

BOOKING AUTHORS



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Synopsis

'FAMOUS ALL OVER TOWN.'

BERNIE SCHEIN (Pronounced -SHINE), AUTHOR

INTRO

Born, bred and Bar Mitzvahed in Beaufort, SC, Bernie graduated from Newberry College, Newberry, SC, and earned his Master's Degree in Education from Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Bernie's been featured and published in Atlanta Magazine, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Newsweek, Creative Loafing and other magazines, journals, and periodicals. His most recent book prior to *Famous all over Town* (2014) was '*If Holden Caulfield Were in My Classroom*' (2009). His first book (co-authored with his wife psychologist Martha Schein), *Open Classrooms in the Middle School*, was a featured selection of the Educators' Book Club.

At present, he writes, speaks and tells stories about his life as a Jewish southerner. An educator for 45 years, he is also an educational consultant, doing workshops, giving talks and telling stories about the kids in his classroom at the Paideia School in Atlanta, where after serving as principal of three different schools, he taught for 33 years. The Scheins have two daughters—the writer and philosopher Dr. Maggie Schein and the teacher Lara Alexander Williams — and two granddaughters, Sofie and Caitlin. Bernie lives in Beaufort.,SC (**PRONOUNED: BEW-FORT**)

“Like its author, this ambitious novel is by turns hysterically funny, wildly neurotic, uniquely sensitive, and heart breakingly honest.” – Pat Conroy

BOOK INFORMATION/SYNOPSIS

Short summary:

Novelist Walker Percy said in an interview before he died that **the most powerful word in the English language was “Jew”**. He also said that the only remaining unexplored territory in Southern literature was the Jewish-Southerner.

Everyone is famous in *Famous All Over Town*, as at least they were in all small Southern towns. Everyone, for better or worse knew everyone else. White, Black, Jewish, Christian, sane, insane, male, female, gay, straight, Northern transplants, all speak out, in one way or another, and make themselves heard in the small Low Country town of Somerset, South Carolina in those fantastic decades leading up to the millennium. Staking out a claim on Walker Percy’s unexplored terrain, moreover, are two Jews, a native and a New York transplant, as intimately involved and as expressive as any of Somerset’s townspeople.

***Famous All Over Town* (FAOT) demands that readers, whoever you are, reconsider what it means now, in the South of today, to be of a place versus merely in it.**

Detailed summary:

Setting: Somerset, SC, from the fifties to the millennium:

- The white sheriff’s Black mistress is also the madam of the local downtown brothel. They have a son who turns out to be gay, eventually “coming out” at Harvard in an article for Esquire Magazine. She is a widow, and her daughter from that early

marriage integrates Somerset High all by herself, ends up the senior class valedictorian, and nurturing her lifelong bitterness toward not only the white sheriff but her white classmates, refuses to give the valedictory address. Over at the military base, a drill sergeant marches his entire platoon of recruits into Oyster Creek at night, in which three kids drown, bringing national attention to Somerset and to the subsequent trial of the drill sergeant.

The psychologist dealing with the drill sergeant in the case is a New York Jew, a marine at the time, who ends up marrying the daughter of the town patriarch. The drill sergeant's lawyer is also Jewish, only a Somerset native. The drill sergeant's wife is a professor of philosophy. The trial of the drill sergeant turns on the testimony of the sheriff's mistress, the madam of the local brothel.

The leading segregationist on the school board is also a Jew, and also a native, and his adversary is the same Jewish lawyer, also a native, who defended the drill sergeant.

The Drill Sergeant goes from homicidal to suicidal, his psychologist, the New York Jewish transplant, is obsessive-compulsive, and the newly arrived poster boy for the marine corps is a war hero who turns out to be a flamboyant transvestite.

Meanwhile, our psychologist in his off-hours is counseling our valedictorian-to-be as she desegregates Somerset high, our transvestite who yearns to be arrested as a war criminal instead of hailed as a hero, and soldiers off to the Vietnam war, which he and the C.O. secretly oppose.

Stuck in a moral mess, our psychologist drives his wife, the patriarch's daughter, crazy, to the point where she ends up in an affair with his now best friend, the local Jewish lawyer now doing his best to help make integration work.

Listening, our psychologist says, is a pain in the ass. He declares to his wife he no longer believes in it.

Our war hero transvestite shows up in court in glorious drag after the sheriff's son, a football prodigy, charges him with sexual assault. A surprising number of our local denizens have become addicted to the Watergate hearings. After Jimmy Carter's famous Playboy interview in which he declared he had felt lust in his "heart", our psychologist's wife, daughter of the patriarch, fully aware that lust is felt not in the heart but the penis, wonders aloud if he has the tool for the presidency.

