still without anything of their own. "Save only the special bequests made below, all my worldly goods and moneys and properties I bequeath to the holy Catholic Church of Rome, under the hereby stated conditions of bequest..." (193).

The Clearys are allowed to stay on Drogheda as long as one of the ancestors is alive. They are each given a respectable sum of money that is sufficient for the rest of their lives, but they do not get what rightfully should be theirs.

McCullough's family saga also depicts the historical past – the period of World War II in Australia and New Zealand. McCullough is a master of words in this area. Her vivid descriptions of the war scenes let us think that she fought in the battlefield herself: "Eight hundred and eighty-two British guns and howitzers spoke together. The heavens reeled, expanded, could not settle, for the barrage went on and on without a second's diminution in the mind-shattering volume of noise" (454).

As usual, McCullough does not simply accept the conventions of the genre she is using. In this novel, she takes members of one family but does not treat them equally. She takes the central character and follows her from the early childhood, to her love story with Ralph and concludes the story of great love in the story of

Justine and Rainer, since the main plot could not be completed in the middle generation. McCullough's characterization is innovative. This family saga is different, since the leading male character is a priest and that is why the romance elements of the family saga are used unconventionally. Since the priest breaks all of his vows, for the romantic elements only the vow of celibacy is important, McCullough can include them in her novel.

4.4 THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic Church plays a significant role in the novel. It can even be regarded as one of the main characters, since it represents the main competition to Meggie, first through Ralph, who does not want and cannot give it up for her and later through Dane.

Again, McCullough shows us that she knows what she is talking about. Her knowledge of the Church system is shown at the beginning of the novel when we first meet Father de Bricassart. The opposition between Church demands and Ralph's lifestyle is presented to us in the first paragraph. "The road to Drogheda brought back no memories of his youth, though Father Ralph de Bricassart, eyes half shut against the glare as his new Daimler bounced along in the rutted wheel tracks that marched through the long silver grass" (65).

It is immediately known that the vow of poverty has been broken by this young priest. It is also hinted that he is not Australian but Irish. So, did he come to raw Australia by his own will? The conversation between Mary Carson, the owner of Drogheda, and himself quickly gives us the answer: “What did you do, to make them send someone like you out here into the back of beyond?” “I insulted the bishop,” he said calmly, smiling” (69). This is how we realize that not only the vow of poverty is broken but also the vow of obedience. By being sent to an off place like Gillanbone, Ralph is supposed to repent of his disobedience. Instead, he makes friends with the rich, mature Mary Carson. She falls in love with the handsome, young priest and tries to buy his love by giving him expensive presents – a horse to ride, a farm as his own playground and an expensive car. Ralph gladly plays along and accepts her game. Ralph too knows how the Church works. He does not want to remain “Father” de Bricassart; he wants to climb all the way up the Church hierarchy, to the very top, to being Pope, if possible. Mary Carson is an old woman without relatives, as he believes. She will have to leave an estate to somebody. Ralph puts two and two together. If she leaves all her money to the Church, it will be because of him, because of his friendship with this old woman. The Church rewards priests who contribute to the welfare of the Church. “If he played his cards well, this old woman might be the answer to his prayers” (68).

He strives to be a perfect priest, but he forgets that the means that are supposed to help him be one do not come from inside him but from outside factors. He

believes that he would reach that perfection as a cardinal, or the Pope, but not as a regular priest. He lies to himself: “I am a vessel, Mrs. Carson, and at times I’m filled with God. If I were a better priest, there would be no periods of emptiness at all. And that filling, that oneness with God, isn’t a function of place. Whether in Gillanbone or a bishop’s palace, it occurs” (71).

Even as Ralph speaks of his vows, he believes he has it all figured out. “Poverty is nothing new to me; I don’t come from a rich family. Chastity I accept without finding it difficult to maintain. And obedience? For me, it’s the hardest of the three. But I obey. And if necessary, I’m willing to endure Gillanbone as the life sentence” (72).

Obedience is already broken, so is poverty – Ralph is, with Mary’s help, not poor. However, chastity, which he believes is the easiest to maintain, will be the most difficult one when he meets Meggie and she grows up. However, he 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.

