

# Bryce Courtenay

BY JESSICA TEISCH

"First with the head, then with the heart," wrote Bryce Courtenay (1933-2012), Australia's best-selling author, in his blockbuster debut novel *The Power of One* (1989), about a child's journey to adulthood before and during South Africa's apartheid regime. Indeed, with his head and through the lens of history is how Courtenay seemed to view his writing, if not his life.

Over his 30-year writing career, Courtenay, revered by his fans as a "man of the people," built his success by marketing himself and his books and developing relationships with his readers. Yet although he is widely considered Australia's most commercially successful recent writer—he wrote 21 books in 23 years and sold more than 10 million copies of his books in Australia and millions more worldwide—Courtenay's works never achieved the same critical acclaim awarded to other Australian writers such as Peter Carey and Tim Winton. His well-researched, issue-heavy, doorstop-sized novels, from the semiautobiographical *The Power of One*, which created the bildungsroman template for many of his novels, to *The Potato Factory*, a salacious tale of Australia's beginnings, are complex Dickensian tales of action and adversity, rich in larger-than-life characters. For

this reason, the literary elite often dismisses his novels as potboilers and Courtenay as simply a purveyor of popular fiction.

Courtenay's first priority was to tell a good story. "I'd like to be known as someone who tells a story that's perhaps even quasi-important to know," he once told the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "I have the greatest prize of all, the hearts and minds of a whole nation of readers." And despite the occasional bad press, Courtenay did not wholly escape the literary establishment entirely: he was awarded various honorary doctorates and made a Member of the Order of Australia.

Courtenay's penchant for storytelling spilled over into his own picaresque life, and at times, he tinkered with the truth. "It's just how it comes out," he said. "Sometimes it's absurd, sometimes it's ridiculous, often it's laughable. And sometimes it's very close to being a lie" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3/17/12). *The Power of One* contains the broad contours of his life story, and, even if embellished, Courtenay's life is nonetheless a remarkable tale of overcoming adversity.

Born in a village in the Lebombo Mountains in South Africa on August 14, 1933, Courtenay was the son of a

married salesman and an unmarried dressmaker who suffered from nervous breakdowns. He claims to have been raised in an orphanage and reform school (a fact disputed by his older sister), where he honed his storytelling skills to his classmates. “I was beaten up every day until one day I said, ‘Ach man, I’ll tell you a story if you stop.’ Then I threatened not to tell them the next episode if I got beaten up again. It was tough, but it could have been tougher if I hadn’t been born with blue eyes and white skin,” he wrote on his Web site. In 1950, after engaging in the subversive act of helping black Africans learn to read (he was fluent in Zulu and Swazi), Courtenay left South Africa. At age 17, he headed north to work in a copper mine in Rhodesia. “Every night I faced the prospect of not coming out alive,” he told readers. “It gave me enormous lust for life and it paid handsomely.”

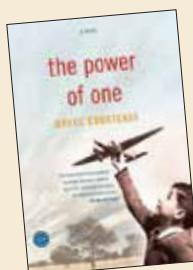
Courtenay used his newly earned money to travel to London and study journalism. There, he met the Australian Benita Solomon and returned to Sydney with her in 1958. They married (though later divorced); he became an Australian citizen (“Everything about [Australia] was right,” he wrote, “the sky was high, the land and people felt familiar.”); and they had three sons. One died of AIDS-related complications contracted through a blood transfusion, which Courtenay related in his heartbreakingly nonfiction book, *April Fool’s Day* (1993).

Courtenay parlayed his journalism skills into advertising over the next 30 years and became an award-winning creative director at various agencies, where he honed his writing and business acumen. Although he enjoyed the executive lifestyle, Courtenay eschewed the hard-drinking, pack-smoking man he had become. In the late 1980s, in his 50s, he started writing fiction and retired from advertising a few years later. “You live three lives. One growing up; one being responsible, paying your mortgage and having kids; and one being yourself. I’m now in my third stage,” he wrote, and with his prolific, popular novels, he more than fulfilled that last stage before his death from gastric cancer in 2012.

