**Bryce Courtenay** is in remarkably good spirits for a person in his predicament. "This might be the last interview ever," he says, with what can only be described as a devil-may-care laugh. It is more than a year since Australia's top-selling novelist was diagnosed with stage three stomach cancer. As he points out, "Stage four is it." But the author of such blockbusters as *Tandia* and *The Potato Factory* sees little sense in wasting time worrying about his future, or lack of it. Since recovering from surgery to remove the tumours, he has been hard at work on his latest sprawling epic, putting in 12-hour shifts at his desk and tapping out thousands of words a day. Post-operative chemotherapy and radiation therapy were recommended, he says, but he was told they would only slightly improve his prognosis and he figured the side effects would play havoc with his writing schedule. He prefers to take his chances without them.

So far, so good. His 21st book is coming along nicely and Courtenay looks as healthy and spry as any 78-year-old has a right to look. His cheeks are pink, his mood is buoyant. "May I have a hug?" he asks when I arrive at his comfortable house in a leafy inner suburb of Canberra.

Courtenay is not only this country's most popular purveyor of fiction - a more or less permanent fixture on our best-seller lists - but one of our best-loved citizens. A small man with a big personality, he is a Member of the Order of Australia, an Australia Day ambassador and both sponsor and presenter of the annual Australian Hero Award. As a public speaker, he is so inspirational that he has been known to move even himself to tears. But as he wraps me in his arms, I am uncomfortably aware that there are some strange inconsistencies in his life story.

Have you fudged facts? There is no nice way of asking that. But as it turns out, Courtenay admits freely to a tendency to tinker with the truth. He says he doesn't mean to mislead, exactly. "It's just how it comes out. Sometimes it's absurd, sometimes it's ridiculous, often it's laughable. And sometimes it's very close to being a lie."

Listening to the conversation is his second wife and former publicist, Christine Gee. "Not a lie, darling," she corrects him. "No, you don't tell lies. Lying isn't a nice thing to do."

Gee, 57, turns to me: "I don't see Bryce as someone who lies. I see him as someone who will embellish a story for effect, but he will never deliberately tell a lie to hurt someone, to win a point or anything like that."

Courtenay agrees. "I never do it to gain anything," he says. "No way."

**Hundreds of articles** have been written about Courtenay since the 1989 release of his smash-hit debut novel, *The Power of One*, said to be based on his own harrowing childhood in South Africa. Trawling through the archives before we meet, I read about his early years in a brutal orphanage, his banishment from the land of his birth as a result of his efforts to help the oppressed black majority, his emergence as an advertising whiz-kid in Australia and his eventual transformation into a sensationally successful author. There is much about his despair over his son's death from medically acquired AIDS (the subject of a poignant non-fiction book, *April Fool's Day*), his struggle to forgive critics who dismiss his novels as pot­boilers and the solace he has found in long- distance running. If you were writing the back-cover blurb for his biography, you would use phrases like "epic tale of adversity and triumph" and "spellbinding testament to the strength of the human spirit".

Flicking through the newspaper files, my eye is caught by a snippet about Courtenay competing in the 1996 Boston marathon. According to the report, he realised 35 kilometres into the race that he wasn't as fit as he should have been. Deciding the best tactic was to hook up with another runner, he fell into step with someone nearby and discovered that he, too, was a writer. The pair chatted intermittently until crossing the finish line, at which point Courtenay asked his new friend's name. "Stephen King," the guy replied.

I contact the office of the master of the chiller-thriller to check the details of the story. The email from King's executive assistant, Marsha De Filippo, is short and surprising: "Stephen has never run in the Boston marathon."

A small thing. But it is still in my mind when I come across an account by Courtenay of how he came to migrate to Australia. "I was in a bar in Earls Court in London," he is quoted as saying, "and there was this unbelievably beautiful woman with a man you just knew was going to end up fat and bald. They were talking to each other about how Australia was a cultural desert that didn't appreciate their talent, which is why they'd come to the UK, and I was thinking, 'I don't have much talent, maybe that'd be okay for me.' Of course, it turned out they were Clive James and Germaine Greer."