However, Mary’s plans for her personal property are different from Ralph’s hopes. She invites the Clearys to live on Drogheda to take care of the farm and intends to leave it to them, not to the church after her death. Ralph becomes genuinely fond of the family, especially Meggie. As he realizes that his plans of inheriting Mary’s money for the Church will probably not come true, he also

slowly forgets about his ambitious plans in the Church. As years pass, he is more and more fascinated by the way the family works, and he is fascinated by young Meggie. Mary does not like it. She loves the priest herself and cannot compete with the beautiful young girl. So, she goes back to the original plan. She cannot win Ralph with her body or soul, but she can win him with money. Mary writes two wills – in one, she leaves all the money, the property and everything she owns to Paddy and his family. She gives it to her lawyer. She gives another one with a personal note to Ralph, only to Ralph. He must promise not to read it before he sees her dead body. Mary Carson dies the next morning. Ralph opens the document. It is her will, where she leaves all the fortune – thirteen million pounds – to the Catholic Church, but Ralph must be in charge of administration and channelling of money, properties and be the chief authority in charge of Mary's estate. She, of course, makes sure that Paddy stays on the farm as its main manager and Ralph must provide all the members of the family with a good amount of money, so they do not suffer any lack of money or home.

In the novel, Mary is given the name “spider” for a good reason. She plays her game tactfully, on purpose to thwart her enemy, in this case, Ralph and Meggie and their feelings for each other. It is up to Ralph to decide which of the two wills (testaments) will be presented to the family and will be valid. She forces him to choose between his integrity and his love for Meggie, on the one hand, and his ambition to rise in the Church, on the other.

Mary Carson knows Ralph better than he knows himself and she knows exactly what he will do. "I love you, but I want you to scream in agony. Because, you see, I know what your decision will be. I know it as surely as if I could be there, watching. You'll scream, Ralph, you'll know what agony is. So read on, my beautiful, ambitious priest. Read my will, and decide your fate" (192). She is right. As soon as Ralph reads the will, his ambitions that he buried, return. He forgets about Meggie, about her love for him and sells her for Mary's money and the chance to be Cardinal de Bricassart. "Was there a decision? Didn't he already know, hadn't he known the moment he read her will what he was going to do? The tears had dried. With his usual grace Father Ralph got to his feet, made sure his shirt was tucked in all the way round, and went to the door" (196).

Mary wins. The Church wins. Ralph believes he has won too. As they read the will, the Cleary family does not want to contest it, since they know they will have more than ever before and naively believe that Ralph had no influence on Mary's decision. However, Ralph leaves Gillanbone without saying goodbye to the Clearys. His conscience is not clear. He feels as if he had betrayed the family.

Father, please don't think there are any hard feelings on our side. Mary was never swayed by another human being in all her life, priest or brother or husband. You were mighty good to her, and you've been mighty good to us. We'll never forget it." The guilt. The burden. "Thank you, Paddy.

You may rest assured I'll see you never want for a thing." Within the week he was gone, not having appeared on Drogheda again (212).

His feelings of guilt are, however, soon put aside, since his ambitions within the Church are becoming real. As the only administrator of a vast fortune, he is called to Sydney to work closely with the Archbishop. He is going all the way up. "Father de Bricassart became private secretary to Archbishop Cluny Dark. But his work load was light; he had two undersecretaries. For the most part he was occupied in discovering just what and how much Mary Carson had owned, and in gathering the reins of government together on behalf of the Church" (212).

He can never truly forget Meggie. He is torn between his ambition and his love for her. No matter how great this suffering is, how great the inner conflicts are, he is determined to be somebody important in the Church; he is determined to end his life in the Vatican. "There were times when only kneeling on the marble floor of the palace chapel until he was stiff with physical pain prevented him from catching the next train to Drogheda" (243).

Chapter after chapter, McCullough advances Ralph's career in the Church. Soon he becomes a personal assistant to His Grace the Archbishop Papal Legate to the Australian Catholic Church, Vittorio Scarbanza di Contini – Verchese. Since this respectable man is a link between the Vatican and the Australian Catholic Church, Ralph is well aware that he is a step closer to the Vatican.

The scenes among priests, particularly the friendship between Ralph and Vittorio, illustrate the intimacy which grows up between these men who are denied intimacy with women. Through McCullough's vivid descriptions, one begins to understand why these men get so attached to each other. Vittorio becomes a close friend to Ralph. He reads him like an open book and understands that he is torn between his great ambition as a priest and somebody else in his life. "The Church had places for ambitious men, as did all great and self – perpetuating institutions. Rumour had it that Father Ralph had cheated these Clearys he purported to love so much of their rightful inheritance. If indeed he had, he was well worth hanging on to" (279). Ralph trusts Vittorio completely, knowing he could disable his career, considering everything he knows, but he does not. Instead, Vittorio helps Ralph on his way up. He understands Ralph's pain and knows that he is first a man, then a priest. Ralph needs much more time to realize that.

