

The write stuff: author Steven Conte

The Write Stuff: Port Fairy author Steven Conte on the rollercoaster of success.

From legal eagle to sea eagle: Jock Serong



Contrary to popular belief, writing – rather than the law – was Jock Serong's first career choice and for many years he balanced the two before finally making the jump.

Words and photos by Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="color: #dc943c;"] T [/dropcap]he most commonly told story about Port Fairy editor and author **Jock Serong** is that he was a lawyer who became a writer, but in fact it is the other way around: he was a writer who fell into law.

“English and English Lit were always my favourite subjects at school, but when I told my career counsellor that I wanted to be a writer, they suggested I do a law degree, because ‘there’s plenty of words there’,” he says with a wry grin.

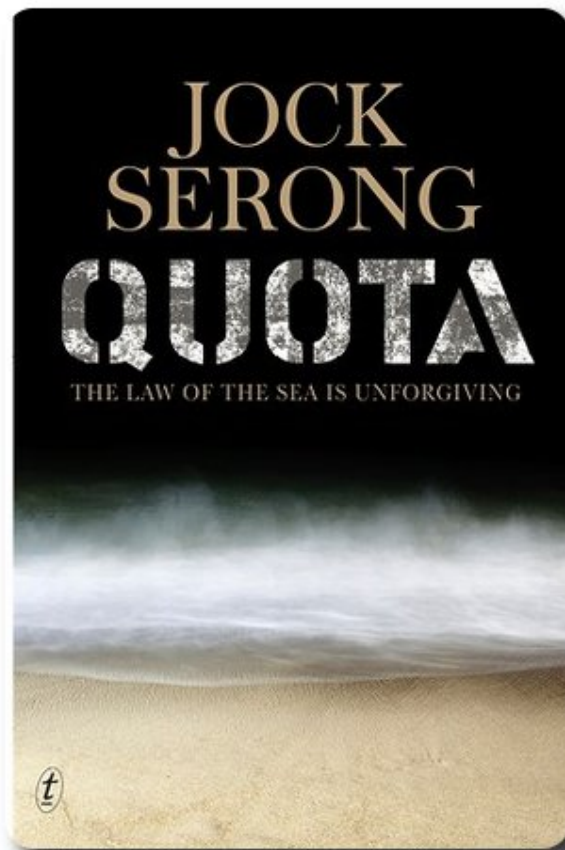
But what every writer knows- and what career counsellors never quite understand – is that there are words, and then there is *writing*: storytelling, building a narrative, creating a scene, turning words into living, breathing objects.

Worse, once you know that you love to write, the bug never leaves you.

All of the teenagers who kept journals and wrote short stories and loved English – and then grew up to become anything but a writer – still have a writer’s heart. Some listen to that nagging voice, most don’t.

Jock listened.

“I started writing professionally as a freelancer about six or seven years ago and had, if you like, three jobs: as a parent, my legal career and my writing, and the pressure to keep those three going all at once was increasing,” he says.



Jock's first novel was published earlier this year and has been optioned for television.

[dropcap style="color: #dc943c;"] H [/dropcap]aving relocated from Melbourne to Port Fairy 10 years ago, Jock had already chosen between lifestyle and a more traditional career path.

He was a barrister in Melbourne, but came to Port Fairy to work as a solicitor after he and his wife Lilly, a nurse, decided it would be a better place to raise their children (they now have four, aged from 3 to 10.)

And besides, the surf was excellent.

Jock, a surfer, began writing for two or three different surf publications, while also working at Maddens Lawyers. It was his surfing connections, however, that eventually opened the door to a life submerged entirely in writing.

“Early last year, Mick (Sowry) and Mark (Willett) were nursing this idea of a high-quality magazine built around ideas of the ocean and they asked me if I would like to edit it,” Jock explains.

Like a cliff diver in Acapulco, Jock stepped to the ledge and took the plunge.

[Great Ocean Quarterly](#) was developed over the next six months and, like *Bluestone*, has just marked its first birthday. Also like *Bluestone*, *GOQ* is edited in the front room of a house, Jock’s house, which is where he does most of his writing.