- The sheriff's wife lies in a comatose state as her father, a Pentecostal minister, pleas for forgiveness.
- The madam of the local brothel turns respectable, buys into downtown, runs for the Board of Education, becomes a member of the Town Council, and with her business savvy and acumen turns Somerset from Redneck into Resort, from provincial to Cosmopolitan, a haven for retirees and tourists, with everyone in town making money.

People marry, have children, go away, feed the poor, and steal from them. Our esteemed valedictorian becomes a powerful Washington attorney, returning home only to give, against her mother's wishes, the white sheriff his due.

Unfortunately, the white sheriff is also her brother's father.

What is new, unique, valuable, or distinctive about my work?.

Every type of Southerner is given voice here, particularly as the Old South becomes the New South. It speaks to the "universal truths" in the LIFE. So I hope every southerner's story—everybody's story, in fact—is here for the taking.

The Jewish-southerner, said Walker Percy, is unexplored territory in Southern Literature. He is alive and well in FAOT: the native, the transplant, the sell-out. (Jews read, especially Jewish women.). Also, dominant in here is a mixed marriage--aristocratic WASP and New York Jew—i. e., see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil married to see-it, hear-it, and shout it from the rooftops. Generally, WASPS are repressed, Jews are obsessed. Both of us are nuts.

The “landscape of the unconscious,” a decidedly Jewish take, I think unique here too. The novel deals not only with over-the-surface style and substance of the South, but under-the-the-surface, i. e., the “landscape of the unconscious”.

Pat Conroy’s cameo appearance. I’ve been a character both in his memoirs and novels, in which if I do say so myself, I’m funny as hell. Maybe there’s an interest/angle here..

Competing books: What books do I see as competing works? What are the books’ relative strengths and weaknesses as compared to *Famous All Over Town*?

I don’t know of another book about the small-town Bible Belt South in which every type denizen--white, black, bi-racial, Jewish, Christian, sane, insane, male, female, gay, straight, young, old—is given voice, is heard and represented, particularly as the reader sees the confluence of the Old South with the New. The marines speak up, since like many Southern towns, Somerset has a military town. Even the Yankees speak up.

After all, in *Famous All Over Town*, everybody’s famous.

Walker Percy said the last remaining unexplored territory in Southern literature is that of the Jewish Southerner.

Here you have not only the representative Jewish native generally more moderate to liberal than the general population, but the Jewish segregationist who makes sure his daughter peroxides her hair blonde and gets a nose job,

and most dominant of all the New York Jewish transplant, naturally a psychiatrist, who marries the daughter of the town patriarch, naturally an Episcopalian. **The Jewish Southerner is represented here big-time.**

Janis Owens refers in her Foreword to the above-the-surface and the below-the-surface landscapes in the novel, not only the status-quo steeple culture idea of what's right and what's wrong but the far less black-and-white realm of the often overlooked (in southern fiction, anyway) truths of reality. She is referring here to the psychological landscape, "Freudian in depth and vision... a revealing excavation of the subconscious that is both poignant and hilarious" and dare she say it, which she does, "Jewish".

Southern theme: in the small-town South—probably in all small towns in the last century—everyone knew everyone else so yes, everyone was famous, **but everyone, the reader soon discovers, is also an outsider.** Everyone, not just the Jew or the Black or the gay, but the WASP, the town-royalty as well.

****Still, at the risk of spectacular immodesty, wouldn't it be nice if FAOT's Somerset is to Pat Conroy's Beaufort, SC (The Great Santini) what Conroy's Beaufort is to Harper Lee's (To Kill a Mockingbird) Monroeville, Ala..**

- **NOVEL'S DIFFERENCES FROM OTHER SOUTHERN NOVELS;**

Pat Conroy's Jew is Sammy Wertzberger, his Black Toomer, his redneck Red Pettus-- the military family no one has done better-- and he shows us the town, as an outsider-cum- insider, magnificently.

I, however, am a native to Beaufort, on which Somerset is based, and I am a Jew, so while Pat's take is that of a military brat, mine is that of the Jewish Southerner.

And in **Harper Lee's novel** not only did everyone “know their place”, they knew, for better or worse, each other, as they do in *Famous All Over Town*. Her satirical and compassionate take on race in a small Southern town is fascinating. **Mine, however, reflecting a different time, is more diverse and complex.** In FAOT Blacks, like everyone else, speak for themselves, and not only does the reader witness their victimization, but also their astonishing take-no-prisoners power.