McCullough times the events in both lives – Ralph's and Meggie's – symmetrically. As Ralph achieves the next step in his career, Meggie achieves the next step in her personal life. Although both should be more fulfilled and more satisfied, they are only more miserable. By the time Meggie turns twenty-three, meets Luke O'Neill and marries him, Ralph is already a Bishop. Only five years after Mary Carson's death. Two years later, Meggie gets pregnant and bears a daughter. At almost the same time, Ralph becomes an Archbishop.

There I am to be blessed with the biretta of a cardinal, and continue my work in Rome under the direct supervision of His Holiness.” “Whereas I?” “You will become Archbishop de Bricassart, and go back to Australia to fill my shoes as Papal Legate. “ He, a non-Italian, to be honoured with the Papal Legation! It was unheard of! Oh, depend on it; he would be Cardinal De Bricassart yet! (357).

However, no matter how hard one tries to shut one’s heart up, one cannot succeed. Ralph can no longer fool himself that his love for God is stronger than love for Meggie, or that God is his only necessity, and he gives in. They reach the peak of their romance on Matlock Island a few months after Justine’s birth. Ralph stops lying to himself that he does not need Meggie and joins her. Meggie stops lying to herself that she needs Luke for her happiness. They realize their lives will never be the same but **must** stay the same. Meggie rails against the Church which demands that her priests not be men. She finds it difficult to accept that Ralph still cannot give up “his” God for her. He sets off to Rome. He goes to the Vatican to achieve the last step in his career – to become a cardinal, perhaps even Pope. At the same time Meggie realizes she is pregnant with Ralph’s child.

We learn more about the sacrifices the Church requires and the forgiveness it preaches in Ralph and Vittorio’s conversation which follows Ralph’s breaking the

vow of chastity. Yes, Ralph must confess his sins. He must admit he has broken every vow. One understands that the Church tolerates the breaking of the vow of poverty (since the Church itself profits from it), but to forgive the breaking of the vow of chastity, is incomprehensible. Nevertheless, the Church does. “The pride, Ralph, the pride! It is not your place to forgive, do you not understand that yet Only God can forgive. Only God! And He will forgive if the true repentance is there. He has forgiven greater sins from far greater saints, as well as from far greater villains” (436). Vittorio understands what Ralph has yet to learn that one cannot be a perfect man; one cannot be a perfect priest without making mistakes and without confessing that it is impossible to be perfect. One must make mistakes, break vows, be tempted and fall to temptation. Then he can understand the rules of life and the rules of priesthood.

Ralph believes he is a God himself. Meggie and his love for her constitute a lesson he has to learn, and a temptation to which he must fall, to deserve a place among the best and to become what he strives for.

Humility was the one quality you lacked, and it is the very quality which makes a great saint – or a great man. Until you live the matter of forgiveness to God, you will not have acquired true humility.” “Yes, I lacked humility, and I believe in a way I aspired to be God Himself. I’ve sinned more grievously and inexcusably. I can’t forgive myself, so how

can I hope for divine forgiveness? I repent; therefore I shall confess and await forgiveness. I *do* repent, bitterly (436, 437).

Ralph's feelings, his sorrow and dilemma, are vividly described. McCullough creates the look in his eyes, the gestures of his hands and the movement of his body. You can see this tall man of a proud poise totally broken and suffering. He loves with all his heart. He loves Meggie, but when he is with her, he cannot stop thinking about God. He could never leave the Church for her since he would start hating her the moment he did that. However, not being with Meggie makes his heart scream for her. Even in a Church, in life he loves so much, he cannot be happy. The sacrifice the Church requires from him is a great one. He is, besides Meggie, "the thorn bird" of the book; he is the one who is looking for the thorn to sit on and sing the song of his life and to achieve perfection.

Ralph's ambitions are colossal, as he is willing to put anything aside, except his career, but still he fails to achieve the peak of the Church hierarchy – to become Pope. He does become a cardinal, and that is what his goal has been from the beginning, but he cannot find peace with himself or God. As we find out later, he will only find it when he admits that it is Meggie, not God, he has longed for all his life.