The trouble is that Courtenay moved to Australia in 1958, several years before James and Greer went to England and became celebrated expatriates. Again, it could be an inconsequential error. Or it could be part of a pattern.

**Friends of Courtenay** will tell you that he is the warmest, most wonderful guy in the world. "'Great' is an overused word, but Bryce is actually a great man," says British polar trekker Robert Swan, while one-time prime-ministerial adviser Simon Balderstone describes him as "a class act". Chair of a charitable foundation that provides education and health services to the people of Nepal, Balderstone met Courtenay through Gee, who co-founded the adventure travel company Australian Himalayan Expeditions and sits on the foundation's board. "Christine just adores him, and vice versa," says Balderstone. "He says to me all the time, 'I'll do anything for my darling Christine, and that includes helping you.' " Courtenay's support for the foundation and a host of other charities and humanitarian organisations runs to more than writing cheques. "He's very generous financially and very generous with his time," Balderstone says. "With Bryce, it's all-encompassing. It's generosity of spirit."

Philanthropy is particularly impressive in one who has had to be sturdily self-reliant himself. "Whatever he's done, he's done by himself, with no help," says Courtenay's close friend Alex Hamill, former head of the George Patterson advertising agency. "He's a man who has never had anyone to rely upon."

Courtenay arrived on these shores with little money and no job prospects but a lot of ambition. He has often said that as his ship sailed up Sydney Harbour, he caught a glimpse of a large white house with walls covered in bright bougainvillea and resolved that one day he would own it. Seventeen years later, after carving out a dazzling career in advertising, he turned the key in the lock. It is not much of a stretch to think of Courtenay as Sydney's version of Don Draper, the brilliant, hard-living creative director of the Madison Avenue firm Sterling Cooper in the hit television series *Mad Men*. "He was very famous for his long lunches," Hamill says. "He was a heavy drinker, a heavy smoker. Scotch, mostly."

As a late-summer storm brews outside his living-room window, Courtenay tells me a well-polished anecdote about the time the manufacturers of Mortein threatened to dump McCann Erickson, the agency that then employed him, because their insect spray wasn't selling. Summoned to the office for an emergency meeting, he spent the 20-minute taxi ride jotting the outline of a new campaign on the back of an envelope: "I said to the cab driver, 'What's your name?' He said, 'Louie.' And I wrote this thing about a fly."

Visitors to the Mortein website can view a TV ad starring a fly called Louie that dates from 1957, before Courtenay got his start in the industry. He cannot have invented the character, as he has long claimed, but he did play a significant part in the creation of the singing Louie that first appeared on our screens in 1962 and was still there, spreading disease with the greatest of ease, some five decades later. (Late last year, Mortein announced Louie was finally to be killed off, but after a public outcry, the company agreed to a stay of execution. At time of writing, his fate is undecided.)

When Courtenay decided to become a novelist, his marketing nous stood him in good stead. "There are writers in this country who are better than me," he says, echoing the words of many a reviewer. But no one disputes that when it comes to pitching a book to the paying public, the former adman is in a class of his own. Who else tests cover designs with focus groups, distributes sample chapters at railway stations and hires sky-writers to emblazon titles high above cities? With one of his novels, he went so far as to launch a tie-in beer (Tommo & Hawk Premium Ale). "Bryce is, beyond anything else, a promoter," says Hamill. "There are some great authors in Australia, and I know many of them, who won't get off their bums and sign books in shopping centres."

Whereas Courtenay is never happier than sitting in-store with a pen in his hand and a queue of fans in front of him. Owen Denmeade, another of his old advertising mates, salutes him for the enthusiasm he brings to the task. How many title pages has he autographed over the years? Denmeade hates to think. "We used to say, if you've got an unsigned copy of a Bryce Courtenay book, it's worth a lot of money."

