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 miltary 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.

SC: 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 athelete 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 KL: When was the first time you went up in an airplane?

SC: 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.

KL: You were in love. Lifelong love affair.

SC: Yeah, it is. And of course, later on, I read Ernest Gahn, *Fate Is a Hunter* and *The High and the Mighty* and decided I wanted to be a pilot. Of course, didn't have the money to go take private lessons. And so when Vietnam came along and I found the Navy had this program where they guaranteed you flight school if you would enlist in college, I thought it was a good deal. I thought, Oh, go learn to fly!

I think really, that set the tone of my life, you know. I got a flying skill that I've used to write books. I still fly, thirty-three years later. Own airplanes. It's been the defining skill of my life.

K: So here's some of his writing about flying. Jake Grafton, Navy fighter pilot, is sitting in his plane at night on the deck of an aircraft carrier, waiting to be launched out into the dark.

5 SC: This is from Flight of the Intruder.

Jake held his helmet in his lap and looked past the edge of the flight deck into the black nothingness beyond. He hated night catapult shots. So much could happen on the way down the cat, all of it bad. Any problem would demand the pilot's instant attention, even as he was recovering from the acceleration of the shot and trying to coax the plane to fly in the night air, sixty feet above the sea. He went over some of the more likely

emergencies and what he might do if one occurred. He moved his left hand from the throttles to the gear handle. If an engine quits or a fire light flashes, gear up. He fingers climbed to the emergency jettison button. Push that and hold for one second. All five drop tanks will then be jettisoned. Ten thousand pounds lighter, maybe the engine will still fly on one engine.

His eyes flicked to the standby gyro. Keep eight degrees nose up, no matter what. Much less, and we'll go in the water. Much more, and we'll stall and go into the drink anyway. He checked the guages. Air speed, pressure altimeter. Angle of attack. Radar altimeter. The gyro. These instruments had the information that would keep them alive. And if one of these instruments failed, he had to immediately notice that its information did not gibe with the other guages and disregard the culprit.

He felt his stomach knot up and automatically, he reached between his legs and checked the position of the alternate firing handle for the ejection seat. There might not be time to reach the primary handle over his head. Every moment that passed was only preparation for the coming instant when he would be catapulted out over the dark ocean, just fifteen knots above stall speed, in a machine near maximum gross weight, in a machine that was merely a cunning collection of complex equipment that failed too often. His life depended on the correctness of his every thought, on his touch with the stick, on the quickness of his reflexes, on the knowledge and skill he possessed.

The penalty for failure would be swift and sure. And the man beside him would also pay. What if we lose the generators? He reached back to his left to check the position of the ram air turban handle. A tug on this handle would cause the wind-driven emergency generator to pop out of the wing and power the flight instruments and critical cockpit lights.

He closed his eyes as he began touching and identifying every switch, knob, and handle around him. He knew this cockpit better than he knew his car. He knew it better than he knew anything else in the world. He looked down the catapult, as he had countless times before. Beyond the end of the deck was the end of the world. He was marooned on an island of red light, adrift in a black universe. Only the here and now, this place and this time existed.

The rain drummed on the canopy. The men on the flight deck stood motionless, waiting for the Start Engine signal. They waited like horses in the rain, resigned to their misery.

The ship began its turn into the wind. The sailors leaned into the quickening breeze. The height of the plane above the deck and the bouyancy of the high-pressure tires magnified the effect of the shift of the deck. The pilot could feel the motion as the ship shouldered the swells aside.

6 K: And Steve Coonts wrote that from firsthand experience. He flew an A6 fighter plane from the deck of an aircraft carrier in Vietnam.

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

S: 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 ways. The final way it got put together was sort of an amalgam of little pieces, snippets here and there of all eight versions.

I've often thought I should take those 24 chapters and put them all together and call them "Love Stories ..."

