

## COLLEEN McCULLOUGH

At 67, Norfolk Island's most famous resident may be losing her sight, but she still has a few books up her sleeve. And despite her status as a national "living treasure", she'd be just as happy peeling spuds

**My mother and father hated each other.** They detested one another, but they refused to separate, so they conducted a sort of war. The winner was the one who lived the longest. So both my brother and I were determined we'd never marry; our parents put both of us off marriage.

**I was an avid Biggles fan.** As a child, I escaped the perpetual parental fighting by living in a world of books. I hated girls' books – girls did such boring things. I liked adventure and loved the stories of Biggles the fighter pilot. The geography in them hooked me; I enjoyed all the battles immensely, too. I'm still a bit of a war buff. These days I read thrillers for relaxation, but I'm not buying any more Patricia Cornwell. She writes in the present tense – it drives me barmy.

**I could be happy peeling potatoes.** I didn't expect much from life, so the fact that I'm now considered one of Australia's "living treasures" is a bit of a hoot. In fact, I'm the sort of person who lives day-to-day. I've never been introspective, I just get on with things. When, as a young girl studying neurophysiology, I decided to go to London to get a higher degree, my boss at the Royal North Shore Hospital wasn't happy to let me go, but that didn't stop me. He treated me like a lackey, and I didn't like – and still don't like – being treated that way, so off I trotted.

**My brother died exactly the way Dane did in *The Thorn Birds*.** My brother's death was a huge convulsion in my life, it was a terrible blow. He was rescuing some women swimming off the island of Crete, when it's believed he had a heart attack. The women were rescued, but his body was found floating 24km out to sea. If he had drowned, his body would have sunk, which is why they suspected a heart attack. I used the experience in my book, as writers do. Writers would murder their grandmother for a good story.

**I became a kind of tourist attraction.** When my first book, *Tim*, [later made into a film starring Mel Gibson] was published [in 1974], I took it to work and showed it to my colleagues. My colleagues said, with noticeable chagrin, "You're going to be the most famous person in this department." I knew then that my scientific career was going to end, and with the publication of *The Thorn Birds* [in 1977], it did. When you're a researcher, you can't be famous for something else. Also, my research colleagues were unnerved. They realised this person they had been working with for 10 years was someone they didn't know.

**After I became rich and famous, I became a target for predators.** Once I left home, I lived on my own, first in Sydney, then London and New York. I never lived with anyone else. And never expected that I would. But I needed somewhere safe to live and write, and Eric Jupp, who wrote the music for *Tim*, suggested Norfolk Island, an eight-by-five-km speck in the South Pacific. It was there I met Ric [Robinson, her husband].

**Ric's younger than I am, but he seems a lot older.** Some people are just born old and wise. I think it was the "daddy" in him that appealed to

me, never having had a satisfactory daddy myself. Ric looks after me. I looked after myself with absolute competence for 46 years – and then I married Ric – and I became a helpless woman. He's so level-headed and calm. I'm much more mercurial, but he's a rock. My rock. We've been married 20 years now, and it just gets better.

**I never wanted a child of my own.** I knew I wasn't suited to motherhood. A kid could be screaming its head off, and I'd be writing and not hear it. If

A book is never far from my mind, which is why Ric has to occasionally snap me out of my reverie.

**I've never been beautiful, I've never been hooked by the mirror.** Aside from the fleshly indignities of growing old, as long as one keeps one's mind, I can bear anything else.

**I couldn't bear to lose my mind.** My mother lost hers, so I worry I'll lose mine. My body, though, seems to be the frail bit. I can't walk any more, because of my eyes; I'm blind in my left eye (due to age-related macular

### "I'VE NEVER BEEN INTROSPECTIVE, I JUST GET ON WITH THINGS"

I'm immersed in my writing, I don't hear a thing. So many women who have children should have been forbidden. At least I had the good sense to forbid myself.

**Sometimes I become so immersed, people snap their fingers in front of my face.** Typically, Ric wakes me around noon to ensure I get out of bed. I then have my first coffee of the day, while he has lunch. I work a little in the afternoon, and then I cook – or we go out to eat. At night, I tuck Ric into bed, then I set to work. The next day, we start all over again.

degeneration). I'm good at acting as if I can see, but my right could go any day. I've lost my depth of field, which is why I keep falling over. When you're my age, falling over is tricky. **My publishers want me to write *Son of Thorn Birds*.** My *Masters of Rome* series [of six books] have only sold millions of books in 30 languages, while *The Thorn Birds* has sold millions upon millions of copies. But who's counting.

JOSEPHINE BROUARD  
*Angel Puss* (HarperCollins, \$49.95),  
by Colleen McCullough, is out now

