

# My Bookstore

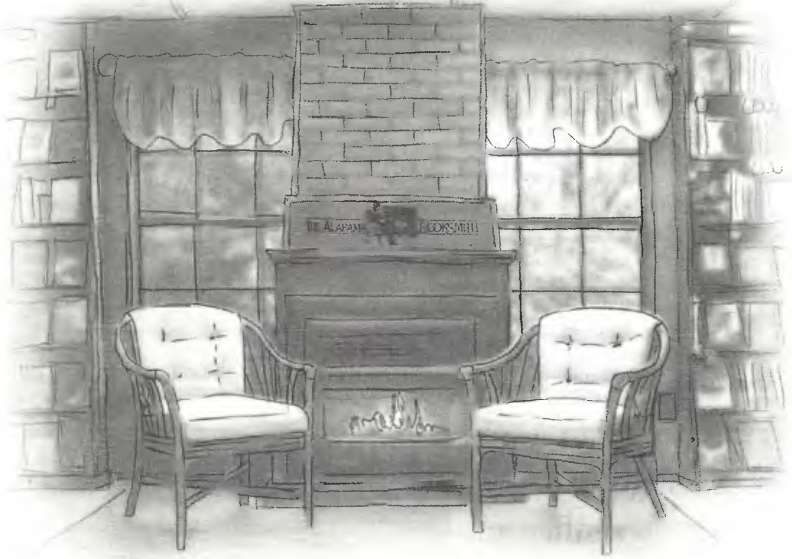
Writers Celebrate Their Favorite Places  
to Browse, Read, and Shop

Introduction by  
Richard  
Russo

Edited by  
Ronald Rice  
and  
Booksellers  
Across  
America

Illustrations by  
Leif Parsons





## Rick Bragg

*The Alabama Booksmith*, BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

First, before I proceed, this has to be said. There are no cats here, and I am so grateful for this I could just bust. No tabbies, no blue-eyed Himalayans or snooty Siamese or butt-naked Egyptians. I do not mind cats in the wider world and appreciate their contributions in rodent eradication, and have even tolerated them on my lap for long seconds at a time, because women love cats like peach ice cream. I just do not believe cat detritus and paper products are good things to have in proximity to each other, and anyone who has ever tried to read a *Cannery Row* or *Lonesome Dove* that smelled of a neglected litter box would agree with me, unless of course their wife

was a cat person and then they would almost certainly lie about it like, well, a dog. The hard truth is books absorb cats, but there are no cats in the Alabama Booksmith in Homewood, Alabama, and that is almost enough, in a literary world lousy with people who think having a damn cat in the stacks or on the counter or lolling in the window is somehow quaint and almost by God *required*, to proclaim it a great bookstore, at least until someone lets in a calico. I do not think that will happen. Everybody who knows proprietor Jake Reiss knows he don't have no time for cats, and usually even for lunch. Now that I have that off my chest, we can move on....

...

He has the whole world pretty well fooled.

Listen to this description of Jake Reiss, from his local paper, *The Birmingham News*:

"Now, a big night for the proprietor...is going home to his Southside townhouse, popping a frozen Lean Cuisine in the microwave, pouring himself a glass of cabernet sauvignon and sitting down at the kitchen table to read one of the 200 or so books he will devour over the course of a year."

The fact is, while he would not want the whole world to know it, the man likes to shoot some dice.

Some men hunt. Some men fish. Some men buy million-dollar motor homes with horns that play the first bars of "Rammer-Jammer, Yellowhammer." Some men, though none I know, attend the opera. Jake Reiss, for relaxation, likes to feel them rattling bones, and let 'em go.

*Jake Reiss is winning, because he is making a dollar by making good books and authors available to people who love to read and love the people who make it a pleasure, and because, late in his own life, he fell in love with books himself.*

Who else but a gambler would turn his attentions from a lifetime success in the tailoring business and, in his fifties, without even shouting, “Come on, baby needs a new pair of shoes,” open a *bookstore*?

The odd thing is, he won. He won, in this time of woe, in this age in which children seem mostly interested in playing games with their thumbs, when reading is a quaint notion from the dusty halls of antiquity, when public funding for libraries is being scraped to the white bone, Jake Reiss is winning, because he is making a dollar by making good books and authors available to people who love to read and love the people who make it a pleasure, and because, late in his own life, he fell in love with books himself. He really is a voracious reader—all kinds of good stories—and, in part because so many people said it couldn’t be done, found a way to make the old-fashioned notion of it all, of books on paper, pay the light bill and a damn sight more. Maybe the reason I say Alabama Booksmith is my favorite is because Jake Reiss gives me hope that my craft will endure. I guess that is as good a reason as any, and more poignant than that stuff about cats.