Anyway, they were pretty bad. But it's all learning how to write, which is the craft. But it's not easy. You meet people who say, "Well, I've finished my first manuscript, and I'm ready to get published." You always just look at them and say, "You don't have a clue." And I think a lot of people don't. They think this is easy stuff. One pass through it, and it's perfect. What they don't see is the endless hours and the chapters that get trashed, and the editor who calls back and says, "This isn't good enough. You have to do it better." That whole proceess of acquiring the craft.

K: Back to Jake Grafton. **10** Like every fighter pilot, Jake knows that when he drops bombs, some people may get saved, others get killed. And he struggles with that. Consequences he never sees.

S: Well, this is a reading from *Flight of the Intruder*. And Jake has just flown a mission. And he's talking with Steiger, who's the air intelligence officer. And Stieger says to him,:

>>>>>>>>>>> Yep, let me tell you, you did one hell of a job on those gomers, baby. You got 47 confirmed, killed in action."

Jake put down the book. "Forty-seven?" he whispered.

"Yep, 47 KIA." Abe grinned again. "You really plastered them. That's our best single mission bomb damage assessment this cruise. Probably a Navy commendation medal in there for you, Jake. Maybe even an air medal."

"Why you greasy little -" Steiger wore a frozen grin.

Jake felt his stomach churn. "What in the hell did you have to tell me something like that for? You think I need to know that? "He was shouting. "Do you know their names? Tell me that! I bet you have their names!"

"Well, I just thought you'd want to know -"

"Why would I want to know? Now I'm the poor shit that has to live with it. Me! Grafton!"

"I didn't mean -"

"And the medal! ... What the hell kind of guy do you think I am? Do you think I'm some idiot glory hound?"

He was spraying siliva. We wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Hey, Jake, I -"

"A medal to wear on my uniform, so every time I put it on my uniform, I remember I killed 47 men! Yeah, I need that, you stupid bastard. I need a medal like that."

11 KL: You became a best-selling writer, right off the starting block. How'd you do that?

SC: Well, it took a lot of skill and cunning. The book finally got edited, *Flight of the Intruder*. We edited the heck out of it, and it was finally ready to get published, and they called me up and asked me if I knew anybody famous. They said, "Well, we need somebody to send this to, to get those blurbs, those puffs that go on the back of the book."

KL: Steve suggested they send it to John Lehmann, secretary of the Navy, who used to be a Navy flier.

Well, he read it and loved it! So he sent it over to the White House with a note, "To Ron from John. Here's a book you might like."

KL: And then he had an amazing stroke of luck.

SC: It landed on the President's desk at the same time as, the same day a reporterphotographer team from Fortune Magazine showed up to do an article on President Reagan as "Reagan the Manager." And you open the magazine to the cover story, and it had, on the left side was a full-page picture of the President at his desk in the oval office. And there were only two things on the desk. One was a jar of jelly beans, and the other was a copy of *Flight of the Intruder*, by Stephen Coonts. Recognizable dust jacket on it.

The secretary was reading the magazine, and she saw the book on the pres's desk. And she went running through the halls, shouting, "It's on the president's desk! It's on the president's desk!"

So the Naval Institute mobilized its staff, all fourteen of them, and they went out and bought every copy of Fortune they could find within five miles of Annapolis. And they stuck arrows on the picture and wrote little notes, and sent those to reviewers all over the country to whom they had sent review copy of *Flight of the Intruder*.

So this book by an unknown author from West Virginia, a first novel, that normally wouldn't even be reviewed by most publication, got reviewed nationwide. And the reviews always started, "This book was on the President's desk."

And so that was a huge, huge help in getting the book some attention.

KL: And it was on the best-seller list for 28 weeks.

12 Here's a scene from that book Reagan was reading: *Flight of the Intruder.* Jake Grafton and his bombadier have been shot down in the Vietnamese jungle in North Vietnamese territory. Jake faces a moral choice. His bombadier, Tiger Cole, has a broken back. Tiger says -

SC: "You'll get out. I've come far enough. I don't want to live in a wheelchair for forty years. I want to die here. I want you to -"

"Devil," the radio interrupted. "We have three or four bad guys headed your way. They just ran across the road, and apparently they've seen the chute. They'll be there before we can make a pass. Better take cover if you can.

