



The Touch

Colleen McCullough

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Not since *The Thorn Birds* has Colleen McCullough written a novel of such broad appeal about a family and the Australian experience as *The Touch*.

At its center is Alexander Kinross, remembered as a young man in his native Scotland only as a shiftless boilermaker's apprentice and a godless rebel. But when, years later, he writes from Australia to summon his bride, his Scottish relatives quickly realize that he has made a fortune in the gold fields and is now a man to be reckoned with.

Arriving in Sydney after a difficult voyage, the sixteen-year-old Elizabeth Drummond meets her husband-to-be and discovers to her dismay that he frightens and repels her. Offered no choice, she marries him and is whisked at once across a wild, uninhabited countryside to Alexander's own town, named Kinross after himself. In the crags above it lies the world's richest gold mine.

Isolated in Alexander's great house, with no company save Chinese servants, Elizabeth finds that the intimacies of marriage do not prompt her husband to enlighten her about his past life -- or even his present one. She has no idea that he still has a mistress, the sensual, tough, outspoken Ruby Costevan, whom Alexander has established in his town, nor that he has also made Ruby a partner in his company, rapidly expanding its interests far beyond gold. Ruby has a son, Lee, whose father is the head of the beleaguered Chinese community; the boy becomes dear to Alexander, who fosters his education as a gentleman.

Captured by the very different natures of Elizabeth and Ruby, Alexander resolves to have both of them. Why should he not? He has the fabled "Midas Touch" -- a combination of curiosity, boldness and intelligence that he applies to every situation, and which fails him only when it comes to these two women.

Although Ruby loves Alexander desperately, Elizabeth does not. Elizabeth bears him two daughters: the brilliant Nell, so much like her father; and the beautiful, haunting Anna, who is to present her father with a torment out of which for once he cannot buy his way. Thwarted in his desire for a son, Alexander turns to Ruby's boy as a possible heir to his empire, unaware that by keeping Lee with him, he is courting disaster.

The stories of the lives of Alexander, Elizabeth and Ruby are intermingled with those of a rich cast of characters, and, after many twists and turns, come to a stunning and shocking climax. Like *The Thorn Birds*, Colleen McCullough's new novel is at once a love story and a family saga, replete with tragedy, pathos, history and passion. As few other novelists can, she conveys a sense of place: the desperate need of her characters, men and women, rootless in a strange land, to create new beginnings.

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