

The Thorn Birds by Colleen McCullough

Introduction.

There is a story about a bird that sings only once. From the time it is born, it searches for a thorn tree and, when it finds one, it flies at the longest, sharpest thorn. As it dies it sings its song – more beautiful than that of any other bird.

In Australia, in the early years of the twentieth century, Meggie Cleary is searching for a way to sing her song. She is strong and beautiful but she loves only one man, a man it is impossible to love – the kind, handsome priest, Father Ralph de Bricassart.

Part 1 1915 – 1917

Episode 1 – Meggie's Birthday

On 8 December 1915, Meggie Cleary had her fourth birthday. After breakfast her mother gave her something wrapped in brown paper and told her to go outside and open it. Meggie sat down beside the front gate, her small fingers struggling with the heavy paper, which smelled of the Wahine general store. At last she saw something gold and shiny. Her fingers moved faster and there at last was her birthday present.

'Agnes! Oh, Agnes!' she said softly, as she stared at the doll.

Meggie had seen the doll months ago in the general store on her only visit to Wahine, the nearest village to their home in New Zealand. She had given it the name Agnes then, and she had often thought about it. But she never dreamt it would be hers some day.

The doll had golden hair and a pink dress. She held it and looked at it without moving. She was still sitting there when her brothers Jack and Hughie came quietly up behind her.

'What's that you've got, Meggie?' Jack shouted. 'Show us!'

'Yes, show us!' Hughie laughed.

Meggie held the doll tighter and shook her head. 'No, she's mine. I got her for my birthday!'

'Go on! We just want to look.'

She held up the doll so that her brothers could see. 'Look, isn't she beautiful? Her name's Agnes.'

Hughie looked at the doll and whistled. 'Hey, Jack, look! It can move its hand! 'Where? Let's see.'

'No!' Meggie held her doll close again. There were tears in her eyes. 'No, you'll break her! Don't take her away – you'll break her!'

But Jack's dirty brown hands grabbed Meggie's wrists, and Hughie tried to pull the doll away from her.

Meggie's tears were running down her face now. 'Don't take her, please!' she cried. She held the doll and tried to kick the boys.

'Got it!' Hughie shouted as he pulled the doll away from Meggie. Jack and Hughie found the doll very interesting. They took off the dress and pushed and pulled at the doll's arms and legs. They turned her head round and bent her legs back. They forgot about Meggie, standing beside them, crying. One of the boys stood on the doll's dress as it lay on the ground. His boots were muddy. Meggie knelt on the ground, her eyes full of tears, and tried to find the doll's clothes in the long grass.

Frank was working in the barn, making shoes for horses. He had started work six months before, and he hated it. He was sixteen years old, small and thin, but strong. All the other Cleary children had red hair, but Frank's hair was black. He stopped work, put on his shirt and left the barn.

The Clearys' house was on top of a hill. Like all New Zealand houses, it was made of wood. Around it stretched the green grass, dotted with thousands of sheep.

Frank hurried towards the house. Then he saw Meggie and the boys. Meggie's dress was dirty and she was still trying to stop her brothers playing with her doll. Frank shouted and Jack and Hughie ran, dropping the doll. They were afraid of Frank's anger.

'Don't let me catch you touching that doll again!' he shouted after them. Then he turned gently to Meggie.

'There's no need to cry! Come on now, give me a smile for your birthday.' Meggie's grey eyes were large and full of sadness. Frank wiped her tearful face with a dirty handkerchief. Meggie picked up her doll and began to comb the golden hair. Then a terrible thing happened. All Agnes's hair came off, and all Meggie could see was an empty hole and the inside of the doll's head. Meggie screamed in fright and threw the doll away.

Frank picked up his little sister and held her in his arms. He could not imagine why she was so frightened.

It was half an hour before Meggie would look at the doll again. Frank spoke to her gently. 'Come on now, it's time to go inside. We'll ask Mum to help us to mend Agnes, eh?'

Fiona Cleary was in the kitchen, preparing the meal. She was very handsome, but she rarely smiled. Although she had six children, she still had a good figure. She spent her days in the kitchen and the back garden, cooking, washing and gardening.

She turned to look at Meggie and Frank.

'Meggie, look at you. Your best dress is dirty!'

'It isn't her fault, Mum,' said Frank. 'Jack and Hughie took her doll away. I said we'd mend it. Can we?'

'Let me see.'

Fee was a silent woman. Nobody knew what she was thinking. She finished looking at the doll, and put it on top of the cupboard near the stove.

'I'll wash her clothes tomorrow morning, and do her hair again. Frank can stick her hair back on after tea tonight.'

Meggie nodded. She wished her mother would sometimes smile. Frank knew that Fee didn't smile much because she was always tired. There was so much to do with six children and little money.

Padraic Cleary was often away from home, working, but he was home for Meggie's birthday. When he came home in the evening the younger boys were playing outside and Frank was cutting wood.

'Go and help Frank,' he told Jack and Bob. Then he went into the kitchen and nodded to Fiona. He sat down in the only comfortable chair in the kitchen.

Meggie came to him and sat on his knee.

He leaned back in his chair. 'How does it feel to be four, Meggie?' he asked his daughter.

'It feels good, Daddy.'

'Did Mum give you your present?'

'Oh, Daddy, how did you and Mum know I wanted Agnes? She's beautiful! I want to look at her all day!'

'She's lucky to have anything to look at,' said Fee. 'Jack and Hughie got hold of the doll.'

'Is it badly damaged?'

'It can be mended. Frank caught the boys before they could do too much damage.'

'Frank? Why wasn't he working? He's got too much work to do to come up here during the day.'

'He just came up for a tool,' Fee said quickly. She thought Padraic was too hard on Frank.

Padraic Cleary was a small man with thick red hair. He had come from Ireland to the Southern Hemisphere twenty years before, and he still spoke like an Irishman. Although he had to work very hard for very little money, he was a happy man.

Fiona went to the back door and shouted, 'Dinner!'

The boys came into the kitchen one by one. The last was Frank, carrying wood for the fire. The family sat down around the big old table in the kitchen, and Fiona served the meat, boiled potatoes and beans.

After the meal the family drank cups of tea, read or talked. Meggie and the two younger boys, Stu and Hughie, went to bed, Jack and Bob went outside to feed the dogs, and Frank took Meggie's doll and began to stick its hair back on.

Padraic closed his book and stood up.

'Well, I'm off to bed.'

'Goodnight, Paddy.'

Fee began to wash the dishes. Frank waited until his father went upstairs and then helped his mother. Padraic did not like to see the boys helping their mother. That was woman's work.

'I wish you had servants to help you,' said Frank. 'You work too hard.'

'Don't talk like that, Frank,' said his mother. 'Your father is a good man, and he

does his best for us.'

Fee looked at Frank as he worked. She wished Frank was not so unhappy at home. She wished he and Paddy would not argue so often.

'Good night, Frank, and thank you,' she said.

End of episode 1

1420 words including introduction