"Roger," Jake said softly into the mic. He coiled, dropped the radio and searched the brush in all directions.

"Get out of here," Tiger Cole insisted. "I'm done for. Go! Get moving!"

The revolver seemed to leap into Jake's hand of its own volition. He scanned the trees in the direction of the road. The bombadier's urging resounded in his ears. He straightened up and backed away from Cole, then turned and ran.

He had not gone very far before he fell. Face down in the undergrowth, he was overwhelmed with panic. He scrambled to his feet, then lunged forward. Forty yards later, he fell again. This time he stayed down. "What are you doing? How will you ever live with this. The SPAD driver was finished, but Cole isn't. You're all he has to get him on that chopper out of here. He wants you to make it, even if it costs him his life. He's kept the faith."

The panic left him, and he felt in its place a calmness. He was certain of one thing. He would rather die than leave Tiger Cole.

K: He went back.

He held the 357 magnum revolver in his left hand with the hammer down. Not yet. He crept back the way he had come. When he glimpsed Tiger lying there, he moved behind a broad tree trunk and listened.

He heard the wind rustling through the foliage overhead and in the distance, the sound of piston and jet engines. Once more, he was waiting for a deer in the Appalachian mountains, expectant, without fear.

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 plateglass 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 plateglass 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 bombadier 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

for the United States in Hong Kong. He is also a billionaire by then. He made his billions in the computer industry.

SC: Well, what he's doing right now in this scene is, he's trying to recruit a computer expert named Steinbaugh, to help hack into the Red Chinese computers.

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SC: "I want you to install some of your back doors," Cole said, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Where?"

"On some of the systems in Bejing. You're going to be working on some systems in the Forbidden City, the Chinese Kremlin. I want you to install back doors, so when the time comes, you can get in those systems and control them. Screw them up or disable them.

KL: So Steinbaugh agrees. He works on the Chinese computers, installs the back doors, which are ways to get into the computer, goes back to America and waits for the signal. Meanwhile, he gets cancer. He's near death when he gets the signal from Cole.

This menu had five choices: Safe, Arm, Fire, Self-destruct, Exit. He positioned the icon over the one he wanted, then clicked the mouse. That was all it took.

KL: And halfway around the world, China's supply of intercontinental ballistic missiles began to self-destruct.

16 Steve Coonts loves to juxtapose the boring with the startling. Here is Eaton Steinbaugh, living an ordinary life in middle America, while he secretly blows up the Chinese missile supply. People and things are often not what they seem in Coonts' novels. And here's another one of those kind of characters. A kindly hitman from the book, *Under Seige*. He's been hired to kill the President, the Supreme Court Head Justice, and other important officials. His name is Henry Charon.

SC: Yeah, that's the name of the boatman across the river Stxy in classical Greek mythology.

KL: Charon? And the River Styx goes to -

SC: To Hades. He was the person who ferries the souls over to Hades.

KL: In this reading, he's out in the woods testing some weapons he wants to use to shoot the President. And he sees a deer and turns gentle.

17 SC: He was only 25 feet or so from her when she finally saw him. She had moved unexpectedly. Now she stood stock still, her ears bent toward him to catch the slightest sound. Henry Charon remained motionless. She relaxed slightly and started forward him, her ears still attuned, her eyes fixed on him.

Surprised, he moved a hand. The deer paused, wary, then kept coming. "Someone tamed her!" he thought. She's tame." The doe came to him and sniffed his hands. He presented them for her inspection and scratched between her ears. Her coat was stiff and thick to his touch. He stroked her and felt it. He spoke to her and watched her ears move to catch the sound of his voice.