The last sacrifice of that overly ambitious man is the greatest one could ever imagine and one would deserve. He has to pay the price that God, not the Church,

requires from him. The Church has obtained her share with Ralph's money; God has not. Ralph has to bury his own son. After God forgives him, he is rewarded, and he dies in Meggie's arms. This occurs on Drogheda, a place where he was the happiest, where his heart wanted to be, not in Vatican, where his head wanted to be. Meggie has forgiven him too. Ironically, he has put Church before Meggie all his life, it has always been more important than her, her feelings and their mutual son. He admits the truth, not before, but in the final moments: "Would you have pursued a different path if you had known? About your son? Yes! Cried his heart. No, sneered his brain. You were blind. You didn't want to see. Ralph Raoul, Cardinal de Bricassart, that was what you wanted; more than her, more than your son. More than your son" (650). However, in the final moments, it is she who stands at his side; it is she, of whom his last thoughts are meant to. "Whatever she was, she could bear anything. Anything! So he closed his eyes and let himself feel, that last time, forgetfulness in Meggie" (651).

Another aspect of the theme of love is connected to ambition and the idea of the perfect priest. In the novel the perfection that Ralph is trying to achieve is emphasized. He believes he cannot be perfect until he reaches the peak of the Church hierarchy. He **seems** to be the perfect priest, for he does all the external things well and makes an ideal impression, but his ambitions and rise in the Church take him away from caring for ordinary human souls. His involvement

with Meggie is only the most dramatic illustration of the flaws that make him an imperfect priest. Ralph's perfection is only outward.

Dane O'Neill is the only character who seems to have a genuine relationship with God. He is Maggie's and Ralph's son, the product of their passion, the most wanted and most loved child for Meggie. She cannot have Ralph, so she takes the best he can offer, the best part of him that can never be taken away from her; or so she thinks. Dane is, so it seems, sent to her by God, only to teach her a lesson and to punish her for thinking she can cheat Him and she is stronger than Him. She is punished for thinking she can meddle with His plans. Since Dane is perfect, almost too perfect for a normal human being, Dane seems to be a creation of God himself. It does not stop with the perfect appearance; he is always happy, he always smiles. He is mature and self-confident even as a child. He is immediately recognized by everybody as special. However, he does have one flaw in Meggie's eyes. He wants to become a priest, just like his father, of whom he is not aware. She is angry at his decision to become a priest, for she sees that choice as Ralph's and God's ultimate revenge on her.

Everything about Ralph fascinates Dane; but not his father in him, not a man, not a friend of his family's, but the perfect priest he sees in him. However, Dane is closer to God than Ralph could ever be. He is like his father without internal conflicts. For him, priestly requirements seem to be natural. Dane's perfection is inward and real. Dane is wholehearted and whole-souled in a way that Ralph,

tormented with internal conflict, can never be. Dane, however, feels that he is not perfect, since he has not suffered. He achieves the perfection in the last moments of his life, as he gives his life to save another. A heart attack, the cause of death, gives him short but strong pain. He struggles against death at first; later he accepts it as sent from God. Through the pain which brings suffering and death, he finally achieves perfection and can die peacefully in an ecstasy of love for God. "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!" (633).

McCullough shows a great knowledge of the Roman Catholic Church, its habits and religion in general. It starts with presenting Paddy's and Fee's marriage of convenience, not being by the rules of the Catholic Church. He is a Catholic; she is a member of Church of England, therefore a Protestant. Fee did not convert; she accepted Paddy's religion, and they raised their children in worshipping an exclusively Catholic God. When talking to Father Ralph, she explains what she believes in. "I'm not a hypocrite, Father de Bricassart. I had lost faith in my own Church, and I had no wish to espouse a different, equally meaningless creed" (94).

The same thing happens with Meggie when she decides to marry Luke. Luke is "an Orange" (a member of the Protestant Church of Northern Ireland), Meggie had been raised as a Catholic. Luke does not want to convert; the priest does not want to marry them. Meggie is devastated and as much as she hates God, she also

respects Him. “But, Luke, I have to be married in church. If I’m not, I’ll be living in sin” (319).

The author shows us how the church and the public school system of the Catholic Church worked at the beginning of the twentieth century. Nuns of the Order of the Sisters of Mercy were anything but merciful. Children from poor families, as the Clearys were at the time, were punished and caned for each mistake, even if it was not one. The Clearys are not Sister Agatha’s favourites; not just Meggie, also her brothers. They do not shed a tear when punished, so Sister Agatha is even more determined to punish them. The reason – they cannot “donate organs to the church or gold vestments to the sacristy, or a new horse or a buggy to the nuns” (37). Additionally, poor children, no matter how smart or promising, were laughed and sneered at. Instead of being motivated for work, they were just the opposite – afraid to develop and show their potential. For example, Meggie is smart and quick to learn, but when she stands in front of Sister Agatha she is so afraid, that she cannot say a word. Again and again, she is punished with a cane.

