

## **Stephen Coonts**

### ***In Their Own Country transcript***

**1** S: Well, I'm a storyteller, a professional liar and a commercial writer. I don't really do literary fiction. The idea is to write books and sell them. Create entertainment for the reading public.

Kate Long: And that's West Virginia's best-selling writer, Steve Coonts, author of *Flight of the Intruder* and at least nine other best-selling novels. I'm Kate Long. And you're listening to *In their Own Country*, a radio series that lets you visit with some of the most interesting writers West Virginia has produced. This week, you'll hear some of the work and philosophy of Steve Coonts - who says nobody but his publisher calls him Stephen.

Stephen Coonts: When I buy a paperback at the airport, that's exactly what I'm after. I'm after entertainment. I'll never win a Pulitzer, but hopefully a lot of people will read the stories and get a bang out of them. You know what they say literature is. It's stories by people who are dead. And they're still being read today. And so if people read my stories after I'm dead, they will have achieved that magic level, and they'll be literature!

**2** KL: Steve Coonts is definitely not a quilts and banjos writer. He began with novels about fighter pilots. His web site describes most of his books as techno-thrillers.

SC: I dunno who invented that term. Some book critic thought that one up. Originally, it meant a military thriller that was heavy on technology. But now, it means any thriller in which modern technology plays some role, big or small.

KL: Child psychologists say children read stories about witches and dragons and evil queens, they're working out their fears about the dangers that they see in the world. Well adults can do the same thing with Stephen Coonts' tales, in which his heroes survive their encounters with terrorists or drug dealers, hit men, the Chinese army. And these tales are probably not based on Steve Coonts' memories of his childhood in Buckhannon, WV.

**3** KL: You grew up in Buckhannon. Could you give us a little bit of a picture of little Steve Coonts.

SC: I dunno. Little Steve Coonts read a lot of books. I liked books a lot and read everything I could get my hands on. Won a prize in the fourth grade for reading all 278 books in the fourth grade library.

I just was an omnivorous, voracious reader. And you think you have to be if you ultimately are going to write. When people ask me, or tell me they have writing ambitions. I always ask them: Well, what do you read? If you're not a reader. You're never going to be a writer.

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Buckhannon was and is a really nice town. Great place to grow up. I always thought I was lucky. I managed to grow up in a good place, surrounded by interesting people. These people who talk about how terrible their childhood was ... Mine was great!

I loved to go hunting and played a lot of sports. Everything from T Ball as a kid, right on up. And managed to be a three-sport athlete in high school and played on the 1964 state championship Triple-A football team. The reason we won the state championship was I didn't have to play much.

**4** *When was the first time you went up in an airplane?*

Well, my dad's senior partner had a little farm in the southern end of Upshur County, and he had an Aronco Chief, which was a two-place, prop-driven plane that had no electrical system, and you had to spin the prop by hand to start it. And he gave me a ride down there. I remember flying down there when I was six years old. I remember sitting in the right seat, and somebody standing out there propping the airplane, starting the engine. I couldn't see over the instrument panel. And it made a lot of noise. I looked out and saw the ground falling away and thought it was pretty cool! And that was my first airplane ride.





So anyway, I got a divorce in 1984 when I was working for the oil company. And I decided, "Now's the hour! I'm going to actually write that novel I've always wanted to write." I was at the point in my life when I needed a personal triumph. My personal life was a disaster. My oil company was in trouble, in financial trouble. And I didn't like being a lawyer. So I just needed to accomplish something. I didn't expect the novel to ever be published, but just completing a novel - writing the whole thing right from word one to The End - was important.

I think a lot of people have these type of goals. You know, they have nothing to do with making money. They want to ride a bicycle across America. They want to climb all the 14,000-foot peaks in Colo. Or float down the Mississippi on a raft. And I tell people, they ought to go do it. They ought to fulfill some of these kinds of ambitions. Because that's what makes life worth living. It's certainly not money. And it's certainly not the day-to-day grind.

We need some of these type of challenges. For me, writing a novel was one. So I got my secretary to show me how to use a word processor. So I'd work at night after everybody else'd go home. I'd sit down there and write from 6 to 10 or 11 at night, and then come in Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays and write for ten hours a day. And at the end of six months, I had a manuscript!