The memory must have been strong. She seemed unafraid. The moment bothered him somehow. Man had changed the natural order of things, and Henry Charon knew this change was not for the better. For her own safety, the doe should flee man, yet he had not the heart to frighten her. He petted her and spoke softly to her as if she could understand and watched in silence when she finally walked away. The doe paused and looked back, then trotted off into the trees. She was soon lost from sight. Thirty seconds later, he could no longer hear her feet among the leaves that carpeted the ground.

An hour later, he arrived back at his car. He opened the trunk and got some targets which he posted on the wall of the ramshackle farmhouse. The pistols were first. All nine mm, he fired them two-handed at the target at a distance of ten paces. There were four pistons, all identical Smith and Wesson automatics. He fired a clip full through each. One seemed to have a noticeably heavier trigger pull than the others, and he set it aside.

When he finished, he carefully retrieved all the spent brass. If he missed one, it was no big deal, but he didn't want to leave forty shells scattered about. After he posted a fresh target, he took the three rifles and moved off to 50 yards. The rifles were Winchester Model 70s and 3006, with 3 X 9 variable scopes.

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KL: So here's this guy who doesn't want to frighten a deer. And then half an hour later, he's practicing with his rifles to kill the president.

SC: Yeah, well, there's a little humanity in each of us, and that's what makes characters fun to read about. They're not cartoon characters. They're not the guy who jerks off fingernails. They're real people who do horrible things. And unfortunately, those are the villains among us. They're real people who do bad things and then go home and eat breakfast like everybody else.

18 KL: The same book, *Under Siege*, has a second, simultaneous plot. While Charon is taking shots at the President, an FBI undercover man, Harrison Ronald Ford, a cop from Indiana, has been recruited by the FBI to come to DC and infiltrate the operation of a local drug lord who kills you if he even suspects something's funny. He starts to suspect Harrison Ronald. So the FBI takes him off the street and stashes him in the FBI barracks at Quantico outside D.C. Where he is in no way safe.

SC: Harrison Ronald Ford is scared. He's in over his head and he knows it.

KL: In this next scene, he's figured out that somebody is coming to the FBI barracks to kill him at night. And he's sitting in the dark in the stairwell.

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19 SC: At about 2 in the morning, Harrison Ronald heard the fire door on the first floor of the stairwell being opened. It made a metallic noise that was clearly audible here on the third floor landing of the FBI dorm at Quantico where he sat in the darkness with a slab-sided Colt in his hand. Nobody had ever oiled the pushbars on the heavy doors, thank the Lord. Harrison Ronald eased his head between the rails and stared downward. into the darkness trying to see. There was nothing, not a glimmer of light.

There should have been a light, of course, but Harrison Ronald had unscrewed all the bulbs, over two hours ago ...

Somebody was down there. He closed his eyes and concentrated on what he could hear. He even held his breath. Yes, a scraping sound, a shoe sole on the non-skid of the concrete steps. Ronald pulled his head back and sat absolutely still, the automatic held firmly in both hands. This is really it, he told himself. Anybody with a legitimate reason to use this stairwell would not try to be quiet. This is really it. He sat frozen. Any movement he made, the other man was bound to hear. His feet were out of position, and his butt was cold, ice cold on the hard, concrete step.

He sat, breathing shallowly. A light. The guy below was using a small pencil flash, looking things over. Now it was gone.

Somewhere outside a car horn honked. It sounded far, far away.

He eased his eye to the window in the door and looked down the hallway. The man was outside his door, a thick figure, medium height, carrying a long weapon. Harrison Ronald moved away from the window and stood in the darkness, trying to think.

The man might not come back this way, although he had left the door ajar. Even if he did, he might expect Ford to be waiting here. If the man goes into the room, Ford asked himself, should I go down the hallway toward the room, back up to the third floor landing, or down to the first floor?

He took another look. The man was bent over, working on the lock. What if there is more than one man? That thought froze Harrison Ronald. No, not a sound here in the stairwell. Maybe another man coming around in the lobby, using the elevator or the stairwell beside it. If so, where was he?

He took another peek through the window. The stout man was going through the door. No one else in the hall. The man would come out of there in seconds. What to do?

