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NATIONAL COURTS

## Fresh twist in battle for author Colleen McCullough's estate

By Michaela Whitbourn

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The bitter battle over the estate of the bestselling Australian author Colleen McCullough has taken a fresh turn, with a potentially crucial document coming to light three years after the NSW

Supreme Court dispute kicked off.

McCullough's widower Ric Robinson is embroiled in a costly feud with his late wife's executor and a US university over her estate, which is estimated to be worth millions of dollars thanks to her art collection and royalties from her 25 books, including the 1977 hit *The Thorn Birds*.



Author Colleen McCullough, in 2008.

*Photo: Danielle Smith*

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Mr Robinson being accused of taking advantage of his late wife's ill health to change her will in the days before her death.


He vehemently denies the claims and Tuesday marked the beginning of the final five-day hearing of the dispute.

The court heard on Tuesday that a document from a solicitor to McCullough, dated October 2014, had been discovered in a file in recent days and "purported to refer to Mr Robinson as a beneficiary" of the estate.

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McCullough's widower Ric Robinson believes her estate was left to him. But a US university is also convinced that she planned to donate everything to it.

*Photo: Supplied*

The timing of the document is critical as it may show McCullough intended to revoke a will she made in Sydney earlier that year that left her estate to the University of Oklahoma Foundation.

But the foundation - supported by McCullough's executor and friend Selwa Anthony, who is pursuing the matter in court - believes it is still the rightful beneficiary of McCullough's estate.

Justice Nigel Rein said on Tuesday he was "a bit concerned" the October 2014 letter had only been made available to Mr Robinson's legal team in recent days after it was discovered by Ms Anthony's lawyers.

"Why has that only just come to light?" Justice Rein said.

Ms Anthony's barrister, Kim Morrissey, said the document had been "overlooked" by one of their witnesses and had been discovered in a file in recent days.

Justice Rein questioned whether the document might mean the dispute over the University of Oklahoma will have been a lengthy "waste of time".

Mr Robinson's barrister, David Murr, SC, said the letter showed the will leaving McCullough's estate to the foundation had been "superseded" in late 2014.

But Mr Morrissey said the letter did not revoke that will and, even if it did, the will leaving her estate to the University of Oklahoma Foundation was subsequently "revived".

Mr Robinson, McCullough's husband of 30 years, has previously argued the Sydney will was not valid and was, in any case, replaced by another document signed on Norfolk Island in January 17, 2015, about a fortnight before his wife's death from a series of strokes.

Ms Anthony says the 2015 will was made in "suspicious circumstances" and McCullough was "not capable of reading the document" she allegedly



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advantage of his late wife's poor health, isolation, fatigue and dependence of the deceased, so as to dominate, overbear and overburden her".

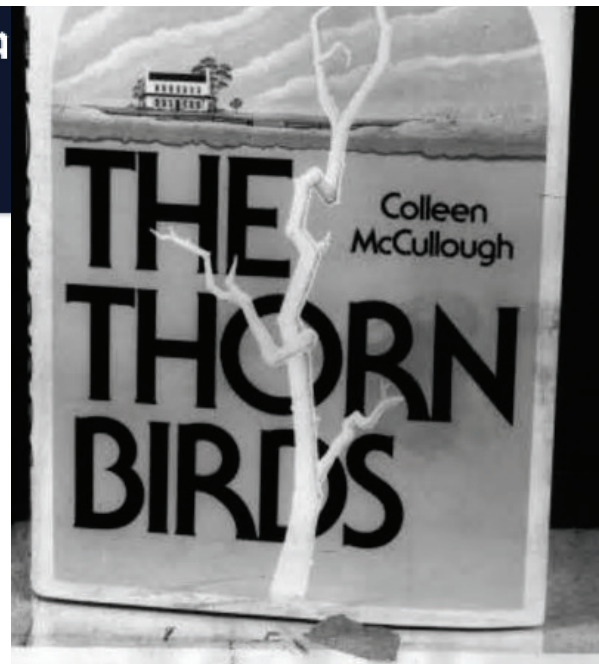
Mr Murr said McCullough left her estate to Mr Robinson "completely free of any undue influence".

McCullough shot to fame after the publication of her second novel, *The Thorn Birds* (1977), the story of a doomed romance between a Catholic priest and a woman in the Australian outback.

It sold 33 million copies worldwide, smashed every publishing record at the time, and was turned into an award-winning television miniseries in 1983, starring Richard Chamberlain and Rachel Ward.

But she hated her newfound fame and moved to Norfolk Island where she met Mr Robinson, 13 years her junior. She once described him as "a cross between Isaac Newton, a Samoan prince and a convict".

The hearing continues.



Colleen McCullough's bestseller *The Thorn Birds*.


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