

Readers, Writers, and Reiss

As owner of The Alabama Booksmith, Jake Reiss uses his business skills and professional friendships to lure the biggest names in literature to Birmingham. By **Nancy Dorman-Hickson**

Television personalities call it a “get”—the ability to land a sought-after celebrity for an appearance. In the book publishing business, chain sellers or large independent bookstores usually receive the “get.”

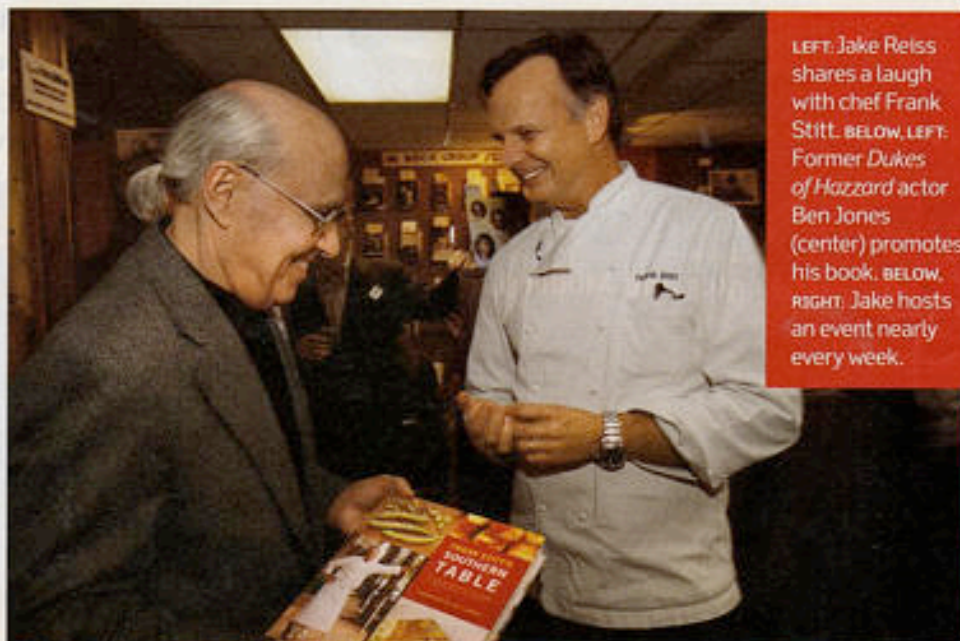
Still, few store owners—small or large—secure as many famous authors, or have as much fun doing it, as Jake Reiss. His Alabama Booksmith, a cozy store located in the Homewood community just south of Birmingham, attracts literary stars as stellar as Pat Conroy (*The Prince of Tides*), Cassandra King (*The Same Sweet Girls*), Fannie Flagg (*Fried Green Tomatoes*), and Rick Bragg (*All Over but the Shoutin’*).

“Jake draws the kind of writers he does because his enthusiasm is genuine and infectious,” says Rick Bragg. “I once signed about a hundred books sitting in a van in the pitch dark because Jake asked me to.”

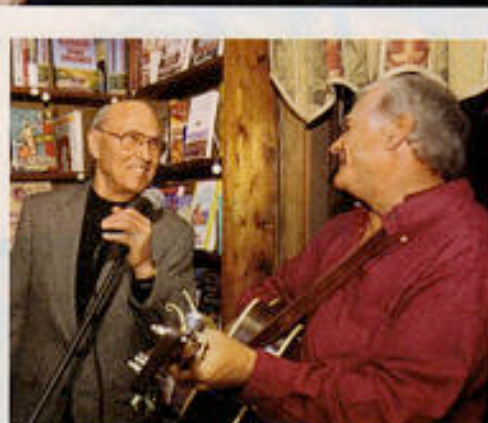
Everything’s Jake Indeed the ponytailed bookstore owner enjoys a far-reaching reputation as a friend, mentor, and loyal supporter of authors and their readers. When he spies a familiar face, Jake readily recalls the person’s family history, political affiliation, favorite color, and pet preference, be it cat or dog.

“Jake gets us to come because he tells us all we are his very favorite writer,” says Joshilyn Jackson, the Georgia-based author of *gods in Alabama* and *The Girl Who Stopped Swimming*. “We believe him because he means it. Every time, he means it.”