Bookshelves across Australia groan under the weight of Courtenay's whopping novels - more than 700 pages, many of them. Bob Sessions, his publisher at Penguin Australia, says that since 1997 he has sold 9.5 million volumes, close to eight million of them in this country. The Power of One is way out in front but all his titles do well. "When the book trade was in better health, it was quite common for us to sell more than 250,000 copies of a new Bryce Courtenay," says Sessions. These days, it is more likely to be about 200,000. "Which is 100,000 more than anybody else except *Harry Potter* and *The Da Vinci Code*."

According to Shaun Symonds at Nielsen BookScan, he easily beats Matthew Reilly and Di Morrissey, currently the next most popular Australian novelists. Courtenay is the author of 12 of the top 50 most borrowed titles in public libraries since surveys began almost 40 years ago, and four of the top 10. (*Tommo & Hawk* and *The Potato Factory* come in first and *second*, Jessica and *Solomon's Song* eighth and ninth.) Reilly has only two books in the top 50, Morrissey none.

Who are Courtenay's readers? "I don't think they're the kind of people who would normally attempt a big book, to be honest with you," says Sessions, explaining that Courtenay's skill is in knowing how to hook them and draw them along: "They want a strong plot with lots of twists and turns, and they want colourful characters - sometimes too large and too colourful to be true, but that's okay." He regards Courtenay as a master of old-fashioned storytelling. "I call him a latter-day Charles Dickens."

Like the great 19th-century English novelist, who gave readings and lectures to packed houses, Courtenay is a natural performer. "He really does connect with people," says Sandy Grant, who published his first five titles when he was chief executive of Reed Australia. In the early days on the promotional trail, Grant wondered how Courtenay's heart-on-sleeve style would go over with audiences. "But the crowds loved it. They were all on their feet, rushing to embrace him."

I remark in passing that Grant must have come to know Courtenay pretty well. After a pause, he replies that he is not sure how well anyone knows him. "I wouldn't know what was real and what wasn't real, in retrospect," Grant says.

Suddenly the theme music from *Mad Men* is playing in my head. The history and true identity of Don Draper are a mystery to most of the other characters in the show. "Draper? Who knows anything about that guy?" says one of his colleagues at Sterling Cooper. "No one's ever lifted that rock."

**Courtenay holds up his left hand** and shows me a scar on the forefinger. He says he got it more than 70 years ago, at an orphanage outside Duiwelskloof, a small town at the base of the Limpopo mountains in north-east South Africa. He was seven years old, and gathering firewood to heat the water for the children's weekly showers, when he started playing with an axe a bigger boy had left in a log. Next thing, his finger was hanging off and the matron was giving him a hiding. "People who worked in orphanages were pretty rough. We got beaten so often on our bums that we got these permanent marks. We used to call it Chinese writing."

He says he walked the 10 kilometres to the doctor's surgery with his injured hand wrapped in a tea-towel, arriving so weak from loss of blood that he passed out under a mango tree. The doctor found him there that night and stitched him up but then was called away to an emergency. "I crawled under his house, which was like a Queenslander, on stilts," Courtenay says. "I woke up in the morning and the sun was streaming through the floorboards on the verandah. I'd been lying against a packing case and, being curious, I opened it. It was full of books. On top was a red morocco leather book with gold edging to the pages. I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my life."

He took the precious volume back to the orphanage, he says, where he hid it until a kindly temporary teacher arrived from Johannesburg. "She was the first person ever to gain my confidence. I took her my book and said, 'Please teach me to read this.' " The text was in English, which presented a problem. Courtenay had been in the orphanage since he was a baby, he says, and despite his Anglo surname, spoke only Afrikaans. But both he and his teacher were up for the challenge: "She taught me to read English! I could read it before I could speak it."

While I am getting my head around that, he gallops on. "The book was called *The Abolition of Slavery in the Cape Province 1834*. And by the age of 11, I could recite every single one of the 813 pages. I learnt the whole thing by rote."

What I want to say is, "Whoa there ... 813 pages? By rote?" But Courtenay has already moved on to the bit where, with his teacher's encouragement, he sits for a scholarship to King Edward VII School, one of Johannesburg's leading boys' colleges. "She said, 'You won't win at 11 because it's mostly won by 14-year-olds and nobody has ever won it at 11. But I want you to sit it for the next three years and you'll get it, I feel sure." Courtenay blitzed the exam at his first attempt, he says, and became the youngest person ever to win the scholarship - "with the highest marks ever achieved, I think".

