

WNEWS

Colleen McCullough: Australian author's \$2.1m estate left to her husband

By Jamie McKinnell

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The estate of Australian author Colleen McCullough, worth an estimated \$2.1 million, was left to her widower Ric Robinson, the NSW Supreme Court has ruled.

Mr Robinson, who denied accusations of unduly pressuring his wife amid ailing health months before her death, said both of their reputations had been restored.

Heard across eight days in May, the NSW Supreme Court battle exposed marital problems and financial woes.

It was described in Justice Nigel Rein's judgement as "a most unusual case".

The matter featured "a significant divergence of accounts" but also "many contradictions" in what supported the parties' respective positions, Justice Rein said.

"If the track of the truth in this matter is to be found, it is narrow and poorly lit."

McCullough's close friend and the executor of her will, Selwa Anthony, claimed her true intentions were reflected in a 2014 document that named the sole beneficiary as the University of Oklahoma Foundation.

McCullough, who was a founding board member there, died on Norfolk Island in January 2015.

Mr Robinson was married to the author for more than 30 years. She had no children or other living relatives.

Justice Rein ruled a document signed by McCullough in October 2014, which left everything to Mr Robinson, overwrote the previous version and left the entire estate to Mr Robinson.



PHOTO: The late Australian author Colleen McCullough (L) and her husband Ric Robinson. (Supplied: Harper Collins / AAP: Paul Braven)

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Key points:

- The author sold 33 million copies of her most famous novel, *The Thorn Birds*
- A claim that she wanted to leave her fortune to a US university was dismissed
- The estate includes a large art collection and royalties from McCullough's 25 books



PHOTO: Colleen McCullough's most famous novel, *The Thornbirds*, sold 33 million copies (AAP: Harper Collins)

Neither Mr Robinson nor Ms Anthony attended the final hearing.

Through his solicitor, Mr Robinson indicated he would not be making any comment and was considering the judgement.

"He is pleased that his and Colleen's reputations have been restored and he is grateful to all those who have supported him," solicitor John Brown said.

Outside court Ms Anthony's barrister, Kim Morrissey SC, would not say whether she was disappointed.

"We just have no idea yet, we haven't had a chance to speak to her ... we just have to read the judgement and consider it," he said.

Justice Rein ruled the parties pay their own court costs.

During the sittings in May, the court heard Mr Robinson relied upon his wife's income but denied shouting at her on one occasion when she cut the money off.

By mid-2014, McCullough and Mr Robinson were struggling financially.

Ms Anthony, who described McCullough as "like a sister" to her, recalled the author telling her in 2014 that she "kicked Ric out for good" because he had a mistress.

However Mr Robinson insisted his late wife was supportive of the relationship.



PHOTO: A black and white image of author Colleen McCullough sitting at a typewriter, date unknown. (ABC News, file photo)

Reliability of witnesses called into question

Justice Rein's judgement cast doubt on the credibility of key witnesses, including Mr Robinson and Norfolk Island solicitor Piria Coleman.

Ms Coleman helped prepare many of the documents at the heart of the matter and gave critical evidence that when McCullough placed a mark on the October 2014 documents, it was merely a "failed attempt".

Those documents were designed to "placate" Mr Robinson and keep McCullough "safe", it was claimed.

However Ms Coleman's evidence should not be accepted as truthful, Justice Rein said, because she made "significant admissions of inappropriate conduct".

Justice Rein also found Mr Robinson's evidence about when he learned of each version of the will was "confusing and inconsistent" and that it was implausible to say he was not "too worried" about whether a different version existed.

"I am not able to treat Ric as a wholly reliable witness and I need to treat his evidence with caution."

Author 'cranky', but mental capacity intact

Justice Rein concluded there was evidence McCullough could be "cranky and impatient", even difficult and demanding.

But whatever Mr Robinson's failings, he could not be blamed for the "marital discord", he added.

The court accepted there was no doubt McCullough was in poor health in October 2014, but her condition was not so poor as to affect her mental capacity with regards to making a will.

McCullough was one of Australia's best-selling authors, writing 25 books, with her most famous — 1977's *The Thorn Birds* — selling 33 million copies.

While she enjoyed international success, the Sydney-born author spent most of the past 30 years in Norfolk Island with her husband.

The estate includes royalties from her books and a large art collection.

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