

# Achieving the ‘write’ balance

Jenny Moffett talks to veterinary surgeon, world traveller and published novelist Ben Kane.



Ben Kane's first novel 'The Forgotten Legion' is a tale of "gladiators, brothels and raging wars".

When it comes to work/life balance, some people seem to be able to combine career and family commitments with a passion for something over-and-above their daily routine. So, what about Ben Kane? To-date, Ben – a veterinary surgeon originally from Castlebellingham, Co. Louth – has managed to work in mixed and companion animal practice in several different countries, get married, start a family and write his first novel. However, when I ask Ben whether he has ‘cracked’ the whole work/life balance issue he’s quick to disagree. So, how easy is it to fit everything in?

“Extremely difficult!” says Ben. “I get up at about five o’clock, probably at least two or three mornings a week, and write for a couple of hours before I go to work. Most days I write during my lunch break when there’s often a break of two or three hours before evening consults. I also write every single weekend. There’s no way round it – it’s got to be thousands of hours of extra work.”

Ben’s first book to be published – ‘The Forgotten Legion’ – is a historical novel of epic proportions. Following Romulus and Fabiola – twin children that are born into slavery during the fall of the Roman Republic – the novel portrays a no-holds barred account of early Roman life with a liberal helping of gladiators, brothels and raging wars. The story knits fiction with ancient history fact, following in particular Crassus’ disastrous campaign in Parthia (modern day Iran). Here, the Romans suffered one of their greatest defeats ever and about 10,000 Roman soldiers were taken prisoner and, says Ben, “never seen again”.

## Starting out

Ben, a 1992 UCD veterinary graduate, says that he got into the habit of writing from updating friends and family on his travels – he has visited in excess of 60 countries in the last decade. “I spent the guts of three years backpacking in the late ‘90s to 2000, back in the days when email wasn’t as prevalent as it is now. Lots of my friends and my parents didn’t have email so I used to write travelogues about what I was doing,” he explains. Oddly enough, however, Ben’s interest in historical writing was from a vaguely veterinary source. “When I got the idea for writing a book, people said ‘Oh you should write a book about your travels’ but lots of people do that. However, I have always been interested in ancient history and when I was working near Hadrian’s wall during FMD in 2001, I visited lots of the Roman sites. That’s when I got the idea.”

Ben’s veterinary training has also helped him in some unusual ways within the book. Anatomy, for example, has helped him with the description of many of the animals and wildlife in the story. He also describes a more

graphic example: “There’s a character in the book who’s a soothsayer who can predict the future from the way the wind blows or the birds fly. He also sacrifices animals and studies their organs – the description of a sacrifice is potentially like a post mortem!” He feels his veterinary training gives him the edge in his narrative: “Sometimes I read a book and there’s a description of something similar where the person hasn’t got the medical or veterinary training. There’s inaccuracies where most people wouldn’t notice and that annoys me!”

Born in Kenya in 1970, Ben returned home to Ireland with his family in 1977. His father, Kyran Kane also a vet, worked in the Drogheda office of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, from where he retired last year. Following school in Dundalk and five years at UCD veterinary school, Ben worked in Northern Ireland and at Westgate Veterinary Clinic in Drogheda before moving on to the UK. He then managed to combine years of veterinary work, including several stints as a locum, with many trips abroad to places as far afield as North, South and Central America, Antarctica, the South Pacific, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and China. Now he lives in Clutton, a small town in Somerset and travels the ten miles to his small animal practice job in a clinic in Bristol each day.

### Balancing act

He started writing in earnest once he had returned to the UK and says that this influenced the choice of job and locality for Ben and his wife Sarah. “Because I wanted to become a full-time writer, being on-call was something I didn’t really want to do anymore,” he explains. “The reason we moved to Bristol was so that I could get a job without on-call, specifically so I could write.” He’s now on a four-

day week and although he occasionally has to look after in-patients out-of-hours, he has no emergency work. Now that the writing career has taken off and that there’s been a new addition to the family – baby son Ferdia arrived in August 2006 – Ben’s work situation is to change again. “It’s actually a trilogy that I’m signed up for. I’m writing book two at the moment and that will come out in summer 2009. The third one will come out in 2010 so there’s plenty

of writing to be done. I handed in my notice a couple of weeks ago and I’ve decided that to absolutely maximise what’s going on, I’m going to work part-time from May. I hope to have part-time work or to locum; it’s impossible to see my family otherwise.”

If all of that sounds like too much hard work, it’s good to point out that Ben has enjoyed the way his life has evolved. “At first I was just keen to ‘write a book’ but, as I began, I found that I absolutely adored the writing. I also have to do large amounts of research and I find that incredibly enjoyable as well. Also, I can do all of that from home which, with a young family, is very nice.” Has he any advice for vets



Ben, hard at work operating on a case of pyometra.

who have a burning passion to try something new in their lives? “If someone’s interested in something that’s not to do with veterinary it’s very important to investigate it and then explore what possibilities there might be, so that expectations are realistic. Then, for me, it’s how great is the desire for what you want. I am absolutely focused on being a successful writer.” And, he repeats, he hasn’t yet ‘cracked’ that work/life issue: “Veterinary is a high stress job. I salute those who do the five days a week – that’s hard to balance with trying to live a normal life and see your family.” ‘The Forgotten Legion’ by Ben Kane is published by Preface, a new imprint owned by Random House, and is due out in May 2008. The book will be available from all good bookshops and online at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).