



Lansbury, Coral Magnolia (1929–1991)

Novelist, playwright, academic and feminist, Coral Lansbury, mother of lawyer, Malcolm Turnbull, died in Philadelphia on Tuesday night, aged 61.

Dr Lansbury, who was Distinguished Professor of English and Dean of Graduate Studies at Rutgers University, had cancer for some years and her health deteriorated over Christmas.

Her parents had come to Australia as cast members of the musical *Showboat* (the actress Angela Lansbury was her second cousin) and she was born in Melbourne in 1929.

She was a child actress in J. C. Williamson productions; and her prolific writing career started early with her first radio script accepted at 13. She wrote radio soaps such as *Portia Faces Life*, which she later described as crypto-feminist. In 1948, her verse play *Krubi of the Illawarra* won the Henry Lawson Prize for poetry, a feat to be repeated by her son in 1974.

She married three times – to radio producer George Edwards, Bruce Turnbull, and to John Salmon. She gained her doctorate at Auckland University before moving to the United States in 1969 where she has lived ever since.

She wrote a study of 19th-century British perceptions of Australia, *Arcady in Australia*, a biography of Elizabeth Gaskell, a study of language in Trollope, and received a Guggenheim Fellowship for an examination of the relationship between pornography, vivisection and gynecology in the 19th century.

Malcolm Turnbull described his mother as a powerful speaker and lecturer who did well in the US because of “her ability to command an audience in a very dramatic way”. She thrived under the US “publish or perish syndrome”, he said.

When her last marriage ended in divorce in 1981, she decided to concentrate on fiction and produced five novels, the best known of which, *The Grotto*, she promoted on her last tour to Australia in 1986. Her last novel, *Opium*, dealing with the opium trade among New England Quaker families in the 19th century, was finished in October and will be published by Knopf.

“She was terribly brave,” said Mr Turnbull yesterday. “She finished *The Grotto* while under chemotherapy and had not wanted anyone to know she was sick.”

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