Mind you, he felt a bit out of place among middle-class students from stable homes. On ABC TV's *Talking Heads* in 2006, he said: "I never wanted anybody to know that I had no background, that there was just this darkness, a vacuum in the back of me, that I came from nothing and no one." (As if he sprang from a Petri dish, remarked one TV reviewer.) On ABC Radio in 2010, he said he slept on park benches in the school holidays rather than return to the orphanage. He befriended derelicts and, at the end of each vacation, "I used to line them up and take them to hospital and have them all checked out, because drunks don't die of alcohol, they die of other things." His actions did not go unnoticed: "By the time I had reached my matric year, Johannesburg Hospital at Witwatersrand University had offered me a scholarship in medicine."

Courtenay tells me he excelled at school ("I was a so-called brilliant student, I could do anything"). But in the radio interview, he made clear that he avoided getting too close to the other boys. "If you're going to survive, the one thing you can't do is tell 'em anything," he said. "You have to be totally secretive about who you are, what you are. You also learn to lie, of course."

**Working from 7am to 7pm,** seven days a week, Courtenay takes seven months to write a novel. He starts work the day after Australia Day and finishes on August 31, delivering each chapter to Penguin on completion to ensure that the book can be edited, printed and in the shops for the Christmas rush. "The last six books I've finished within an hour of each other," he says, "right to the point of having a courier waiting for the last chapter at the front door."

To help him keep to such a tight timetable, he employs a full-time researcher, his brother-in-law Bruce Gee. "Like a lot of people, he's not a terribly quick reader," says Bruce. "My job is to get information to him in a predigested form." Also entrusted with checking each day's output for errors, Bruce points out that he isn't the only one on the payroll. "People advise us on music, for instance, and on esoteric things like historical railways. All sorts of stuff ... Bryce is almost a cottage industry."

Despite all this assistance, some of Courtenay's novels have received withering reviews. Writing in *The Age*, Juliette Hughes described *Sylvia* - which is set during the 12th-century children's crusade and has a beautiful, preternaturally gifted teenage heroine - as "a book so mystifyingly bad that the main thought you come away with after struggling through it is 'Why?'" This sort of negativity makes Courtenay hopping mad. After *The Power of One* got mixed notices in some Australian publications, he pointed out indignantly that it had been lauded overseas. "*The Kirkus Reviews* called it a literary masterpiece," he said. (Actually, *Kirkus* called it "surprisingly refreshing", "somewhat endearing" and an example of "sturdy, workmanlike prose".)

Courtenay is convinced that some of the literati have been out to get him from the start: "They decided, 'This guy's an adman and he couldn't possibly be writing anything but crap.'" Fellow Australian adman-turned-novelist Peter Carey has encountered no such prejudice - in fact, he has been awarded two Booker Prizes - but Courtenay has an explanation for that: Carey himself is "a perfect example of that kind of inane literary snobbery", he has said in the past. He tells me, "I've known him for 30 years and I like his work, certainly, but he's a very strange guy." He once stopped to chat to Carey in an airport lounge, he says, and noticed after a while that the other writer was casting anxious glances over his shoulder. "I said, 'Peter, are you waiting for somebody?' He said, 'Bryce, look, I'd rather not be seen with you.'" (Carey denies that this happened.)

Courtenay has little doubt that if he put his mind to it, he could win the sort of accolades heaped on Carey and West Australian novelist Tim Winton. "Timmy typically takes three to four years to write a book," he has been quoted as saying. "I know if I took that long I could write a superb literary novel, but I'm not vaguely interested in doing that."