Some people here in suburban Homewood, people with no gray in their hair and no concept of a world without smartphones, think Jake has always been in the book business, has always been a kind of free-spirited bibliophile with two inches of gray ponytail jutting from the back of his head, who sits surrounded by signed first editions of Pat Conroy and has Salman Rushdie on speed dial. But he used to be respectable. He used to run a tailoring house for some of the most influential people in the South, men who had to at least look respectable, CEOs and government men and high priests (football coaches). He made suits for Bob Hope, and for senators. He still likes to tell me, “I could build a suit that would even make you look good.”

I guess the reason I have wasted so much time talking about the proprietor instead of his shop, his wares, is because Jake Reiss is the store. He does his own heavy lifting. He flings book cartons around like a young man. He hauls a thousand pounds at a time to readings and book events in his somewhat worn, magenta-colored Chevy van

from the Reagan administration (the first one, before he and Nancy were regularly consulting the spirit world), always taking twice as many as any sane person would think he would need. But Jake is a gambler, and you never know when someone will need an extra 700 copies of a book in an auditorium that seats 215.

The bookstore itself, at the risk of hurting his delicate feelings, looks a little bit like the place in Piedmont, Alabama, where my mama used to go have her fortune told. Let us just say the Homewood Historic Commission will never come knocking at his door. Overhead, for Jake, is the moon and stars above. He has prospered in the book business for more than two decades, moving from a place in the somewhat tonier Highland Avenue section of Birmingham to this current location, this unassuming (a kinder word) wood-frame building off the highway that is a little tricky to find even on your third trip here. It is a throwback to an older time, or at least that is how it first appears. The ceiling is low, even on a short man, and the floor gives a bit. The shelves are made of honest wood and go floor to ceiling with history, the classics, poetry, mystery.

I feel at home here, and I am honored that my books are on these shelves, but as I sat down to describe why I liked the place, I found myself not with a list of things it is but things that it is not. It does not have comfy chairs, or cozy reading areas, but nor do I have to try and think over the roar of construction of a double-chocolate frappacini... frabucin...oh, to hell with it. There are, as near I can tell, no charging stations or other portals for laptops, though I am sure there is a drop or two somewhere around. I am pretty sure there is no Wifi... Wyfy... you know what I mean. You do not bring a laptop to Jake's, though you can read a newspaper, standing up.

Nor is he working hard to be quaint. There is not a single rocker here, unless he has one in the back for naps. But then I do not think the man even sleeps. There are just books, in a store where you are more likely to find Henry Louis Gates, Jr., than a pop-up book about some monkeys jumping on a bed (though, for the record, I have that one).

But what you do not see, at least at first glance, is the secret to its survival. “We’ve pretty much converted this joint to all signed copies,” Jake told me, “and every year has been bigger than the last for twenty-two years. Our Signed First Editions Club is one of the largest, if not *the* largest in America, and we’ve been fortunate enough to have Philip Roth, John Updike, Richard Russo, Salman Rushdie, Geraldine Brooks, and so forth sign for our members...customers in all fifty states and fourteen foreign countries. We’ve hosted President Jimmy Carter, David Sedaris, Anne Rice, Christopher Hitchens, Ken Burns, Wendell Berry, and hundreds of others.” He does not mean to sound like a salesman, like a man working it, he just can’t really help it. When he made pants, he wanted to make good pants and sell them for as much as he could get and then sell some more. He sees no reason why the book business cannot be conducted in a similar fashion, without apology. I do not know where he finds the energy. When I am his age, I will look for a soft place to lie down.

He is so enthusiastic about his new business, he gets carried away. Introducing me, once, at a book event, he described in passionate detail how I bodily carried an elderly woman and her wheelchair into a crowded auditorium. I remembered it as a lovely young woman in one of those inflatable ankle casts. There was, however, carrying involved.

The people who make the money decisions in this craft recognize that enthusiasm and send people down here on more than just promises. They sell books at his store—lots of books. “When we request that big-time writers visit and New York publicists are a little reluctant about sending their superstars here, we remind them that Alabama not only produces the magnificent Mercedes and rockets that go to the moon, but author events that are out of this world, also. We usually partner with one of the city’s nonprofits like Children’s of Alabama, The Literacy Council, local NPR and public television.... We regularly produce sales that are tops on each author’s tour.”

I do not have the heart to tell Jake that we here in Alabama have not actually helped heave anyone to the moon in quite some time,

but he is just so damn happy about it I hate to smudge up another good lie.

I think he is good for this craft, and his store is good for it. There are plenty of other places to sit in an old chair and sip some designer coffee and peruse the *Oxford American* or recharge your I-Whatever or check your email or pet a damn cat.

**RICK BRAGG** is the best-selling author of works of nonfiction, including *All Over But The Shoutin'* and *Ava's Man* and *Prince of Frogtown*, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize. He is a Harvard University Nieman Fellow, and Professor of Writing at the University of Alabama. He is also a winner of the James Beard Award and many other national writing awards.