

## PREFACE

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‘We have been storytellers since the dawn of time. I simply see myself as sitting under the Banyan tree, and saying, “This is what happened” and starting to tell a story.’

Bryce Courtenay, May 2012

BRYCE COURTENAY’S ICONIC DEBUT novel, *The Power of One*, opens with the simple but unforgettable line, ‘This is what happened.’ A born storyteller, Bryce claimed that these words formed the beginning of the eternal story we have wanted to hear since the dawn of time. Yet he never chose to write his autobiography. He would say, ‘What would be interesting about it?’ and he would then quote his friend and fellow Australian writer Morris West, who said, ‘There’s just one problem about writing an autobiography: I don’t much care for the central character.’ Perhaps Bryce also agreed with the sentiments of his great literary hero, Charles Dickens, who wrote, ‘I rest my claims to the remembrance of my country upon my published works . . .’

In April 2020 I sat down at my desk in Sydney and began to write a memoir of sorts of my own – the story of having co-founded in 1975 a pioneering adventure travel company called Australian Himalayan Expeditions. I eventually came to write a chapter that told the story of how Bryce and I first met in 1993. I wrote a second chapter, and then

a third and a fourth! It was clear that I had unexpectedly veered away from writing my own story to writing a memoir about my late husband.

It was a nerve-racking revelation at the time, but I felt encouraged when recalling Bryce's words from *The Power of One*: 'First with the head and then with the heart, you'll be ahead from the start.' I had in fact considered writing about Bryce's life while he was still alive, but he had retorted to this idea, with a loving grin, 'Darling, don't you think one writer in the family is quite enough?' But ultimately the timing felt right, and the urge to continue writing about Bryce's life grew stronger. Slowly, chapter after chapter, the book began to take shape. I hoped that somehow, I might even end up securing a tick of approval from the spirit of the master storyteller himself.

To be Bryce's wife was both a joy and a privilege, and I remain proud of the contribution I made to our years together. Not long after we became a couple, he said, 'I love you very deeply, and we make a fantastic team, but you do realise you have taken on a full-time job looking after me? Plus, for seven months a year you're a writer's widow while you wait for me to finish each book.'

In writing Bryce's memoir I wanted to reveal the story of his life as I came to know it, as well as reflect on his astonishing literary legacy. Bryce's generous support of countless charities, his passion for wildlife and the environment, and his efforts in championing the next generation of writers were also important for me to acknowledge. I was mindful of his advice to others who were planning to write a memoir: 'Whitewashing a family when writing a story is not a story at all!' While this is fair comment, I quickly realised that writing a memoir is a big responsibility and not for the fainthearted. I also came to appreciate why Bryce preferred to write fiction, which allowed his imagination to roam free.

From his humble beginnings in Africa to his dazzling success in advertising and as a bestselling author, Bryce's rags-to-riches life story resembles one of the epic tales of his books. And perhaps it took a life like his to conjure the stories he wrote. Material was no problem – there were so many stories to incorporate from how he survived his tough

childhood to the international acclaim that followed the publication of his debut novel, *The Power of One*, in 1989.

Since Bryce passed away in 2012 a few people have approached me seeking to write his biography, but I never felt comfortable with any of their proposals. It began to make sense for me to undertake the task myself. I recognised I was in a unique position, having for many years been his closest confidante.

But the task did not come without its challenges. Whilst I had known Bryce since 1993, we didn't come together as a couple until the middle of 2005. There were sections of his life I had not been a part of, and this meant I had to spend months researching archives and putting together the pieces of the jigsaw. I drafted copious notes about our years together, read and listened to hundreds of media interviews, and organised our extensive archive of photographs. I re-read Bryce's books, and in doing so appreciated even more how he had woven aspects of his own life into them. I also spoke with some family members and people who had known Bryce for decades, and I am indebted to them for sharing their time and candid insights. There were inevitable gaps, but I felt I had enough material to write an authentic story told with integrity, humour and love.

In the middle of 2020, I found a battered, unmarked cardboard box in my garage containing over 120 letters written by Bryce to his mother. At first I didn't realise what they were and came close to throwing them out, but I quickly came to see the discovery provided a cache of pure gold for my manuscript. I only wish I had found them while Bryce was alive: I would have loved to have asked him countless questions about their contents. These precious letters also made me appreciate even more what he had gone through in his life. I have included excerpts from these letters in this book, and have retained Bryce's misspellings for authenticity.