Hundreds of writers—both the established and the emerging—call him friend. “Jake makes a personal connection with writers, and he spares no effort in promoting their books,” says Sena Jeter Naslund, author of the critically acclaimed *Ahab’s Wife*. “I know that my novels got to be national best-sellers because Jake and other devoted independent bookstore folks shared their enthusiasm for my writing



LEFT: Jake Reiss shares a laugh with chef Frank Stitt. BELOW, LEFT: Former *Dukes of Hazzard* actor Ben Jones (center) promotes his book. BELOW, RIGHT: Jake hosts an event nearly every week.



with their customers.” Rick agrees. “Jake’s made me feel good about a book when I had my own doubts,” he adds.

Comfort, Publicity, and Sales

Even though his shop stands hidden away at the end of a dead-end street, Jake still manages to offer a book signing or other special event nearly every week. He attributes the ability to land well-known writers to his understanding of how a book tour works.

“Publicists look at all sorts of goals in making an author’s schedule,” he explains. “The top three things are providing the writer with creature comforts, media exposure, and book sales.” Jake and his staff excel at all three. “We try to meet an author’s requests—from someone like Anne Rice, who has a special diet, to Mitch Albom, who wants a specific pen for signings,” he explains. “It’s not too hard. Almost without exception, I find writers to be low maintenance.” ➔ *turn to page 10*



Keeping writers happy also helps him compete with the discount stores and chains. "Not only are we battling huge chain stores, we're also battling their big-city locations," he says. That's why a recent accolade particularly tickled him. "Tracy Chevalier, author of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, lives in London," Jake says. "On her Web site, she mentions that she was in the U.S. last year and visited six cities—New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, and Homewood, Alabama."

Birth of a Bookstore

Although Jake is now on a first-name basis with writers around the world and reads around 300 books annually, there was a time when he wasn't a reader, much less a part of the literati.

His introduction to the literary world started about 20 years ago when his son opened a used-book store in Atlanta and Jake tried to help add to the inventory. "He made me a list of 120 titles to buy. I wasn't familiar with any of them," Jake says. "I went around to garage sales not having a clue."

Jake's son didn't need all of the books he found, so his father stored the rest in a closet and a spare bedroom. He eventually moved them

*Illuminating
the Word*

THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE

MOBILE
MUSEUM
of ART
In Langan Park

10.10.08 - 4.12.09

Andrew Jamieson, *Islamic Roundel*. Image © 2002 The Saint John's Bible and Saint John's University. Organized by The Minneapolis Institute of Arts and Saint John's University. The exhibition and its national tour are made possible by

MOBIAI
MOBILE INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND HISTORY

Florida's East Coast
PIRATES!
January 18 - July 4, 2009

Artifacts, maps and treasure will tell the tales of men and women who sailed the Gulf Stream.

251.208.7569
www.museumofmobile.com
111 S. Royal St. Mobile, AL 36602 THE MUSEUM OF MOBILE
In historic Downtown

Jake lives a literary lifestyle at work and home. "I hardly ever watch television; instead, I read about 300 books a year," he says.



out of his house in 1990 when he opened his own used-book store, The Highland Booksmith on Birmingham's Southside.

"I still didn't read," Jake recalls with a laugh. Instead the bookstore novice made most of his livelihood—then and now—by working in "America's oldest family-owned custom tailoring business," started by his grandfather in 1899. "Bookselling was merely a sideline, a hobby," he says.

It is, of course, much more than that now. Since opening The Alabama Booksmith in 1999, Jake's business has grown every year, which is a rarity in the independent bookstore game.

"In our little part of the book business, we have selected an area that's on solid footing," Jake explains. "It's like custom tailoring. People accustomed to wearing fine clothes are going to wear fine clothes. People who read the kinds of books we sell are going to continue to read good literature." ●

The Alabama Booksmith: 2626 19th Place South, Homewood, AL 35209. **Hours:** 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Saturday. For more information visit www.alabama-booksmith.com, or call (205) 870-4242.



Rooms with their own View.

707 BANK STREET
DECATUR • 256.355.4533



Glee Interiors



256.350.5532

719 Bank Street
www.eliseandhenry.blogspot.com



the paperchase

invitations :: stationery
unique gifts

826 bank street
256.355.8993



Hera Bradley



OVER FIFTY EXCLUSIVE DEALERS
FURNITURE • GLASS • LINENS
JEWELRY • VINTAGE CLOTHING

818 BANK ST. 256.351.1070
www.bankstantiques.net

Bank Street
Antiques

Visit THE SHOPS OF HISTORIC
DECATUR, ALABAMA