

The write stuff: author Steven Conte



Author Steven Conte, who won the inaugural Prime Minister's Literary Award in 2008 with his debut novel, is now living – and writing – in Port Fairy.

Words and photos by Carol Altmann

It says much about the fickle world of literary success that **Steven Conte**, the inaugural winner of the Prime Minister's Literary Award in 2008, is driving taxis two nights a week in Port Fairy.

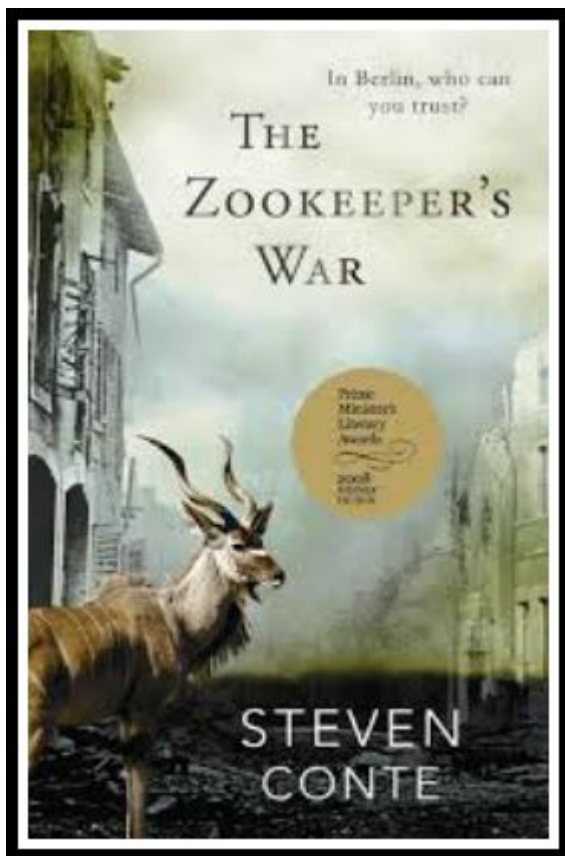
But Steven, a clear-headed, well-travelled, 41-year-old, has seen enough of life to realise that personal self-worth and external notions of “success” should never share the same room.

"It is no doubt professional humiliation, but I long ago succeeded in separating off my personal sense of self with professional success, which is just as well," he says over coffee at Charlie's on East.

Indeed, Steven sees cab driving – one of many such jobs he has taken over the years to support his writing life (others include life modelling and bar work) – as not only a great way to meet the Port Fairy locals, but to earn at least some income while preserving the freedom he needs to write.

"At the moment I am driving two nights a week, which is far better than spending 37 hours a day in an office and having the money, but no time to write," he says.

"I think all writers know that, to be a writer, you have to commit financial self-mutilation somewhere along the way."



It is seven years since Steven won the lucrative, \$100,000 Prime Minister's Literary Award, with his first novel, *The Zookeeper's War*, a story based around an Australian

woman who is married to a German zookeeper, set during the fall of Berlin in the Second World War.

The novel was described, variously, as “an extraordinary debut” and “a powerful exploration” of the issues of trust, fidelity and the brutalities of war as it is experienced by all sides.

Since those heady days of high-profile success, Steven has relocated to Port Fairy with his wife, **Jackie Bowe**, who comes from south-west Victoria, and their infant son. He is now working on his third novel since the award.

Yes, a *third* novel, and what happened to the second helps to explain how things haven't quite worked out as might have been expected.



Baring it all: the Spencer Tunick 'Naked City' photo shoot in Melbourne provided inspiration for Steven's follow-up novel, but it was never published. Image: Travelcity.

As Steven explains it, his second novel was a completely different scenario to that of his first, which always makes publishers nervous, especially when your first novel was such

a success (*The Zookeeper's War* was published internationally).

Naked at the Bridge is set in contemporary Melbourne and focuses on the fictional lives of two women – a couple – who take part in **Spencer Tunick's** real-life photo shoot on the Princess Bridge in 2001. Dozens of people gathered on the bridge that day, including Steven Conte, to be photographed naked for Tunick's signature "Naked City" shoot.

"It is a contemporary story...as opposed to the historical fiction of *The Zookeeper's War*, but the premise just wasn't grabbing people and I couldn't get it published," Steven explains.

Five or six years work was destined, so far at least, to remain in a drawer.



Steven Conte at East Beach: "I long ago succeeded in separating off my personal sense of self with professional success, which is just as well."

While more fragile beings might have curled up into a ball and decided that a writing life was too hard on the soul, Steven pointed himself in a new direction that builds on where he has already gone before.

“I am writing another World War II book...historical fiction, and I am really excited by it and feeling confident about where it is going,” he says.

As any writer knows, to talk too much about a book in progress is to put a hex on it, so Steven will reveal only that it again has a strong European storyline, with an intriguing link to Russia’s Tolstoy.

At this stage the book is still a “glorified blueprint”, but Steven is back into the discipline of writing three to four hours every weekday on a laptop set up in his garage/office.

He doesn’t have an agent and there is no definite publisher for his work in progress, but Steven sees such realities as part of the bigger existential crisis facing the entire publishing industry.

“The ground is shifting beneath us and what might be how things operate one year, is not how they are operating the next.

“This is why you cannot see it as anything to do with your own self worth. You might ask yourself, ‘at what point do I give this up?’, and I am not at that point.”

[box]You can visit Steven Conte’s [website here](#).[/box]