Another example of Church hypocrisy is shown in the case of the young priest who breaks his vow of chastity. The priest falls in love with a female parishioner and has an affair with her. It does not stay hidden from other parishioners nor from other priests. The young priest is, of course, strictly punished. He is sent to Darwin, a frontier town, where women are almost

nonexistent. He would get no chance to ever get in personal contact with any girl, all of his personal and other mail would be checked, and all of his phone calls would be supervised. For, “his vows were absolute, he could never be released from them; if he was too weak to police himself, the Church must do it for him” (239).

Ironically, it is Ralph who has to talk to the young priest and present him with his punishment. Ralph, who has, by that moment, broken two of his vows, with the third one to be broken quite soon: “Do you really understand the disgrace you’ve brought on yourself, on your parish, and especially on the Church you purport to love more than any other human being? Your vow of chastity was as solemn and binding as your other vows, and to break it is to sin grievously” (238).

It is necessary to stress that the priest in question is a regular priest. His affair with a girl becomes public, and therefore he must be punished for others to see that the Church takes its affairs and rules seriously. When an affair happens to Ralph, he is already an archbishop, a respectable member of the Church, and he brought a great amount of money into the Church. Besides, his affair stays hidden from most people. Only the protagonists and the people with whom they share know about it. That makes Ralph’s sin tolerable for the Church as an institution.

4.5 STYLE AND STRUCTURE

The novel is written in the third person with the omniscient point of view, as is common in family sagas. It has often been described as an old-fashioned novel. It is divided into seven books; each of which focuses on one character. The story is told from that character's point of view, although the inner thoughts of other characters are also occasionally included. The focus shifts from one person to another. It is not often clear why a certain section has been given a certain character's name, since it is as follows.

The first book, "Meggie", covers the period of 1915-1917, and starts when the protagonist of the novel is four 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. It follows her as a child and later as a young woman. 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. It ends with Father Ralph's leaving Drogheda and it is clearly shown, that he did that with a sense of guilt. "He spent the few days packing his scant belongings, and touring every station in the district where there were Catholic families; save Drogheda" (212).

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. It is surprising that Paddy has his

own section, especially given one after he played his crucial role in the novel's plot. But, his horrible in a fire death, does form a climax within his section.

Book 4, from 1933-1938, focuses on Meggie's unhappy marriage to Luke O'Neill. It is ironic, however, that Meggie and Ralph consummate their love and concept Dane in "Luke's" section.

Book 5, from 1938-1953, is given Fee's name, long after she has played an important part in the story. But it is here, in this section, that Fee and Meggie finally come together and start enjoying their relationship and the fact that they are mother and daughter. "Suddenly, Fee's hand came out, rested on Meggie's knee, and she was smiling – not bitterly or contemptuously, but with a curious sympathy" (485). This section also details the war years on Drogheda and the childhoods of Dane and Justine.

Book 6, Dane, from 1954-1965, includes Dane's ordination and his death. In this book, Justine begins an affair with Rainer, a man who has been a close friend for more than seven years.

Book 7, from 1965-1969, contains the 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. Logically, it is given the name Justine.

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 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.

She reveals the characters' thoughts, feelings and actions by describing them vividly, rather than revealing them through the dialogue. Scenes and details, especially details 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.

McCullough occasionally includes the text of letters or other documents to advance the plot of the novel. The entire controversial will of Mary Carson, where she leaves all her fortune to the Roman Catholic Church, is included. Justine's telegram to Drogheda, where she announces her marriage to Rainer is also there.

HAVE JUST BECOME MRS RAINER MOERLING HARTHEIM STOP
PRIVATE CEREMONY THE VATICAN STOP PAPAL BLESSING 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 (691, 692).

A particularly evocative item is the small newspaper story of Frank Cleary's conviction and incarceration, discovered by Fiona three years after the fact: "Francis Armstrong Cleary, aged 26, professional boxer, was convicted today Goulburn District court of the murder of Ronald Albert Cumming, aged 32, labourer, last July. The jury reached its verdict after only ten minutes' deliberation..." (222).