Bryce was an amazing but complex person, and uncovering the events that defined his true self has been challenging and, at times, even heartbreaking. He endured a chaotic childhood with tenuous

relationships with both of his parents, which he sometimes described as being ‘short on love, lonely, and brutal’. Nonetheless he never failed to acknowledge that his parents had done their best, living through difficult times and circumstances themselves. Bryce was blessed with a positivity and a great sense of humour from an early age, which enabled him to keep hope in his heart. Even still, emotional deprivation endured in his childhood left deep scars that never fully healed. While he was consistently Australia’s number-one bestselling author, in his own eyes it was perhaps never enough. At times his psychological scars led him down pathways that caused him to be a bit reckless – and, later, regretful. Admittedly, we have all done or said things that on reflection we wish we hadn’t.

Bryce’s life wasn’t defined by fame or money. He did, however, struggle to feel a sense of self-worth, and perhaps no one person could give him the amount of love he craved. But he was an extraordinary, generous and loving husband and I cherish the precious years we shared. I miss him dreadfully, and always shall, while remembering what he said to me in the last few days of his life: ‘Darling, I want you to embrace the gift of life as I have.’

Bryce was devoted to his family and his three children, Brett, Adam, and Damon, and frequently said, ‘The most important and meaningful aspect of my life is being a father.’ It was a sentiment that carried greater poignancy given he did not find out who his own father was until he was fifteen years old. Bryce also took care of his mother, Maud Jessamine Greer, and provided her with financial assistance from an early age.

His passion for life, humour and positive attitude provides an enduring tale of someone who never lost hope, and who held fast to his dream of becoming a writer. The events of his own life inspired many of the themes of his books: triumph against adversity, and holding tight to a dream.

At times Bryce had to pay a price for the unrivalled success he achieved both in the advertising industry and as a bestselling author. His personal courage, resilience and humour were a constant source of

inspiration to me, to his family and to almost everyone he met. He was always able to summon the courage to carry on, even through difficult times or when tragedy struck. The most devastating example of this was on 1 April 1991, when his youngest son, Damon, passed away aged just twenty-four.

Bryce was a gifted storyteller. With the application of truckloads of ‘bum glue’ he managed to write twenty-one books in twenty-three years. Most of them became number-one bestsellers, and some went on to sell millions of copies worldwide. It has been estimated that something like one in three Australian households owns a Bryce Courtenay novel. He used to say with pride, ‘My books belong with the socks and the chocolates under the Christmas tree.’ Bryce’s books sometimes received unflattering reviews from literary critics, but he was far more interested in the opinion of his readers, and would say, ‘The reader is always right’, even referring to the reader as ‘the fourth protagonist’ in his books.

Bryce was diagnosed with gastric cancer in late 2010. In the last months of his life he kept writing even though his illness was extracting a terrible toll. He rarely complained, and at the end of July 2012 the final chapter of his novel *Jack of Diamonds* was completed, a year later than he had intended. At that point he then pretty much turned off his computer. He wanted to spend the time he had left with me, and with Brett and Ann, Adam and Gina, and his beloved grandchildren. It was an intense experience, but I know how much it meant to him to share this time with those he cared about most. Bryce passed away on 22 November 2012 at the age of seventy-nine, just ten days after the publication of *Jack of Diamonds*.

I hope he would approve of my decision to write the story of his extraordinary life. He always knew that one day a biography would be written, of that I am sure. I have often felt his guiding hand on my shoulder from the portrait of him by Paul Newton, which hangs on the wall behind my desk. I can’t tell you how many times I have gazed at this artwork and said, ‘I wish I had asked you more questions about your life!’ Throughout, I have tried to keep uppermost in my mind the words he

cherished from his grandfather, that ‘Good storytelling must include a bucketful of tears and a bellyful of laughs.’

This book was written to present to Bryce’s three grandchildren, Ben, Jake and Marcus, and to my son, Nima. It was also written for the millions of readers around the world who continue to inspire me to champion Bryce’s legacy. Their outpouring of love and kindness has been remarkable, and many have begged me to write Bryce’s life story. There is no question that in every respect Arthur Bryce Courtenay AM was a force of nature. My hope is that this book will be received as a fair testament to his life, and an inspiring celebration of all that he achieved.

In advance, I extend my apologies for any errors in my book. I have truly given it my best. I have poured my heart into writing it over an eighteen-month period, and am both grateful and honoured that Penguin Random House Australia decided it was worthy of publication. I especially wish to thank their CEO, Julie Burland, and my publisher and editor, Rachel Scully, who believed in me and whose contribution as my editor has been extraordinary. It is my hope that people reading it will be pleased with this tribute, the first biographical work of Bryce’s life. It is especially poignant that it is being released on the tenth anniversary of his passing. I invite you to turn the page and commence reading *Bryce Courtenay: Storyteller*.

My warmest wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christine Courtenay". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline that extends under the word "Courtenay".

Christine Courtenay AM  
1 August 2022