

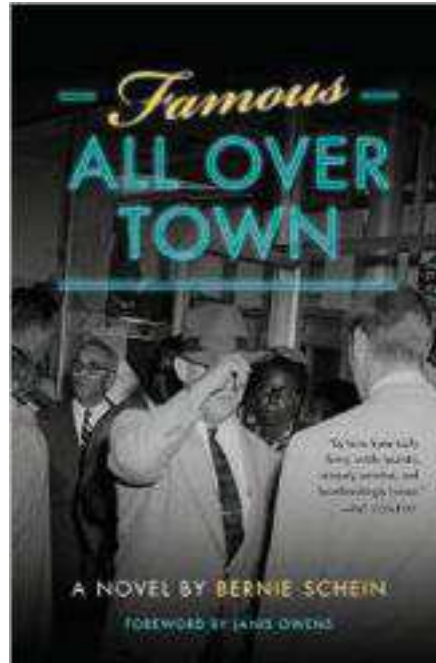
## **Southern-fried Jewish humor is Schein specialty**

By Charles Munitz  
Advocate correspondent November 19, 2014



Author Bernie Schein is a great storyteller. His new novel, “Famous All Over Town” (The University of South Carolina Press, 2014), is set in the fictional town of Somerset, South Carolina. It’s a not very disguised version of Beaufort, Schein’s own hometown and current residence. Schein’s entertaining and provocative novel features a passel of colorful Southerners, both black and white, with two Jews as its central characters. Schein’s autobiographical tales help give a sense of his lifelong passion for the South which he brings to life in his fiction.

His grandfather came to this country from Lithuania in 1896. Perfectly situated between Charleston and Savannah, Beaufort was perfect for peddling, which Schein’s grandfather did before he opened a store some time later. At one point, according to Schein, his grandfather found a black infant on the railroad tracks “swathed in brilliant rags.” He took the child in, even adopted him, but eventually the child left with his black housekeeper. Tragically, some years later, the grandfather was held up in his store by a black man, shot and killed. Even more tragically, and ironically, that man turned out to be the very same boy whom he had adopted. Though sounding a bit like folklore and somewhat hard to believe, Schein recounted this tale as factual.



Schein grew up in the family store established by his grandfather, strongly influenced by his own father's vivid remarks. "Daddy used to say: 'If it weren't for the blacks, it would be the Jews' and that 'The Jews were the Negroes of Europe.'" From his experiences in the store, Schein grew up believing that blacks were "better than whites... kind and gentle," while whites were "mostly drunks." He also claimed – perhaps surprisingly – that, in Beaufort, he did not experience anti-Semitism. "In the Bible Belt, we were the Chosen People." In Beaufort, the Ku Klux Klan "was around," Schein noted, but "it was a bit more genteel than up the road."

Schein recalled that Josie Lipschitz, a Jew who owned Beaufort's department store, was able to give a list of local Klansmen to the new black sheriff based on his recognition of the shoes which he had sold to – and identified – when they marched in robes through town.

Equally ironic is Schein's account of Josie going to knock on the door of a Beaufort acquaintance named Earl, who wouldn't let him in the house because "we're having a Klan meeting and Jews are not in the Klan." Again, Schein related Josie's followup as factual, a wonderful cross between Borscht Belt and Dixie: 'That's okay Earl, I just came over to tell you we have a sale on sheets.'

That is not to say that Schein contends that the South, overall, was a wonderland for Jews. Outside of his protective hometown, things were often considerably more threatening for Jews as well as for blacks. He remembers happening by a Klan rally in an open field in Early Branch, not too far from Beaufort, with burning crosses and one thousand Klansmen in attendance. Listening from the back he overheard the Grand

Dragon refer to the “liberal Jewish principal” in a nearby school. Startled and fearful, he quietly crawled out of sight before he was seen.

In the sixties, Schein and his close friend from Beaufort, celebrated novelist Pat Conroy, were “at the forefront” of the Civil Rights movement and together developed some of the first Black Studies programs in schools in South Carolina. (Schein makes Conroy a character in his novel.)

By his own account, Schein’s gradual acceptance of his own Jewishness, throughout adolescence, led to his feeling greater appreciation by his non-Jewish peers in Beaufort. “Acting more Jewish” drew, somewhat unexpectedly, a positive response from people, who thought his humor was wonderful and his character distinctive and interesting.

Schein’s novel is filled with a sense of the subtle interactions between blacks and whites and the important roles played by Jews there, including one who, largely drawn from his own experience as educator and therapist, provides therapy to some of the locals.

This portrait of Jews in a small, intimate, Southern town is compelling, and, in many ways, unexpected. Though not to be taken as a generalization of Jewish life in the South, Schein’s is a curious window into it, imaginatively captured by a talented storyteller who knows his corner of it very well and who loves it a great deal.

*Charles Munitz publishes the blog Boston Arts Diary.*