The Thorn Birds avoids complicated language or literary allusions. A literary allusion is "a reference in a literary work to a person, place, or thing in history or another work of literature. Allusions are often indirect or brief references to well-known characters or events" (<http://> The glossary of literary terms), although we can find some (the example of one is shown below) to tell the love story of a woman for a priest, and a family for a ranch, in a straightforward fashion. McCullough seeks to tell her sweeping saga in language that does not intimidate the average reader, but makes the novel more accessible. "Thus, like a giant in a Lilliputian World, Drogheda carried on, all quarter of a million acres of it" (491).

The title is also an allusion – it is explained by an epigraph placed before its opening. It summarizes the old Celtic legend about the bird which searches for a thorn on which it may impale itself to sing more beautifully than ever in its life for a cost of life. It is only referred to once in a book, when Meggie explains to Ralph what she has learned.

McCullough uses symbols effectively: Ralph calls Mary Carson “a spider”, since she weaves her web of malice to catch her enemy in it. The repeated use of the spider image reveals her true nature, her actual malice and cruelty. “Startled, he laughed. Somehow he couldn't fence her today; it was as if she had found the chink in his armor, crept inside with her spider's poison” (143).

Another symbol is a rose. Throughout the novel, roses are mentioned many times, especially in connection to Meggie. It is just the opposite of the image that McCullough (Ralph) uses for Mary Carson. Meggie and Mary, two women who both love Ralph are different from each other. One is an “evil” spider; the other is a “gentle” rose. But, as Meggie says in the novel, roses can be dangerous and mean since they have thorns.

There are other examples of “rose symbolism” in the novel. Meggie’s dress for her first party is “pale pinkish grey, the color that in those days was called ashes of roses; between them the dressmaker and Meggie had embroidered the entire gown in tiny pink rosebuds” (174). Memories of that dress are referred to often in the novel, since the event when Meggie wore the dress is seen as one that changed Meggie’s and Ralph’s relationship forever. Meggie becomes Ralph’s Rose, as he often calls her. After the great fire in which Paddy loses his life, Ralph performs a funeral ceremony and decides that it is time for Meggie to find herself a husband. Meggie is furious, when she overhears it, but gives Ralph a rose that survived the fire. It has got the most beautiful “ashes of roses” colour. Ralph saves it as a

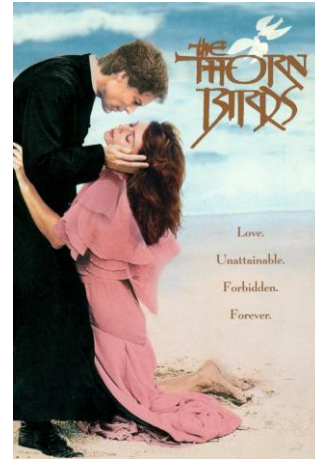
memento in his Bible and often stares at it, remembering Meggie. Archbishop Vittorio Contini-Verchese sees it and that is the time when he realizes that there is a woman in Ralph's life. From that time on Vittorio refers to her as "the Rose". "You see that I have much to repent. I tried a little creating of my own." "Was it the Rose?" "Could it have been anyone else? She's my only attempt of creation" (437).

When Meggie gives birth to Justine and is particularly vulnerable, Ralph reminds her of the rose she gave to him and tells her that she is his rose, his love and his life. Meggie bursts out and dismisses him with the words that she does not want to see him again. "Oh, go away! I don't want to look at you! And you've forgotten one thing about your precious roses, Ralph – they've got nasty, hooky thorns" (379). This is a line which connects the image of rose and its thorns to the thorns in the title.

McCullough also uses the colour "ashes of roses". In the name of that colour lies a paradox – to become ashes, the roses must burn. By burning, they suffer but by that suffering, the beauty of the colour is created. As the birds that look for a thorn of the rose must suffer to sing more beautifully than ever in their lives, McCullough uses the shifting meaning of roses and ashes of roses to convey her central theme.



(<http://> Ashes of roses)



(<http://> Miso – The Thorn Birds)

Another symbol, used by Ralph for Meggie is that of a “sacrament”. He needs to illustrate all the things (and people) in his life in religious terms. Especially Meggie, since he cannot admit that he is in love with a person, with a woman, he must see her as something spiritual. An example of such an illustration is shown when Ralph and Meggie consummate their love once again after many years, long after the Mattlock Island and long after Ralph “gave in”: “And tomorrow morning I’ll say Mass, but that’s tomorrow morning, and the magic has long gone. There is still the night, and Meggie. I have wanted her. She, too, is a sacrament” (513).

The novel ends again with the legends of the thorn birds, with the central symbol, but this time the reference to human beings is made clear.