“The last 12 months have been exhilarating, in that usually at this stage in your life, you have a sense of where things are going and you are consolidating. I feel like I am back in that period of your 20s, where you throw it all up into the air,” Jock laughs.



Jock, from Port Fairy, has no regrets about moving to writing full time: “The alternative was to spend the next 20 years not ever knowing if I could have done this”.

[dropcap style="color: #dc943c;"] A [/dropcap]longside *GOO*, Jock has recently published his first novel, *Quota* (Text Publishing), a crime novel based in a remote town in south-west Victoria.

Just in case you thought – like me – that Jock might never sleep, the novel was developed over several years and involved several major re-writes before that magical moment of being accepted by a publisher.

“All writing has that edge of hard grind under it, the hard work, but I was happy to keep going and to keep at it; I find the process fascinating,” he says.

Quota has been well-received by readers and reviewers and has been optioned for a television production by Madman, in Melbourne. Jock will write the adaptation.

As Jock wanders down Sackville St on a perfect spring day in Port Fairy, saying hello to everybody who has already said hello to him first, there is a sense that his life has turned out exactly as it was meant to be.

When asked if he misses law, he gives a writer’s answer: “I miss the characters and their stories”.

“But no, no regrets. The alternative was to spend the next 20 years not ever knowing if I could have done this.”

Jock Serong will join authors Regina Lane and Clint Greagan for the Warrnambool Books Bookwiz Trivia Night this Thursday, Sept 18, at The Last Coach, in support of the Leila Rose Foundation. [Click here for full details.](#)

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New book: Warrnambool – This is home



Me – Carol Altmann – with my self-published tribute to my hometown of Warrnambool that will be launched on August 19.

[box] **“Warrnambool – This is home” is limited to 500 signed and numbered copies: \$30 plus \$8 flat postage anywhere in Australia. You can [order a book direct from the author by direct deposit or Paypal](#). Books are also available from [Warrnambool Books](#), Fairy St.** [/box]

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] W [/dropcap]hen I first returned to live in my hometown of Warrnambool in early 2013 after being away for more than 20 years, I had a new appreciation for the ties that bind people from this seaside city.

Despite Warrnambool now being a place of 32,000 people, we all feel like we know each other and, if we don't, we spend a few minutes playing what one friend described to me as “the game”.

This is where you ask each other what school you went to, or the names of your parents/brothers/sisters, or if you knew such-and-such and – usually – within no more than four or five moves, “bingo!” you have made a connection.

But it is also more than that.

It is the environment that also connects us: the wild ocean, the bent trees, the Norfolk pines, the whales, the restless wind...

And it is even more than that.

It is the iconic people and places that are so familiar to us and that we remember so fondly, even nostalgically, as we all age and they start to slip away. Names like Swintons, Kermonds, Macks Snacks, Ryan's Removals, The Savoy, Rauert's shoe store, Politis fish and chips, the Materia Brothers and on it goes.

I chose 30 of these icons to photograph and write briefly (snapshots) about – I could have chosen many more – as a small collection of some of the places and faces that connect us as being “from Warrnambool”, even if we live many miles away.



Warrnambool identities: John, Maroulla and Peter Sycopoulis in front of their Kepler St family home. The book is dedicated to Maroulla, who passed away earlier this year.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] A [dropcap]s the book unfolded, I felt an increasing sense of urgency to capture these special places and faces before it was too late, because there is no doubt Warrnambool is facing unprecedented challenges that are seeing many businesses close and not replaced by others.

In the 16 months since I started this book, the Savoy has closed, the Criterion Hotel building has been pulled down and Lucas Bros butchers was sold out of the family. Just this week it was announced that Capricorn Records would come to an end

next month after 35 years.

Warrnambool is changing and, as with any change, there is both an anticipation about what might come and a sadness about what has been lost.

This book is my attempt to preserve some of our shared and precious past.

As I say in the introduction: "Whether you live in Warrnambool, or you simply carry it in your heart, this is a tribute to the place by the sea that no matter how widely we travel, we will always call home".