**8** KL: His main character - Jake Grafton, the pilot - is also the main character in a series of his novels since then. By the turn of the century, Jake Grafton had moved up the line and become an admiral. But in *Flight of the Intruder*, he was just starting with the Navy.

SC: He was just everyman. He was not wise or witty or handsome or a lady-killer or any of that. He was just every guy who went to Vietnam. And the only distinguishing characteristic he had, that other people didn't share, was that he always tries to do the right thing.

The public likes that. I get a lot of mail, and people tell me they really like Jake Grafton, and that's one of the reasons.

**9** KL: Coonts had no trouble writing the flying scenes for his first book, but his editors weren't too crazy about his first drafts of love scenes.

I was in the process of getting a divorce, and love wasn't my thing at the time. So - but anyway, I remember talking to the Senior Editor. And she said, "You know, when I read the flying sequence about the pilot who's on the ground, and he asks his friend to kill him, she says, "I almost cried." But she sez, "Then when I read the love chapters, I almost puked on the manuscript."

(laughs) I think that that's - there's a lesson there. So I ended up writing those chapters eight different times. Boy met girl eight different ways. They fell in love eight different









KL: Jake and Tiger do get out alive.

**13** After *Flight of the Intruder* hit the best-seller list, Coonts started writing a sequel. But his editor at the Naval Institute Press did not exactly jump at it.

SC: I did 150 pages of manuscript and sent it to him, flew to Annapolis, took him and his wife out to dinner, pulled out all the stops, trying to get them interested in this story and they just couldn't do it. So finally he came to Colorado and took me out to lunch, said "You can't write this story. You don't have the writing skills. You can't do Arabs. You can't do women. All you can do is guys in the cockpit and guys on steel ships. And so we don't want the book." You know, Duh da duh!

And so, you know, that really bummed me out. At least he paid for the lunch. I didn't get anything done for about three months. And finally one day, I just thought, well, if that's all it takes to kill a writing career, I'm not ever going to have one.

So I got mad about it. I took my 159 pages and sent it off to three NY publishers that wanted, that expressed interest in my next book. All three of whom, of course had rejected *Flight of the Intruder*.

KL: He got three offers and decided to go with Doubleday.

SC: And I think there's a great lesson there for everybody. And I tell writers, you know, rejections, it only takes one yes. No matter how many publishers tell you no, it only takes one yes. And so don't be discouraged when people keep saying no, no, no.

KL: When Jake Grafton came back from Vietnam, he had to put up with a lot of people assuming that he liked killing people. He had to put up with his future father-in-law, telling him he was a war criminal. And yet, he knew the cost of what was happening.

SC: Yeah, he did. I played with that theme in *The Intruders*, the direct sequel to *Flight of the Intruders*, even though it was written six or seven years after I did *Flight of the Intruder*. One of the scenes in it is Jake, after his father-in-law has given him a hard time, he's waiting in the airport in Seattle. Somebody says to a soldier there that has a missing hand, said to him, "Serves you right." And Jake throws the guy through a plate-glass window.

That actually happened to a friend of mine in Vietnam who stepped on a land mine and lost his left arm and was really - spent a year in the hospital. He was really tore up bad. It was a miracle he made it. He was on the campus of the University of Denver, and some guy said to him, "Did you get that in Vietnam?"

And he said yes, and the guy says, "Just serves you right" and marched off, some prissy little jerkwad who thought that he knew all about Vietnam, and it was wrong, and the people who got drafted and had to go over there and fight were some kind of





















*America* actually came out in August, about August 1, and so it had been on the shelves for six weeks before September 11.

KL: There are a number of letters on your web site, people who were in the middle of reading *America* on Sept 11

SC: Yeah, a lot of people have told me about it. It affected them powerfully. Some people couldn't continue. Others read it and wanted to tell me all about their emotions. And so they post comments on the web site. Or send me e-mails and I post them. Or there's a message board.

KL: I kind of hesitate to ask you this question, but I know you get a lot of people who say on your web site. "Too bad we don't have Jake Grafton to go after all the terrorists." What would Jake Grafton do now?