The thorn bird with the thorn in its breast, it follows an immutable law; it is driven by it knows not what to impale itself, and die singing. At the very

instant the thorn enters there is no awareness in it of the dying to come; it simply sings and sings until there is not the life left to utter another note. But we, when we put the thorns in our breasts, we know. We understand. And still we do it. Still we do it (692).

5. *THE THORN BIRDS* – THE MINISERIES

In the 1980s the miniseries *The Thorn Birds* appeared on Slovenian TV screens. The series was good primarily because of the acting of the main actors. The main role of Father de Bricassart was trusted to Richard Chamberlain. His main strength lies in his look, in his eyes. Without many words, you can read his thoughts and his mind in his glance. He stares into the distance and one can see the pain and the suffering. He also did a great job acting an old man. Not only the mask and the make up, his stand and his gestures could easily fool you that he was over sixty.

Rachel Ward is an outstanding Meggie. She looks vulnerable and strong at the same time. She expresses all her feelings in her face. When she is happy, she is the most beautiful girl in the world; her face is gentle and warm. When life plays tricks on her, throws obstacles in her way, her face shows signs of terrible suffering. Considering that Rachel Ward had little experiences as an actor before, she did a tremendous job among other, more experienced actors such as Barbara

Stanwyck, Jean Simmons, Piper Laurie, Richard Kiley, Ken Howard and Christopher Plummer.



Jean Simmons as Fee Cleary, and Richard Kiley as Paddy Cleary.
([http:// The making of The Thorn Birds](http://The making of The Thorn Birds))



Christopher Plummer as Vittorio
([http:// Movie Actors Christopher Plummer](http://Movie Actors Christopher Plummer))



Barbara Stanwyck as Mary Carson
([http:// Tv digg Thorn Birds](http://Tv digg Thorn Birds))



Piper Laurie as Annie Mueller
([http:// The Thorn Birds Best Moments](http://The Thorn Birds Best Moments))

There was only one real Australian in the miniseries – Bryan Brown, acting Luke. That was why the Australian state did not allow filming the miniseries in Australia, even though the story is set in Australia. They demanded an almost all-Australian cast, allowing only two Americans. Therefore, the makers searched for similar countryside elsewhere. They realised that Southern California looked

much like the interior of Australia, where Drogheda is located. For the cane fields of Queensland, for the scenes of coral reef and Matlock Island, they used Hawaii.

McCullough did not like the miniseries. These are the words of one of the producers – David Wulper: “She hated the show. I don’t know why. It was a big success. I have no idea, but I know she disliked it. I read an article in the Australian papers; it was a big hit in Australia, too. She’s the first that I have come across that didn’t love the show that I made from their book. And I’ve done sixty books” (<http://> The making of *The Thorn Birds*).

McCullough was even angrier when the studio decided to shoot the sequel (or, as Richard Chamberlain nicknamed it, the mid-quel) – called *The Thorn Birds: The Missing Years*. It covers the years during the World War Two – the years when Meggie and Ralph – in the novel and the original miniseries – did not see each other. Archbishop Ralph de Bricassart returns to Australia and Drogheda after becoming disillusioned with the Catholic Church’s motives during World War Two. While there, his beloved Meggie loses custody of her children to her estranged husband Luke O’Neill, who believes he is the boy’s father. Ralph attempts to help Meggie win back Dane. The story filmed is not presented in the novel and these are McCullough’s words: “The first TV series was terrible, and I figure this one will be ghastly. I didn’t write any of it! What on Earth could they find to write about, since I covered all that I did by killing everybody off anyway” (<http://> The making of *The Thorn Birds*).

She did have a point – why bother trying to match the excellence of the original? In reality, *The Missing Years* was a massive disappointment. For anyone unfamiliar with the novel and the original mini series, then this follow-up is fine. It is well acted (even though Richard Chamberlain is the only one left from the original cast), but it is often excruciating viewing. It simply does not fit with what went before.

In order to fit a long book into a ten-hour miniseries, some changes had to be made. Some are good and necessary; some are bad and unnecessary. I will present only the most important ones, those that are misleading for viewers of the miniseries who have not read the novel.

The miniseries focuses mostly on the relationship between Ralph and Meggie from the beginning, leaving aside almost all the other features that make the novel more than just a potboiler. Watching only the miniseries, you do get the feeling that the book ‘must be good’, but you get no impression of what a masterpiece of different genres it is. It is primarily a love story, a romance novel, but at the same time it is much more. The miniseries does the book no favour in this respect.