* * *

***Warrnambool – This is home* features the following:** Swinton's Supermarket (Val Grundy/Dot Grauer); Lucas Bros Butchers (Ken Lucas); Materia Bros (Mario, Paul and Mark Materia); the Sycopoulis family home (John, Maroulla and Peter Sycopoulis); Kermond's Snack Bar (Rob and Bill Kermond); Mack's Snacks (Graeme, Keith and Paul McLeod); Savoy Restaurant (Alan Tampion); Rauert's Shoe Store (Ron and Peter Rauert); The Bowl (Lucas Reid and Andrea Occhipinti); Politis Seafood (Helen, George and Chris Politis); Robert Ulmann whale mural (Justy Ulmann); Warrnambool Surf Lifesaving Club (Lisa Logan (Cole), Ben Logan, Ron Cole); The Warrnambool Standard (Peter Collins and Peter Fletcher); The Warrnambool Woollen Mill site (Mary Jackson); Chittick's Bakery (Ian Robb and John Chittick); Capitol Cinema (Ivan Berndt); Fletcher Jones Gardens (Lex Caldwell); The Quarry/ art collectives (Claire Drylie) Ryan's Removals (Frank and Graeme Ryan); 3YB radio (Steve Welsh and Lyndsay Hill); W'bool Grand Annual Steeplechase (Brian McIver); W'bool Aquarium (Donna Krebs (Livingston)); Timor St Newsagency (Brian Mills); Bojangles Pizza (Simon Mugavin); Isles General Store (Ken Isles); McNeil's BP Service Station (Noel McNeil); the War Memorial Angel; T&G clocktower (Peter Hogg); The Criterion Hotel.

[box type="bio"] *Warrnambool – This is home* will be limited to 500 numbered and signed editions. If you would like to order a copy (\$30 plus \$8 flat postage if required) from Bluestone Magazine, [you can do so here](#). Books are also on sale at [Warrnambool Books](#). [/box]

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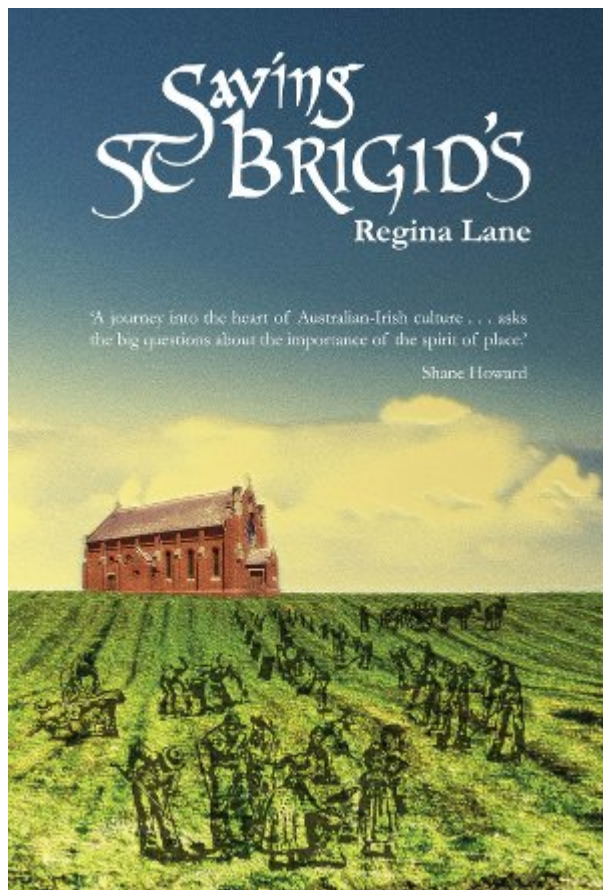
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St Brigid's story proves anything is Pozible



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] 0
[/dropcap]ne of the most highly anticipated local books in a long time is **Regina Lane's** story about the battle to save the 100-year-old St Brigid's Church at Crossley.

Just as the grassroots effort to save the church has been one of epic proportions, so to has the writing of the story behind the campaign that saw the church returned to the community after it was decommissioned by the Catholic Church in 2006.