**Courtenay likes to think** he has always stood up for the principle of a fair go for all. In Helen Chryssides' 1995 book *A Different Light: Ways of Being Australian*, he says he read in a newspaper when he was at school that a professor in Alabama had determined the negroid brain was smaller than that of Caucasians, thereby establishing that blacks were inferior to whites. He says he knew even at 12 that this was nonsense, so he took up his headmaster's challenge to argue the case at the next meeting of the debating society. He phoned Witwatersrand University's anthopology department, hoping to get some help with his research, and "the guy that answered was Professor Louis Leakey, the world-famous anthropologist". The way Courtenay tells it, the distinguished authority on human evolution was temporarily based at the university and "he said, 'Son, wait there, I'm coming over.' "

One of Leakey's biographers, Mary Bowman-Kruhm, tells me she can find no record of Leakey spending an interlude at Witwatersrand, and that she doubts he was even in South Africa at the time in question, though anything is possible. In any case, Courtenay says he lost the debate despite Leakey's coaching: "I couldn't beat the prejudice."

As thunder rumbles over Canberra, he tells how he started literacy lessons for the college's black servants and others who wanted to attend. "I had anything up to 400 Africans in the school hall on a Sunday," he says. "They all had slates and they'd wear their best clothes - mismatching jackets etcetera - and they'd be scrubbed clean and shiny." Twice, the police arrived and demanded the classes be shut down. The second time, "they said, 'We'll close the school if he doesn't close *his* school.' "

To the rescue came Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest and anti-apartheid activist who offered the use of his church hall, Courtenay says, but when the lessons moved there, police torched the building. (Neither the school nor the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre has any record of the classes, which doesn't mean they didn't take place. A memorial centre spokesman, Tricia Sibbons, is adamant the church hall never burned down.)

Courtenay says that as a young man he spent a year in Zambian copper mines, detonating high explosives underground in a job so dangerous that "of the 12 guys who joined with me, six were dead by the end of the time I was there". Back in South Africa, preparing to embark for the UK to attend the London School of Journalism (having knocked back the offer of a place at Oxford), he was visited by a police officer who told him if he ever returned, he would be put under house arrest. As it turned out, he wasn't even tempted to go back because in London he met and fell in love with a charming and cultivated young Australian, Benita Solomon. They married after he followed her back to Sydney.

The couple had three sons - Brett, now 50, Adam, 48, and Damon, the youngest, who had haemophilia and died aged 24 in 1991 of AIDS acquired from a transfusion of a blood product. Courtenay has said that writing *April Fool's Day* was "the single hardest thing I've ever done in my life. I had to write the absolute, total, complete truth." In the book, he says advertising industry heavyweight Sim Rubinsohn persuaded Gough Whitlam's government to introduce legislation that would permit parents to give their children transfusions at home, rather than having to rush back and forth to hospital. But talking to me, Courtenay takes credit for lobbying Whitlam himself: "One day I said to him, 'Gough, if ever you are prime minister, and I'm sure you are going to be, can you make sure that they allow home transfusions? He said, 'Bryce, I promise you.'"

In fact, home transfusions started in the 1970s at the instigation of doctors, says Henry Ekert, who at the time was director of clinical haematology at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital and head of Victoria's haemophilia treatment program. "We started home treatment without checking with Gough Whitlam or anybody else because it was not necessary to have legislation," Ekert says.

A section of *April Fool's Day* was purportedly written by Damon's girlfriend, Celeste Coucke, but she tells me that Courtenay was really the author. "It's my story but it's in his words," says Coucke, who came to regret the arrangement. "I had no editorial control over what was written, which actually was very upsetting for me at the time. There were things there that I didn't want to be published and Bryce refused to remove them." She was then in her early 20s: "If I had been older, I probably would have stood up for myself."

Though Coucke was close to Courtenay in the six years she spent in the bosom of his family, she learnt to take what he said with a grain of salt. His sons referred to "dad-facts", Coucke says. "I called them Bryce-facts." In those days, though, "he was a very different person. I think that fame has changed him a great deal. It worries me that he believes his own hype."

**Sometimes Courtenay describes himself** as an orphan. More often, he says he was put in an orphanage when he was a few months old by a single mother too poor and mentally unstable to look after him. "My mother was obviously bipolar," he tells me. "She sometimes used to take me out of the orphanage and then I'd go back again. Actually, in the end, I just asked to stay. It was too hard."