Amazingly enough, the simple expedient of avoiding the man never occurred to Harrison Ronald Ford. He had lived with fear too long. He sought now to surprise his enemy, confront him in a way that maximized the slim advantage that surprise bestowed on the aggressor. For Harrison Ronald intended to be the aggressor.

Growing up black in the blue collar neighborhoods of Evansville and as a young rifleman in the Marine Corps, he had learned the lesson well: Attack, fiercely, ruthlessly, with iron-willed determination. Always attack.

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18 KL: Considerable mayhem later, Harrison Ronald has survived the drug dealers and the FBI, and he's going home to his grandma. Once again, the vicious juxtaposed with the sweet.

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SC: He took a cab from the airport. The little house looked just the same. The swing was put away for the winter, and the leaves were bare, but the grass had been mowed just before the cold stopped all growth.

The house still needed painting. And the soffit under the eaves, he would fix those rotton places too.

The doctors had told him not to lift anything, so he had the cabbie put the bags on the porch. Then he tried the door. Unlocked. "Grandma, it's me. Harrison."

"Who?" Her voice came floating down the hall from the kitchen. He saw her before he got to the kitchen door. She was old and small and her hair was white. She didn't move too quickly anymore, but he thought he had never seen a more beautiful woman.

"Oh Harrison, you're home. What a wonderful surprise! "

"Yeah, Grandmom. I'm home." He took her gently in his arms.

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19 KL: How do you think up these complex plots?

SC: I tell everybody it's bad pizza. Late at night (laughing). You wake up in the middle of the night, and you're having nightmares. That's it! That's the good stuff. And you write it down.

I dunno. It's never as easy as you wish it was. You know, you have ideas and you play with the pieces. You get a piece here and a piece there. And read some of it in the newspaper. I talk it over with my wife, Deborah. And you just keep trying to come up with a story that's interesting, that will be properly paced, that will have enough unexpected twists to keep the reader riveted, that will have fun characters, interesting characters. They may not be good people, but they'll be fun to read about.

And if you can get the mix right, then you've got a good story. And if you don't, then you don't have it. So you just keep tinkering and twisting and writing.

20 KL: Well, you obviously keep up with modern technology. It's laced through all your books. How do you keep up?

SC: Well, it helps to have people to ask questions of. People who are smarter than you are and have more extensive experience in, for example, submarines. *America,* my last novel, features nuclear-powered submarines. And I don't know much about them. So you ask questions, you read all the literature you can find on submarines. Then you go find people who have served on them and know a lot about them. And you ask them specific questions.

Finally, after you've done your story, you ask those people to review the manuscript and make comments. Some of the comments you don't use. Sometimes they may tell me things, like "Well, you got this wrong. We wouldn't do it this way." For example, I had a submarine expert - a retired admiral, as a matter of fact - looked at America and said that when a submarine gets under way, they don't use a tug. A tugboat doesn't pull them out. They get under way on their own power, back away from the pier under their own power.

And I thought, Eh, I need the tug. The tugboat is an integral part of the plot. Because it's from the tug that the hijackers actually steal the submarine, by forcing the two boats together. Without that, I have to think up another way to hijack this submarine, and I don't know that I have a more plausible way, and so, that stayed in there. And that's typical. Sometimes you just have to twist it to tell a story. You have to have a story all figured out. This is really not about technology. It's really about storytelling.

KL: We'll get back to the nuclear submarine later. But first, let's look at some technology in Steve Coonts' writing. Here's a small example. A CIA agent named Carmellini has invented a whizbang gizmo that cracks open combination-lock safes. He's applying it here, at night, in a government office in Havana. Coonts tells us how it works.

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SC: Tommy Carmelinni pursed his lips, as if he were whistling. This contraption was of his own design, and with it, he could open any of the older mechanical-style safes, if he were given enough time.