## FIRST NOVELS IN COURTEENAY’S SERIES

### The Power of One (1989)

Courtenay’s first novel is the first of his African series, which includes the sequels *Tandia* (1992), *The Night Country* (1998), and *Whitethorn* (2005). Considered one of the most popular Australian novels ever written, the novel has sold more than 8 million copies and been translated into 18 languages. Though purported to be



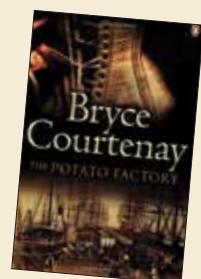
semiautobiographical, Courtenay’s sister admits that, “it wasn’t at all what our childhood had been” (*Sydney Morning Herald* 3/17/12). The book was made into a 1992 film starring Morgan Freeman and Stephen Dorff.

**THE STORY:** Looking back as an adult, Peekay (Afrikaans for “Pisshead”) relates his Dickensian youth in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s. He describes his lonely childhood during World War II, when, at age five, he is shipped off to boarding school and is ridiculed by Dutch Boer students for his English heritage. Then, through a Boer, Peekay discovers his love of boxing—and vows to become the world’s welterweight champion. With racism and apartheid as backdrops, Courtenay’s first work is by turns witty and melodramatic, suspenseful and exotic, as it charts one boy’s violent transition to manhood and empowerment and his discovery of the Power of One: “that in each of us there burns a flame of independence that must never be allowed to go out.”

**“On almost any scale of measurement, *The Power of One* has everything: suspense, the exotic, violence; snakes, bats and Nazis; mysticism, psychology and magic; schoolboy adventures, drama in the boxing ring and disasters in a copper mine. ... You accept Mr. Courtenay as a natural if somewhat naive storyteller, and the incredibility of it all begins to dissolve.”** CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT, NEW YORK TIMES, 6/19/89

### The Potato Factory (1995)

Among Courtenay’s best loved work is The Potato Factory Trilogy (collectively titled *The Australian Trilogy*), picaresque historical novels outlining the development of the Australian nation. As in his other novels, *The Potato Factory* and its sequels contain richly developed characters (many real-life figures) overcoming adversity, multilayered stories about successive generations, and plenty of pulp. *The Potato Factory* explores the lives of the thieves, prostitutes, and lowlife who, suffering from England’s social and political inequalities, were sent to Australia in the 19th century. Sequels: *Tommo & Hawk* (1997), which focuses on the young New Zealand, and *Solomon’s Song* (1999), featuring the divided family seen in the previous two volumes.



**THE STORY:** Ikey Solomon (on whom Charles Dickens patterned his villain Fagin in *Oliver Twist*), a brilliant, ruthless man, has a partner in crime in 19th-century London: his mistress, Mary Abacus, a woman born in the city’s vilest neighborhood who rises from servant to prostitute to high-class madam. All good things must end, of course, and they are sent to the convict settlement of Van Diemen’s Land (now Tasmania). In Hobart Town, Mary learns the art of brewing and founds a successful brewery, the Potato Factory. But Ikey’s wife, the double-crossing Hannah, has other plans for her, and they set out to destroy each other

and each others' families. Ikey's greed, Hannah's hatred, and Mary's ambition tie together their fates, for better or for worse.

**"Now regarded as one of the most popular Australian novels, this is an epic in the true sense of the word. ... The description of life in Hobart Town gives the reader a sense of young Australia as a rough and violent convict settlement."** LAURA COCHRANE, WEEKLY TIMES (MELBOURNE), 12/6/2000

## The Persimmon Tree (2007)

*The Persimmon Tree*, Courtenay's ninth novel, is the first in the Nick Duncan Saga, followed by *Fishing for Stars* (2008).

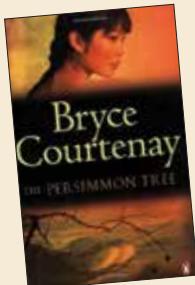
Courtenay, 74 when the novel was published, said he always wanted to write a love story, but he professed that he didn't know how until he felt he had more life experiences under his belt: "The reason is simple enough: most men in my experience have very little idea of what really goes on in a woman's heart or head."

Set in the Pacific during World War II,

*The Persimmon Tree* is a love story, an adventure tale, a war saga, and a novel of courage and survival.