Courtenay has a sister, Rosemary Anderson, 79, who lives with her husband in San Diego. When I phone her a few days after visiting Courtenay, she says he has always been very generous to her. "He's a darling person," she says. But she admits she was dismayed when she read *The Power of One* because "it wasn't at all what our childhood had been".

Having remained silent all these years, Anderson feels a responsibility to tell the truth as she knows it. "It's awkward," she says, "because it's his word against mine ... I don't want to get into Bryce's bad books about this." But the fact is, Courtenay was not raised in an orphanage. The siblings certainly spent time in one, she says, and she is sure that for her little brother, then aged five, it was a horrible experience. "But it wasn't for long. It was a matter of weeks or months." This was in Krugersdorp, north-west of Johannesburg, when their mother, Maude "Paddy" Greer, was briefly married to a man named Roberts. Anderson says they later boarded for about six months at a school in Duiwelskloof, where Courtenay was mercilessly bullied. For the most part, though, they were with their mother, a dressmaker and sales assistant who was subject to "nervous breakdowns" but nevertheless did her best for her children. "We had a difficult start in life," says Anderson, "but we had a mother who truly loved us and showed that she did. We both adored her."

Courtenay is patron of a children's charity called The Pyjama Foundation. On its website, he says he can relate to kids who have been neglected or abandoned: "I was 15 years old before I was embraced or kissed." Anderson demurs. "My mother was very affectionate," she says. "Bryce loved sitting on her lap even when he was quite a big boy." The two were quite similar in nature, she adds. "They were both very loving, outgoing people."

Asked if her mother was upset by the content of *The Power of One*, Anderson says: "It may have hurt her, but I think she understood that he wanted to sell that book and it had to be interesting." Courtenay, who supported his mother financially, has said that she finally told him his father's name the night before she died, aged 93. But Anderson insists that brother and sister had known from their early teens that Arthur Ryder, the married clothing salesman they had thought to be their godfather, was in fact their father. She says Courtenay did not win a scholarship to college; Ryder paid his boarding fees. He did not spend holidays on park benches, either. And he grew up speaking English, not Afrikaans.

Maude Greer gave her children the surname Courtenay, but her son was registered as Arthur Bryce Courtenay Roberts at King Edward VII School, where he completed his final year in 1951. On the Pyjama Foundation website, he says he graduated as "one of the most applied and academically gifted children the school has seen". David Williams, the school's foundation director, looks up old college magazines and sends puzzling news: "The 1952 magazine lists the matriculants in the Transvaal Secondary School Certificate examination for the previous year - his name does not appear in that list."

After the email from Williams and my conversation with Anderson, I phone Courtenay. "Of *course* I won a scholarship," he says indignantly. His sister is wrong about other things, too: when she was at the school in Duiwelskloof, he was at an institution called The Boys' Farm outside the town. It was there that he had the accident with the axe. "My sister is a deeply religious, Pentecostal person," he says. "She gives her version of the truth. You have to decide."

When I mention his name's absence from the King Edward VII School matriculation list, there is a brief silence on the line. "I am astonished," Courtenay says. "But I can't say more than that." A couple of minutes later, he winds up the call.

"I don't want to say any more. Honestly, this is getting absurd. I mean, my life is an open book."

Writers have a propensity for re- inventing themselves, says Peter Pierce, editor of *The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia*. "I don't think we should single Courtenay out for so carefully creating his own story. Dickens was a wonderful self-fashioner and self-publicist. Otherwise he wouldn't have made more money on the stage than he did from writing."

At Penguin Australia, Bob Sessions sees Courtenay's readiness to rewrite reality as no more than a symptom of a hyperactive imagination: "It's just a question of where one draws the line between fact and fantasy. And his line is drawn somewhere different, probably, to yours and mine."

As a journalist, Adam Courtenay is by trade and temperament a truth-seeker, but he says in defence of his father: "He can find the inner truth in people in a way that many other writers who simply stick to the plain facts are incapable of doing."