An electrical current introduced into the door of the safe created a measurable magnetic field. The rotation of the tumblers inside the lock caused fluctuations in the field, fluctuations that were displayed on the computer screen. Finally, the computer measured the amount of electric current necessary to turn the dial of the lock, an exquisitely sensitive measurement. Using both these factors, the computer could determine the combination that would open the safe.

.... Sitting cross-legged in front of the safe with the computer on his lap, Carmellini tugged the latex gloves he was wearing tighter onto his hands, then manually zeroed the dial of the lock. Now he started the computer program.

The dial rotated slowly, silently, driven by the electric motor clamped to the rod. After a complete turn, the dial stopped at 32. The number appeared in the upper righthand corner of the screen. After a short pause, the dial turned to the left, counter-clockwise, as Carmellini grinned happily.

In his mind's eye, he could visualize the lock plates rotating, the tumblers moving. The line on the screen that tracked the magnetic screen twitched unexpectedly. Carmellini frowned. He hadn't moved. The building was quiet. Another squiggle, so insignificant he almost missed it. And another. Someone was coming. Someone was walking softly down the hall. The sensors were picking up the shock waves of their footfalls, as the waves spread out through the structure of the building.

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KL: So then technical description gives way to serious action, and Carmellini knocks the socks off a Cuban security chief. Now, a much larger chunk of advanced technology: fighting robots.

SC: OK, this is from the novel, *Hong Kong,* and it's about York units, which are robots, fighting robots.

21 KL: A huge crowd of civilians is facing the Chinese army in a Hong Kong square, in front of a failed bank, when suddenly - dum da dum - four huge York fighting robots appear to fight the army - two of them named Charlie and Dog!

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SC: As the four York Units which had been in hiding came running from the buildings, Charlie and Dog leaped through the broken glass of their respective third-floor windows. They used their hands and feet to cushion the shock of their landing on the concrete street. Then they began running toward the center of the square. Now all six Yorks were transmitting video and audio to the central computer in the museum trailer. In seconds, the computer had transformed the six data streams into a three-dimensional picture of the square, the trucks, the decorative planters, trees, light poles, smoldering hulks of tanks, and the armed men, who were rising from the pavement with their weapons in hand, staring wild-eyed at the huge, running robots, which attacked the crews of the two remaining machine guns.

Inevitably, a few of the soldiers snapped their rifles to their shoulders to shoot. And instantly, the system directed a York to engage. An onboard CPU slewed the minigun onto the target and triggered a round. Just one round per target because, unlike humans, the Yorks didn't miss.

The ring laser gyros inside each York fed data to a separate maneuvering computer that kept it upright and balanced and onboard censors gathered data that was processed internally by the weapons control computer and passed to the main frame via UWB - which is ultra-wide band radar. And the threats were identified and engaged in the order set by the controller before the battle began.

In addition, the weapons control computer passed information to the maneuvering computer. So they could move the units to minimize the danger posed by low-priority threats. Or threats the York had not had time yet to engage.

The computers and censors operated seamlessly. Each unit engaged targets that threatened it and ran, leaped, swerved and bounded to throw off the aim of the opponents it had yet to engage. The result was mass confusion. Officers shouted and pointed, gesturing wildly at the Yorks which were leaping from truck to truck, running across the square, leaping up on the sides of the buildings, and executing turns in midair while their miniguns hammered out aimed shots.

Soldiers who raised their rifles to aim at the springing Yorks were shot down. Those who did nothing were not harmed. One soldier threw down his rifle and stood erect in

the center of the square with his hands in the air. One of the junior officers drew a pistol and pointed it at the erect soldier. He was immediately shot down by two Yorks.

... Other soldiers threw down their rifles, first a few, then many. The firing slowed to an occasional shot, then stopped altogether. The firing slowed to an occasional shot, then stopped altogether. The running Yorks slowed to a walk, then came to a rest. Each one stood with its head turning, its censors scanning, and the barrels of its miniguns spinning, ready to fire. They were ominous, fearsome.

A cheer went up from the watching civilians, who ran into the square.

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KL: Is there any such machine in development?