SC: Well, I don't know. I'm putting together another novel that's sort of a post-Sept 11 novel. The one we had in mind that I was going to do was a revolution in California. And we didn't think that one would go over too well with the post-World Trade Center public. And again, you have to find a story that appeals to the readers who are going to read it a year, two years from now.

We think we've got one. Jake will be working with the joint counter-terrorism strike force. That's the FBI and CIA. And hopefully, once I get it done here, the public will like it.

**26** KL: Has the government asked you to apply your mind to what the international terrorists -the real ones - might actually do?

SC: Well, amazingly enough, there was a proposal that all these movie screenwriters and thriller writers sort of get together and brainstorm. But to be quite honest with you, I thought it was ridiculous. I get my ideas from reading the newspapers and also from talking to experts, who know a lot more about it than I do. And that's the way all novelists and fiction writers do. They take what's possible, then try to come up with what's plausible.

There's nothing I've written that any dedicated terrorist hasn't come up with. And I don't write how-to books. Nor could I point to any other novelist or screenwriter who does. I just think that's a ridiculous thing. When I was asked about it, I said, "Nah! I don't want anything to do with that. Those people are idiots!" (K laughs)

**27** KL: Steve Coonts lives in Las Vegas now, but I interviewed him at his Pocahontas County farm, at a desk in front of big window, high on a hill overlooking a field. It felt - no surprise - like the cockpit of an airplane.

His farm is near Marlinton, quiet little town. As I drove through Marlinton, I told Coonts, I was thinking "This is a great place for an international intrigue (they laugh)." Quiet little



*wind to get high enough to get over the Cascades and the clouds. Yet if what the briefer said was accurate, the winds probably drop off once I get west of the divide.*

*But what if I get over in Puget Sound, and there is no hole in the clouds? Well, unless I have the gas to go with the wind back to Winachee, my goose is well and truly fried. ...*

*So say I fly north west for an hour and a half, and I don't actually see indications that there is a hole over the Sound, I turn around. An hour's flying with this wind right on my tail should put me back in Winachee.*

*What's wrong with that plan? Well, the wind could die. Then you would need an hour and a half to get back to Winachee. That's three hours aloft, my slow child, and you'll be burning fumes. Twelve gallons an hour times three is 36 gallons, plus the extra fuel burned in the taxi and climb-out. Your plane holds 42. Maybe three gallons or so left after three hours of flying.*

*If the wind dies completely, which is not very likely.*

*I play with it, use my pencil on the chart to measure distances. I'll give it a try. At 6:45 P.M., I'll start the engine. At 8:15, I must fish or cut bait. If I keep going, the hole had better be there, or I'll be in big, big trouble.*

*Aided by this brisk, warm wind, The Cannibal Queen leaps off the runway. She climbs willingly enough above the city of Winachee. I level at 10,000 feet and check her progress over the ground by watching the topography slide under the leading edge of the left wing. Slow. And already I am cold. Not chilly, truly cold. I'm wearing an undershirt, a long-sleeve cotton shirt, two sweatshirts and a leather jacket. But I forgot to put on gloves. My hands are cold, and the cold seeps around the collar of the jacket, and my legs and feet chill. It couldn't be more than 40 degrees up here, and the humidity gives the air a bite.*

*I fly 2-9-0 degrees toward my first and last navigational checkpoint, Lake Winachee. I can see it dead ahead when I swing the nose a little left or right. Beyond the lake are the mountains and the cloud deck. I can see more than a hundred miles from this altitude. West beyond the crest of the divide is an unbroken deck of clouds with the sun shining on fairly level tops. Way, way off to the northwest is a higher cloud wall. But that looks to be over Vancouver Island and British Columbia or even beyond.*

*Thirty minutes into the flight, I am staring at the fuel sight gauge. I am not even across the crest yet, and it seems I have used a lot of fuel. Well, an 8,000-foot climb costs gasoline. Still, the little float bobber looks to be about where it usually rides after an hour's flying.*

KL: So what do you think he does? He keeps flying. And his mind wanders to other earlier flights.