**THE STORY:** Australian butterfly collector Nick Duncan, 17, visits the Dutch-occupied East Indies in 1942 in search of an elusive specimen. Instead, he finds and falls in love with the beguiling half-Dutch, half-Javanese Anna van Heerden. But the imminent Japanese invasion jeopardizes their budding relationship, and they must go their separate ways. Nick sails to Australia on Anna's father's yacht and joins the Allied forces, hoping to eventually reunite with Anna. Anna, however, rather than obtaining refuge in Australia, becomes a prisoner of war. When they meet again years later, the war and their different, tragic experiences find their love and life paths forever changed.

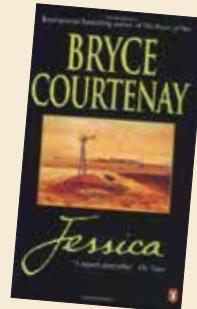
**"Courtenay has written a huge and action-packed saga.... Courtenay leaves no lily ungilded, with a whack of loose and sentimental writing. But if you're a Courtenay fan, you won't be disappointed by the generosity of his imagination."** CAMERON WOODHEAD, AGE (MELBOURNE), 12/22/2007



## SOME WORTHY STANDALONE NOVELS

### Jessica (1998)

*Jessica*, Courtenay's 13th novel, in some ways follows his bildungsroman recipe of hardship, love, deceit, tragedy, and sacrifice. The novel originated from a letter he received from the titular character's niece, who wanted to have her aunt's life story told. "By the time I was nearing the end of the 10-page letter I was genuinely excited. I'd found an astonishing story and I really wanted to write it," Courtenay said (*Sunday Star-Times*, 12/20/1998). "What was so special about Jessica is that she was probably Australia's first liberated woman. She fought against the most astonishing odds to be herself, at a time when women were not allowed to be themselves," he reported (*Press*, 12/27/2005). The novel was adapted into an award-winning Australian television miniseries.

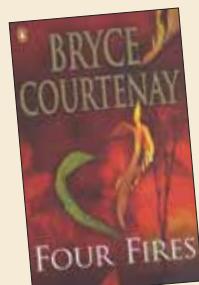


**THE STORY:** In the early years of the 20th century, just before World War I, in frontier farmlands in New South Wales, the strong-willed tomboy Jessica Bergman struggles to work the land with her father. Her mother, meanwhile, schemes to marry off her prissy sister Meg to the town's wealthy bachelor, Jack Thomas. Of course, plans go awry, and Jack falls in love with Jessica instead. Soon, a triple murder endangers Jessica, who acts heroically and fights for justice to save a brain-damaged boy. As Jessica becomes cast out by her family, pregnancies, deceit, and war further plot to ruin Jessica and Jack's love for each other.

**"A moving true story of love, hate and murder."** MIRIYANA ALEXANDER, SUNDAY STAR-TIMES, 12/20/1998

### Four Fires (2001)

As in his other novels, Courtenay compassionately weighs in on social and political issues. This novel, which takes place from the last days of World War II to the end of the 20th century, discusses feminism, PTSD, and prejudice, among others, as it explores one tenacious family's sense of identity and attempt to rise up the social ladder. The four fires of the title are the four elements that Courtenay believes molded the Australian character—war, the religious divide between Protestants and Catho-



lics, passion for sporting, and the battle against bush fires. "Not since writing *The Power of One* have I felt this close to a book," Courtenay wrote on his Web site. "The question of what it is that makes us so uniquely Australian, so different from other peoples around the world is fascinating. Only when we know our history, do we begin to understand who we are. When the past is hidden from us, the future is confused."

**THE STORY:** The Maloneys, a fifth-generation, Irish-Australian Catholic family, live in Yankalillee, a small town in Victoria. Though they start at the social bottom as lowly rubbish collectors, alcoholics, and (unsuccessful) thieves, the tight-knit family strives to pull themselves up despite their dysfunction. A fierce but lovable mother, an emotionally scarred POW father who seeks solace in the bar and bush, three boys, and two girls, one with an illegitimate daughter from a Protestant boy, overcome the obstacles set in their path through sheer strength of character. Told through the eyes of the second-to-last child, Mole, who becomes one of the most talented bush firefighters in the region and in Vietnam, *Four Fires* is, above all, a tale of resilience.

