

The  
Tolstoy  
Estate

READING

GROUP NOTES

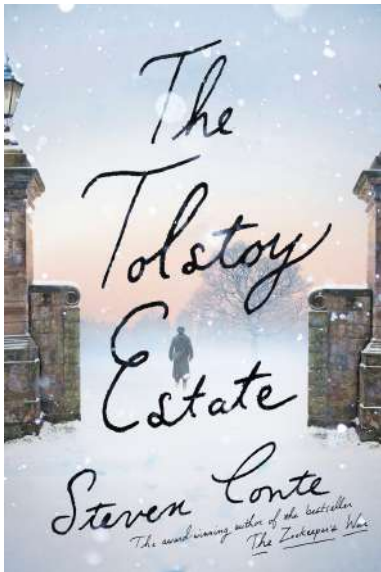
# The Tolstoy Estate

## by Steven Conte

**Powerful, densely rich and deeply affecting, *The Tolstoy Estate* shows Steven Conte to be one of Australia's finest writers.**

In the first year of the doomed German invasion of Russia in World War II, German military doctor Paul Bauer is assigned to establish a field hospital at Yasnaya Polyana – the former grand estate of Count Leo Tolstoy, author of the classic *War and Peace*.

There, Bauer encounters a hostile aristocratic Russian writer, Katerina Trubetzkaya, who has been left in charge of the estate. But even as a tentative friendship develops between them, the war starts turning against the Germans, and Bauer's arrogant commanding officer, Julius Metz, starts becoming more preoccupied and unhinged. Over the course of six weeks, in the terrible winter of 1941, everything starts to unravel ...



From critically acclaimed and award-winning author Steven Conte, *The Tolstoy Estate* is ambitious, accomplished and astonishingly good: an engrossing, intense and compelling exploration of the horror and brutality of conflict, and the moral, emotional, physical and intellectual limits that people reach in wartime. It is also a poignant, bittersweet love story – and, most movingly, a novel that explores the notion that literature can still be a potent force for good in our world.

# Steven Conte on writing *The Tolstoy Estate*

What is it about the Second World War? *Catch-22*, *Sophie's Choice*, *Schindler's Ark*, *The English Patient*, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, *Charlotte Gray*, *The Reader*, *Atonement*, *The Book Thief* – it seems that readers can't get enough of novels set in World War II. My theory is that the war is our Homeric era, a time when millions of ordinary men and women were suddenly forced to live on an epic and (compared to World War I) freewheeling scale. Plus there's the extraordinary scope of the war – ranging from the skies, seas, deserts, forests, jungles, fjords, great cities and, in the case of *The Tolstoy Estate*, the former estate of Count Leo Tolstoy, three hundred kilometres southwest of Moscow, at the beginning of the severe and fateful winter of 1941.

*The Tolstoy Estate* is a love story, a war story, a ghost story (of sorts) and a hospital drama – a dark, Teutonic version of M.A.S.H. It is also a book-infused novel, a homage to literature and in particular to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which is both an inspiration for the novel and one of its subjects.

The novel was born out of a book that's little known today: *Journey Among Warriors* (1943) by Ève Curie (the daughter and biographer of Nobel Prize-winning scientist Marie Curie) – specifically her description of a visit to Yasnaya Polyana, the former Tolstoy estate, just three weeks after its liberation from invading



German forces. The Germans had established a field hospital there, and Curie's interviews with the estate's Soviet staff revealed that everyone present during the six-week occupation – Germans and Russians alike – had become acutely conscious of the site's cultural, ideological and even metaphysical significance as the former home of the author of Russia's great national epic of resistance to a foreign invader.

Within minutes of reading Curie's account, I had imagined most of what became *The Tolstoy Estate*. As the son of a nurse and the stepson of a doctor, I chose as my protagonist a 40-year-old German military surgeon, Captain Paul Bauer, a good man enlisted in an immoral cause. At Yasnaya Polyana, Bauer encounters Katerina Trubetzkaya, the estate's acting chief custodian and a once passionately committed Bolshevik writer, who takes years of pent-up rage at the Soviet regime and redirects it at the invaders.

I want readers of *The Tolstoy Estate* to feel what Bauer feels: the suction of mud on boots, the itch of lice, the sting of ice crystals flicked up on an arctic wind, the exhaustion of performing surgery for forty hours straight. I want to convey the experience of two cultivated but otherwise ordinary people caught up in the machinery of totalitarian states.



# Reviews

"Reading a book that is such a complete world, evoked in such fine detail, is almost wickedly satisfying. Like Tolstoy, whose presence haunts this elegant, intelligent novel, Conte has the gift of bringing the moral ambiguity and complexity of war and those caught up on its periphery to life in a way that is utterly engrossing and immersive. He reminds us that travel is always possible in the imagination even when reality goes dark and that literature always leads us towards the light'

– Caroline Baum

'A riveting story of war, love and literature – Conte's prose does not miss a beat'

– Jane Gleeson-White, award-winning author of *Classics* and *Double Entry*

# Author Bio

Steven Conte studied Professional Writing at the University of Canberra and Australian Literature at the Australian Defence Force Academy (as a civilian). He holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Melbourne. Barman, life model, taxi driver, public servant, university tutor and book reviewer are some of the jobs with which he has supported his writing. Steven's debut novel, *The Zookeeper's War*, won the inaugural Australian Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction; it was also shortlisted for the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book and for the 2007 Christina Stead Award for Fiction. The novel was published in the UK and Ireland and translated into Spanish.



# Discussion Questions

1. Paul writes to Katerina: 'Thwarted love is stronger, more enduring than the domesticated kind.' Would you agree? Do you think that is a factor in their enduring love?
2. 'The century has sunk its teeth into us,' Katerina writes in one of her letters to Bauer, 'and even now is mindlessly shaking us about.' Does adversity deepen or even ennoble the lives of those who live through 'interesting times'? In comparison, is a life passed in peace and prosperity often meaningless and dull?
3. What did you think when the first letter was introduced into the narrative? Did it shock you? Did it change your mind about the novel or change the way you read it? Did it reduce the tension for you or increase it?
4. Siegfried Weidemann advises Bauer to 'Focus on your own job. Don't look left or right. Obey orders and let someone else fret about the rest.' What do you think of this advice? In your family, your workplace, your locality or your nation, is it unethical, necessary or reckless to disregard politics?
5. Bauer is a moral man, acting in an immoral cause. Do you agree with that statement? In your opinion, is it immoral for Bauer and his comrades to put their medical expertise at the disposal of what Katerina calls 'the German war machine'? And if so, is the same true of Australian, NZ, UK and US medics who participated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq?
6. Is Julius Metz a bad person? What about Hermann Molineux? Norbert Ritter? 'Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner,' goes a French proverb: to understand all is to forgive all. How true is this?
7. Did you find the ending of the novel unexpected, satisfying, heartbreaking, hopeful – or all four?
8. 'The novel is a machine,' Katerina writes, 'a noisy, violent thing whose product, oddly enough, is often human understanding, perhaps even a kind of love.' Is this true? Is Katerina right to worry that the novel is a literary genre in decline?