SC: Well, there could be. The only technology that doesn't exist for the Yorks is the batteries that run the Yorks are actually better than current battery technology. Other than that, all the censors and the computers, all of that, is well within the reach of current technology.

22 KL: And now, back to that nuclear submarine, an extremely large item of technology. An international gang of terrorists steals a brand new nuclear submarine - named America. They board it from that tugboat. They've jammed the technology that should have kept them off.

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SC: The chief of the boat already had his hands up, reaching for the scram button, so they ignored him. He jabbed in the red button, and nothing happened.

The warning light should have lit up like a Christmas tree. The power on the boat should have switched to battery backup. "Hands up!" the intruders roared. And one man stood with his weapon on the sailors as his companion dashed aft toward the engine reactor spaces.

The radio man was listening to excited voices from John Paul Jones. He keyed the mic with his foot control. "Intruders in America -" he began. Then they shot him. The American sailors stood stunned, shocked and speechless. Unsure what they should do to resist, most of them simply raised their hands and remained frozen. Those who had other ideas were mercilessly shot by the gun-toting men who came pouring down the main hatch in front of the sail and ran through the submarine.

Kolnikov was the last of the intruders to board. He paused on the deck, watched one of the Germans chop the tow line through with an ax. The fan tail of the tug was already awash. The demolition charges had produced noise and smoke and blown a nice hole in the side of the tug below the water line, all of which was calculated to cause confusion on the American sub, where the sailors' innate caution would be overridden by the obvious peril of the men in the water and those aboard the tug. And it worked.

The downwash of the helicopter buzzing overhead made it difficult to stand on the open deck. Kolnikov lifted his submachine gun and squeezed off a burst. He was so close to the chopper that he saw holes popping in the plexiglas. The machine veared away rapidly. The destroyer was still a mile or so away, barely moving. Good. Kolnikov lowered himself into the open hatch."

23 KL: Now, the timing of this book was spooky. In the story, an international gang hijacks a nuclear submarine, take it out to sea and successfully lobs missiles at New York and Washington. It came out in August 2001, so people were reading it on September 11th.

SC: The submarine uses several of its missiles on New York and Washington. And that aspect of it, in the light of the Sept 11 disaster, gave the book a lot more attention than it might have had, so the publisher is - again, it was the right book at the right time.

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.

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 psyeudonym. 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.

But anyhow, at some point, you just have to suck it up and say, "I just don't want to do one type of story all my life." So I've done a few things. I've done The Cannibal Queen, which is a story about flying an old airplane all over the United States.

KL: His 2002 book, Saucer, is a science fiction adventure.

SC: I've done two anthology collections. We'll just see what happens with these kinds of stories. If the public buys them, which we hope they will, then we'll go in other directions.

26 SC: OK, this is a selection from the book The Cannibal Queen, which is a non-fiction story about flying an old Steerman all over the United States. A Steerman is a biplane. This particular one was made in 1943 and was used as a primary trainer for the US Army. In this particular selection, I'm in Winachee, WA, and I wanted to get to Whidby Island, which is on the other side of the Cascade Mts.

KL: We're going to have some musical fun with this one, pair it up with Steve Hill's music, to make it into jazz.

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SC: I sat staring at the chart. I had fuel for 2 1/2 hours of flying. I'll be bucking a hell of 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 nothwest 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? I 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 navigatioinal 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 guage. 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.

SC: I remember another time years ago when I crossed the Cascades above an overcast. I was flying an A6 then, and the sun had been down for several hours. There was a slice of moon that night, just enough to let us plainly see the tops of the overcast, at 10 or 11,000 feet ,entice us down to fly just above it.

A cloud layer at night looks like a swell-filled grey sea, but the swells are frozen. You speed just above it on magic wings, as if you were living a dream.

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KL: And there you have it, a visit with Steve Coonts, who grew up in a quiet little WV town, Buckhannon and has written one best-selling thriller after another. I'm Kate Long. And you've been listening to In Their Own Country. Thanks for listening.