

Colleen McCullough Interview (Published in Prevent Blindness News, Winter 2005)

World-renowned novelist Dr. Colleen McCullough is the epitome of a Renaissance woman, exhibiting immense talents in widely diverse fields. On a health note, she was recently diagnosed with hemorrhagic (wet) macular degeneration (MD) and has already lost vision in her left eye. While she is frightened about the prospect of going blind, she is determined not to allow the disease to negatively impact her writing, fiery spirit or independence.

McCullough's unique background has influenced her writing style, in particular the exhaustive research that goes into her novels. Born in New South Wales, she exhibited an early talent in drawing, painting and poetry, as well as math and science. While her foremost desire was to become a physician, a congenital skin condition causing an acute allergy to soaps, prevented her from following this path, as she would never be able to "scrub" up.

Instead, McCullough pursued a career in neurophysiology, the study of the human nervous system. She established the Department of Neurophysiology at Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney, Australia, followed by a pursuit of an advanced degree in Great Britain. During her tenure in London, she met Professor Gilbert H. Glaser, Chairman of the Department of Neurology at Yale University Medical School. This led to her immigration to the U.S. and a 10-year research/teaching stint at Yale. Like most women scientists at the time, she was severely underpaid and questioned how she would support herself in the future, inevitably leading to her career as a novelist.

McCullough's first novel, *Tim* was written in 1972, and published in 1974, to uniformly excellent reviews. The novel was made into a movie in 1979, starring Mel Gibson, before he achieved international fame. Her second novel, *The Thorn Birds* became a huge bestseller, translated into 20 languages and adapted into one of the most popular mini-series of all time, starring Richard Chamberlain and Rachel Ward. This success officially ended McCullough's career as a neurophysiologist. She has since published more than a dozen novels and a cookbook.

A resident of tiny Norfolk Island in the South Pacific, she moved there in 1980, and despite intentions of being a lifelong spinster, met a native Norfolk Islander, Ric Robinson, and married him in 1984. McCullough recently shared her thoughts with Prevent Blindness America on MD and life.

PBA: Is it true that in September 2003, you woke up one day with severely reduced sight in your left eye? Had you been to an eye doctor before this?

I did indeed discover a large blind spot in my left eye in September of 2003. Previously, I had had cataract surgery on both eyes, with adjustment of the lenses so that I didn't have to wear eyeglasses anymore. For about ten days I enjoyed perfect vision again, then came the retinal hemorrhage. Initially, I was told not to worry about the blind spot. So I didn't get on a plane for Sydney immediately, as I should have done. I went three weeks later for a scheduled ophthalmological checkup, when all hell broke loose the moment the ophthalmologist looked at the retina in my left eye, which was still bleeding.

PBA: Do you have any vision remaining in the affected eye?

I have peripheral vision in the affected (left) eye, but absolutely no central vision.

PBA: What type of laser treatments have you undergone, how frequently, and do you have to leave Norfolk Island to receive treatment?

I have had all kinds of laser treatments over the past year; the hemorrhage was extremely difficult to arrest. I have to go to Sydney for every treatment – as few as three weeks apart, as many as six to eight weeks apart. The hemorrhage finally was arrested about three months ago, but I still see my Sydney ophthalmologist every four to six weeks.

PBA: Your mother was diagnosed with the same form of MD in her 60s. Treatment options have improved greatly for wet MD in recent years. Did your mother just accept that she would lose her vision; did she seek any kind of treatment?

Hemorrhagic macular degeneration runs in my mother's family. Her father "went blind"; so did two of her brothers as well as she. Only one of those four people seems to have realized what he suffered from – my uncle Harry. My mother never articulated her symptoms, and I never knew of this hereditary form of blindness in the family until after my own crisis.

PBA: Are there any other vision-related problems that run in your family? Did you ever wear glasses or have any vision problems prior to being diagnosed with MD?

Yes, cataracts run in my mother's family too. Apart from developing cataracts in my 50's and age-related presbyopia in my 40's, I never had visual problems – 20-13 vision in both eyes, no strabismus.

PBA: Is it true that you detest the idea of dictating your novels? There are high-tech computers that many vision-impaired people have found very useful. Have you had to physically change the way you write and do you use a special computer or any low vision aids?

I am still hanging in there on my typewriter because the right eye is, at this moment anyway, unimpaired. I cross my bridges as I come to them, but to me, dictation is sloppy writing.

PBA: You are patron of the Macular Degeneration Foundation Australia. What does this involve and do you speak publicly on their behalf?

Being patron of the Macular Degeneration Foundation, Australia, involves using my high public profile to educate the populace about macular degeneration, both wet and dry, and to educate some optometrists about retinal disorders.

PBA: Are any of your novels influenced by personal struggles, such as your time in the States as a woman in a male-dominated field? Do you think your experiences with MD might find their way into one of your novels?

I can't tell you whether my own experiences with macular degeneration will find their way into one of my novels, but my experiences as a woman in a male-dominated scientific field are not limited to the U.S.A. Indeed, after the discrimination I suffered in Australia and the United Kingdom, I thought that America was a female paradise!

PBA: Has MD restricted your ability to travel for business?

No, my loss of eyesight hasn't affected my ability to travel, save that I can't go anywhere on my own anymore. Someone has to be with me to tell me how high the steps are, whether there is an undulation in the ground, and all the things that loss of depth of field affects.

PBA: Were you on the movie sets for *Tim* or *The Thorn Birds*? If so, what was your impression of Hollywood and do you have something memorable you wish to share about that?

No, I was not on the movie sets. In fact, moviemakers loath the writers of the books they transform into what is, alas, usually utter tripe.

PBA: Have you painted in recent years? If so, what style do you paint in and do you have a recurring subject matter? Has your style changed greatly over time?

I can't paint anymore, because I have lost my depth of field. The tip of the brush won't go where I want it to go. I always painted in two styles – gouache design or oil portraits.

There have been many artists who have experienced disabilities and somehow leveraged this to open up creatively. Can you imagine putting a positive spin on your vision loss from a creative standpoint?

I try to put a positive spin on everything that happens to me.

PBA: Some people with MD have difficulties distinguishing similar colors such as black and dark blue. Have you found this to be the case?

I can distinguish dark navy from black if I really concentrate and the light is good. After dark, my vision is severely restricted when it comes to distinguishing between colors.

PBA: How did it feel to receive an honorary Doctor of Letters from Macquarie University?

I was thrilled to be honored with a Doctorate of Letters from Macquarie University. What it told me was that academicians in the Classics approved of my history in my historical novels.

PBA: You have worked on quite a few musical collaborations in recent years. What are you currently working on in this regard?

Yes, I enjoy collaborating in the writing of musicals – I do the wordsmithing, including song lyrics. At the moment I am working with a German composer on an opera about Cleopatra.

Do you work on several projects at once, or write one novel to completion and then start on the next?

I never write two books at once; though I may take a break from a book to write some musical stuff or, in the old days, paint.

PBA: When you are writing a novel and it nears completion, is there a bittersweet feeling, as a part of you does not want to see it end – the intensity of writing that particular book reaching the finish?

No, I am consumed to get to the end of the book I am writing. Once I get there, the drafting process begins – anything from five to 10 drafts. When the last draft is complete, I tend intellectually to collapse like a popped balloon, and only come back to life when I start something new.

PBA: Do you have any words of wisdom or encouragement for the millions of people all over the world coping with MD?

To all sufferers from macular degeneration, I would say: **FIGHT IT!** Don't give in to it. Don't do what my mother did; enclose herself into a smaller and smaller world until the only place she had left to go was dementia. Don't let your diseases rule you – you rule them.