**"The story is a tribute to love, loyalty and survival against the greatest of odds. As we've come to expect from Courtenay, a tour de force of story telling."** STEVE WOODMAN, NEWCASTLE HERALD, 12/15/2001

contracted AIDS from a contaminated blood supply and eventually died. *April Fool's Day*, told from different perspectives—Bryce and his wife, Damon, and Damon's loving girlfriend Celeste, whom he met as a teenager—explores Damon's sickness, positive outlook, relationships, and great inner strength, as well as the ways in which the family coped with Damon's illness and early death. Courtenay also paints a bitter portrait of the inefficient, paternalistic Australian medical community.

**"His best writing was to be found in his non-fiction *April Fool's Day*, the story of his son's losing battle against HIV. When constrained by the imperatives of factual reportage and the examination of memory and lived experience, Courtenay had a great power to move and to convey clear insights. The life he lived was certainly as interesting as the best of the stories that his imagination conjured into narrative."** JULIETTE HUGHES, SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, 12/8/2012 ■

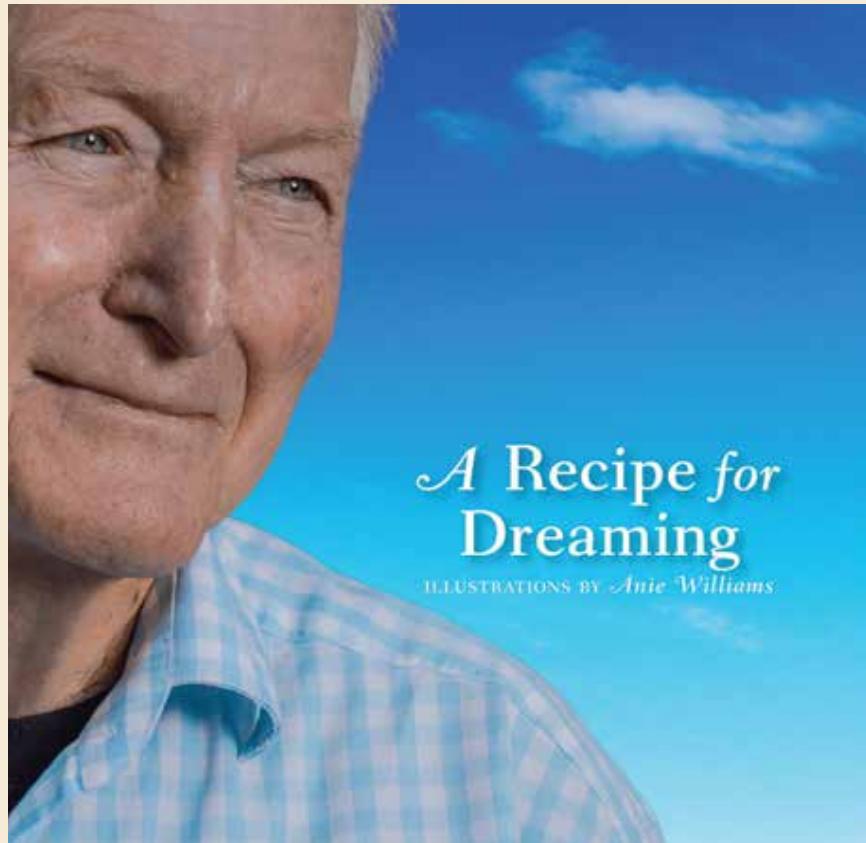


## THE NONFICTION BOOK

### April Fool's Day (1993)

Courtenay dedicated *April Fool's Day*, his only nonfiction work, to his son, Damon, a hemophiliac who contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion and died on April 1, 1991, when he was 24. Courtenay wrote the book as part of Damon's dying wish to dispel the negative perception of HIV/AIDS and its victims at that time. Courtenay professed that with this sad, powerful work, he wished "to reach out and touch people. I hope what comes out of the book is that we should treasure this precious jewel called life while we can, before it's taken away from us" (*Illawarra Mercury*, 1/30/2010).

**THE TOPIC:** Courtenay's son, Damon, was born in 1966 with severe hemophilia, a deadly blood disorder. To stop his bleeds, he needed regular transfusions to stay alive. The screening and fractionation of donated blood in Australia at that time did not, unfortunately, meet safety standards. Damon



**This gift book of "wise words and beautiful images" was first published in 1994 in Australia.**