For Owen Denmeade, the tall tales are part and parcel of his friend's appeal. "He's a storyteller, a bullshit artist," Denmeade says cheerfully. "But he's not a hurtful bullshit artist. He doesn't set out to damage anyone. Absolutely never. He's never set out to bring anyone down."

Celeste Coucke isn't sure that she is prepared to let him off that lightly. To dream up Bryce-facts is one thing, she says. "To turn them into some sort of boys' own adventure so that you receive adulation, I just find that very odd. A child does that, not a grown man."

In my original conversation with Courtenay, he makes clear that, at some level, his confabulation is a protective strategy. "I can actually see a 'naked fact', " he says. "A 'naked fact' is about me, at seven, standing in the nude with my hands over my scrotum, because I'd been circumcised for some reason, and nobody else in the orphanage was circumcised. And I have this impulse to dress [the fact] up - put on a pair of dancing shoes and a bow tie and comb its hair and say, 'Go for it, kid.'"

I ask if he always knows when he has thrown the switch to vaudeville. "Absolutely," he replies. He doesn't get mixed up about what is and isn't true? "Good Lord, no."

But he can see that the tap-dancing causes problems. "It just goes too far sometimes. I get carried away ... It's hard to excuse, in fact it's probably inexcusable. But it's who I am."

**Courtenay left Benita in 1998** after almost 40 years of marriage. They remained friends and he was at her bedside when she died of acute myeloid leukaemia in 2007. At her funeral, he sang Gershwin's *Summertime*, which seemed to Coucke, for one, a little over the top: "You were sort of thinking, 'This is not about *you*.'"

Last October, Courtenay married Christine, his partner of five years (having earlier had a relationship with her identical twin, literary agent Margaret Gee). They moved to Canberra from the NSW southern highlands to be closer to medical specialists - besides the cancer surgery, he has had a heart valve replacement, and his back is so bad he wouldn't mind an operation on that, too. But it was a bout of shingles last year that stopped him delivering his new book, *Jack of Diamonds*. It wasn't the pain that was the problem ("I don't give a shit about pain") but the fact that the medication scrambled his brain. Says Alex Hamill, who reads all Courtenay's work in manuscript form: "It became apparent to me around the middle of this book that it just wasn't going anywhere. I said to Christine, 'This book is quite strange.'"

Courtenay was inconsolable about missing his first deadline in two decades. "I know how stupid it is," he says, "but when you have one of those A-type personalities where achievement is important, and you have my kind of background, then ... failure is unthinkable." It wasn't as though he was hanging on the income from the book's sales, though, according to Gee, he is not as wealthy as might be imagined. "He could be worth an absolute fortune," she says, "and his accountant wrings his hands that he's not. He's lost it, given it away, made bad business decisions, whatever." Courtenay shrugs: "Money doesn't interest me even vaguely."

The hero of *Jack of Diamonds* is a musician and gambler named Jack Spayd. According to advance publicity, he is "a young, talented man, fighting to achieve his ambitions, and having to use his considerable talents to find his way in a perilous world". Which could be a synopsis of many of Courtenay's books. Anyway, the author was back on the job at the first opportunity, attacking his computer keyboard with hands so badly affected by arthritis that he can type with only two fingers. "The discipline is just breath-taking," Gee says of his approach to his writing. "People think it pours out of him. But I see very little ecstasy and a lot of agony."

His son, Brett, watches all this with bemusement. "I mean, why? What's to prove?" he asks; he loves Courtenay and has long wished he would devote less time to his work and more to his family. "But it's not for me to say, 'Hey, that's a poor substitute for living, breathing grandchildren.' It's something for him to decide himself." It seems to Coucke that for Courtenay, "the story is everything. But at what cost really? It's sort of like winning at the expense of everything else. Winning is a wonderful thing but you'd want your family to be there on the finishing line, too, one would think."

The cancer could return at any time. Courtenay says his doctors have told him there is a 50 per cent chance it will recur within two years. When I look at him sympathetically, he protests that those are pretty good odds. "I'll take a 50-50 gamble on anything," he says.

Heads you live, tails you die. "You win or you lose. I mean, there isn't anything in between."