We hardly get any idea of Meggie’s primary family; we do not learn about Paddy’s and Fee’s marriage or relationship. Not much is explained about Paddy’s Irish background, the differences between his and Fee’s religion, how she gave it all up and how she accepted her destiny, marrying a man she did not love to assure herself and her illegitimate child a future.

The jealousy of Mary Carson towards Meggie is much more stressed in the miniseries than in the book. She is more a villain than McCullough presented her. In the novel Mary Carson does nothing against Meggie. She only watches and observes her relationship with Ralph. Till the final action, when she leaves the choice of her own will to Ralph, Mary takes no action to prevent Maggie's and priest's joining. In the miniseries, she is the one responsible for taking Meggie out of school, since she stops paying her tuition. When Ralph asks Mary why she hates Meggie so much, she answers: "Because you love her too much". In the novel she is a reasonable, although jealous woman, blaming Ralph for failure. In the miniseries she is much more against Maggie and that is what makes her much less human.

Another important difference between the book and the series is Frank's destiny. In the novel, Ralph does all that he can to save him from the jail after he kills a person in a street fight. It takes him a few years to do so, and Frank is an old man when he returns to Drogheda. In the miniseries Frank dies in jail, but we find it out only if truly paying attention. In both cases, one gets the feeling that Frank was left out, forgotten. In the novel, we get the feeling that McCullough had forgotten him and remembered him towards the end and had to put him somewhere in the story. After all, he was one of the key characters, who made of Fee and her life what she actually was. If that feeling is present in the book, it is much more present in the miniseries. Not only did the producers not know what to

do with Frank, but they simply ran out of time to finish his story. However, Frank's story is in my opinion a negative point in both the novel and the miniseries.

In the novel, Meggie becomes a rational woman with many life experiences. When she realizes, after she returns from Matlock Island that she is pregnant with Ralph's child, she knows she has to do something. She has to provide a father. Before she leaves him and returns to Drogheda for good, she finds her husband, who has, in the meantime forgotten that he has a wife and a daughter, and sleeps with him. She is smart enough to make sure that nobody, especially not Luke and even more the Church could ever doubt Dane's origin.

In the miniseries, Meggie is driven by emotion. She does visit Luke before leaving him, but sleeping one more time with her husband, who is, in addition to all his bad character features, also a bad lover, is the last thing on her mind. The scene in the miniseries where Meggie gives a farewell speech to Luke is one of the best, but is not according to what McCullough wanted to achieve with Luke's and Maggie's last intercourse. The scenes, in both the novel and the series show Maggie's emancipation, something that a previous generation would never have done. But McCullough went further and showed how rationally Meggie had begun to think and how much she had matured in those years of loneliness. Again, this is an important feature of the book, unfortunately and unnecessarily changed in the series.

The last important difference is Ralph's death or, the place of Ralph's death. In the novel, Ralph dies on Drogheda, in Maggie's arms, in the living room. However, in the miniseries, Ralph's death has more significance. He dies in the rose garden, the place of many life and love decisions in the miniseries. Roses with their thorns are an important source of symbolism in the novel and the series. Before he dies, he tells the story of the thorn bird to Meggie once again, reminding her that he did realise that he was a bird, trying to find his thorn to sing the last and the most beautiful song of his life; he thought that his life song was God, Church, religion and his ambition. In the final moments of his life he becomes aware that Meggie, his love for her, even more her love for him and their son was his life song. That was what was worth living for, what made him a human being.

All in all, did the miniseries do a favour to or damage the novel? Colleen McCullough gave permission for the miniseries and approved the script, but still did not like the finished product. Yes, there were some unnecessary changes. However, thanks to miniseries the book was translated into many world languages.

6. CONCLUSION

In this diploma paper I have sought to establish the structure and themes of the novel that raise *The Thorn Birds* above popular literature.

These features include the author's comprehensive knowledge of the system of the Catholic Church.

Second, the author vividly illustrates life in the Australian Outback.

Thirdly, the style and the structure of the novel are well considered and organized: McCullough's seven segments/books cover the period 1915–1969 and each takes a different member of the Cleary family as its focus. The novel is also a well-structured family saga.

Symbols are used sparingly but effectively in the novel; the roses, the thorn birds, and the interwoven Celtic legend contribute to giving the novel greater value.

The novel was adapted as a television miniseries and, although unnecessarily changed in some features, the series contributed to the later success of the novel.

After the series was broadcast in many parts of the world, the novel was translated into many languages, including Slovene. Nowadays, it is still one of the most frequently borrowed books in Slovene libraries.

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