Saving St Brigid's (Bridin Books) is Regina's first book and was a true labour of love. Her deep, personal connection to the church, which was her family's local church when Regina grew up as a child at Tower Hill, spurred her on to raise the \$15,000 required to write and publish the book.

Late last year Regina launched a [Pozible crowd-sourcing campaign](#), where people are asked to pledge funds to meet a set

target, and continued working on her 50,000-plus word manuscript.

Regina raised the \$15,000 – and polished the manuscript: both by deadline. What a magnificent achievement.



The hard slog: author Brigid Lane puts the finishing touches to Saving St Brigid's during the heatwave earlier this year. (Image: [Brigid Lane](#))

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] While the book will be officially launched tonight, following the 'soft' launch at the Port Fairy Folk Festival last Saturday, we have asked **Michaelie Clark**, from [Warrnambool Books](#), for a synopsis:

"When the Catholic Church put St Brigid's church and hall up for sale in 2009, the reaction from the locals was fervent and swift.

They remembered the legacy of their ancestors, the fierce sense of faith that was represented by the church, built by the children of famine survivors in the Erin of the southern hemisphere. They weren't going to let such an important part of their heritage go without a fight – even if they had to take it all the way to Rome.

Regina Lane brings the spirit of the region's multi-faceted history alive through the tale of modern rebellion, and in doing so, creates her own culture of thought, which leaves a legacy of its own."

You can find out more about Regina and the story behind *Saving St Brigid's* on [her website](#) and the **Friends of St Brigid's website**.

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Writing a star-studded novel



Poet, author and teacher James Laidler at the 2010 Ex-Libris Festival, Port Fairy. (Image courtesy of Ex-Libris).

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] B
[/dropcap]oy, we have some talented school teachers in South-West Victoria.

Not only do they have the exhausting and often unappreciated task of fronting up to a classroom each day to teach, but they are often also writers, poets, musicians and novelists in their “spare” time.

This week, **Michaelie Clark** from [Warrnambool Books](#) has chosen a

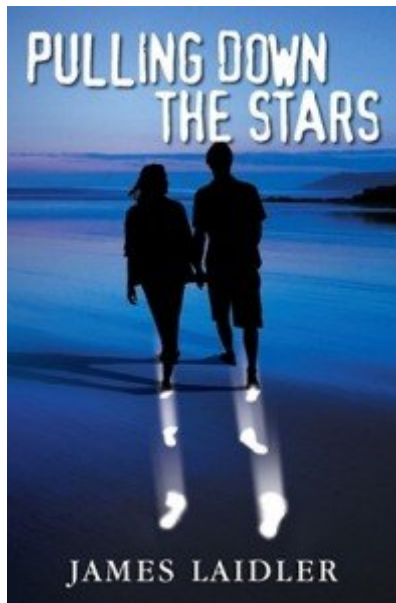
book by Emmanuel College teacher, poet and novelist **James Laidler**, who is rapidly building the sort of CV that makes your eyes water, such is the spectrum of his talent. Here is Michaelie's summary of his latest work:

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"]S[/dropcap]et in Warrnambool, and incorporating some of the city's most famous landmarks, *Pulling Down the Stars* is the second novel by award-winning local author, James Laidler.

Infused with vignettes and the evocative language that defines Laidler's style, the book bridges teen and adult themes and spans genres with its eclectic mix of humour, romance, drama and suspense.

The story revolves around Charlie, a young psychiatric nurse living with his widower father and stroke-affected grandfather. Burdened with the dysfunction and responsibilities of his family, as well as the guilt of wanting to be free to do as he pleases, shy, deep-thinking Charlie finds an outlet in his song-writing while he waits for life to look up.

Instead, his life is turned upside-down when he meets Maxine, a spiky, hot-blooded surfer-girl who works at the local abattoir in order to rebel against her well-to-do parents. Thrown together by unconventional circumstances, a trust and understanding slowly builds between Charlie and Maxine, but unbeknownst to either of them, there is a dangerous threat lurking in their midst...



Find out more about James via his [website](#).

And congratulations to Warrnambool Books for taking out the social media prize at the recent Warrnambool Small Business Awards!

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