

## **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.





S: The A6 Intruder aircraft was the Navy's all-weather attack aircraft: carrier based, crew of two, a pilot and a bombardier. I was a pilot.

K: After he got out of the service.

S: Drove a cab in Denver for a couple of months. Was a police officer in Longmont, Colorado for a couple of months. And then got into law school at the University of Colorado. Entered in September of 77. Went through in two and a half years. Graduated in September of 79 with a law degree.

**7** K: When did you start writing?

S: I started in '73 after the war, when I was a flight instructor. And I'd fly airplanes during the day, then come home at night and try to write about what it was like. My problem was, I didn't have a plot, and I didn't have the craft. But I pounded away for about ten years, wore out a couple of typewriters, and had reams of drivel. But I did learn how to write flying scenes.

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** K: 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.











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 Intruder*, 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 criminals. You know, and I think that that just captured the tone of the moment, so I used that sequence.

KL: Well, that guy probably didn't get to throw the guy who said that through a plate-glass window, but Jake Grafton did it for him, didn't he?

SC: Yeah, that's the fiction. Jake gets to do the things that you wish you had been there and done.

**14** KL: I know people ask you all the time if Jake is your alter ego, or if Jake is you.

SC: Well, he's not me. He was just every man who went to Vietnam. I got out of the Navy after nine years. Jake's obviously stayed for a career, so he's an Admiral and I never was.

I had a psychiatrist say to me, "Well, if you aren't Jake Grafton, perhaps he's the man you wish you were." And he thought, "Oooo that's heavy." But of course, there's a little bit of truth in that in that, you know, there's a little bit of the author in every character they write, even the bad ones. The bad guys, the good guys, the villains, all of them. What you read in fiction is the author's view of the world, how the author thinks people think, how they feel, all this stuff.

**15** KL: Tiger Cole, the bombardier with the broken back, turns up years later in Coonts' book, *Hong Kong*. By then, Jake has become an admiral, and Tiger is consul general





















**24** 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)

**25** 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 town, however, a little Neo-Nazi compound nearby, and national observatory nearby and so forth. Do you ever think of writing a book set here, put Jake Grafton here?

SC: Not Jake Grafton. Bu I've thought about for years doing a story. In fact, I've actually written one, called *The Garden of Eden*. My publisher was horrified. It was not a thriller. It was contemporary, about the people I met here in West Virginia and have known all my life.

They were horrified. They said all these people who are buying all these thrillers won't want the book, and you'll kill your thriller sales. Anyway, that was their take on it. I'm rewriting the book at the present time, and - who knows? - maybe it might come out in a year or two, maybe under a pseudonym. So we'll see.

If you're going to make a living, writing stories, you have to sell them in major numbers. This is a numbers game. I'm a full-time writer. I have been since 1986. And it takes a lot of books to make a living. You have to keep cranking them out one at a time.

Unfortunately, authors are known as brands. You become a brand. And you take huge financial risks if you play around with the brand. So neither the publisher nor most authors who are successful want to do that, because if you stumble, the losses are catastrophic.

KL: But he's thinking of taking that risk.