She, like me, is a native, and down-to-earth as she is, hers is a decidedly WASP take on the town from a child's point of view. Again, I am a native, but my take inevitably is that of the Jewish-Southerner, and in FAOT, again, everyone—Blacks, gays, WASPs, war criminals—speak for themselves.

- **Purpose: What prompted me to write this book?**

“**Sheriff Cooley's got himself a little nigger gal on the Island.**” What does a 12 year old (which I was at the time), overhearing it, do with that image, particularly when his dad's grocery store is in the slums, and the “Negroes” have always been so kind to him. They, not the white customers, were the ones who gave him a nickel when he was five.

Who was, I later wondered, that “little nigger gal on the Island?” What was the nature of their relationship?

PSYCHOLOGY OF THE NARRATIVE: Back in the era of institutionalized racism just about everyone, to one degree or another, was living a lie, growing fat, so to speak, on denial, if only for the sake of survival, living if only on the periphery, in the fairy land of pretense; in other words, prostituting themselves, being less than true to themselves. **And to survive psychologically, they had to live in denial** that they *were* prostituting themselves.

- So those in the World's Oldest Profession literally were the only ones who even came close to possessing a patent on the truth. They were whores, they knew it, and pretense wasn't an option, particularly if you were the madam of the local downtown brothel catering to, among others, the most prominent men in town. So the "little nigger gal on the island" became in my imagination the only true honest person in town. Consequently, with her smarts, savvy, beauty and connections, since information is power, the most powerful woman in town. The truth was hers, because she had nothing to lose, having given it all away. **Back then there was little in the way of job opportunities in Beaufort, in most small Southern towns, for educated Black women. (teaching was about it). I gave her an education and a real belief in it—the only ticket to freedom for her children—and her freedom provides her with the dignity of those beautiful black martyrs, whom I personally knew as well.**

In that way, I realized, all of us were and are outsiders, not just the Jewish minority, of which I was one, in the small-town South.

The Beaufort Jew, of course, like all small-town Southern Jews, was a minority within a minority, as alien to the stereotypical Jew—New York, Miami Beach, Atlanta—as a Jewish cowboy, a Jewish hillbilly, or a Jewish Sumo wrestler.

RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES:

I honestly think this outsider'ness,' this confusion of identity, an identity of which I am also proud, probably the progenitor of my sense of humor, in other words, the condition that inspired my sense of humor. Remember too that Jewish kids in small Southern towns were sometimes among the most popular. Yankee Jews were always surprised to discover they didn't have to dodge our cold dead

bodies hanging from trees when they visited. In fact, they were more often than not surprised we were even here.

As I matured into adolescence I became Mr. Funny man. When asked by friends, “Bernie, you folks really don’t believe our Lord Jesus Christ was the Son of God?”

“We do not,” I’d reply, “We believe that he was a great man,” which is what Mom had taught me to say when I was younger. Now, however, I was older. I was a man. I’d been Bar Mitzvahed. So I just couldn’t help myself. “After all,” I continued, “he was a Jew. All Jews are great men. Consequently, I am a great man.”

This dualism, I think, inspired both the characters of the local Jewish lawyer, a native, and the New York Jewish transplant, Bert Levy, who is probably the most dominant character in the novel. In fact, everything in the novel is affected either directly or indirectly by one of these two characters, though in *Famous All Over Town*, everyone affects everyone else. That was the way it was back then in small Southern towns.

Beaufort, like the fictional Somerset, was and is a military town, because right across the bridge is Parris Island, the military base. Half the rentals in Beaufort are to marines. They’re a huge part of the economy.

That’s how, back then, Bert Levy, a Harvard-trained psychologist from New York, would end up at Parris Island and later settle in Somerset itself. That often happened like that in Beaufort. So Bert, who grew up in New York in a Jewish community, who attended school with mostly Jews, who lived in a Jewish neighborhood, ends up a triple-threat outsider: a Jew, a Yankee, and a marine. In the face of such a rich Jewish background, the local Jewish lawyer, like many Jewish Southerners from small towns, feels his own Jewishness is less than “real”, a limp diluted version.

- **What inspired the military as a strong force in the novel?** At the same age I heard about “the little nigger gal in the island”, Sgt. Matthew MeKeon in 1956 marched his platoon of recruits into Ribbon Creek, Paris Island. Because of the drownings, newspapers all over the world called it the Death March. For the first time *real* outsiders came to town, outsiders *to* Somerset.. Real strangers. The genuine unknown. The photos in the newspaper, the talk in the town which was pretty hush-hush since the town depended on the military for its survival, ...I didn’t know what to do with al that either, as a 12 year old. **And later, when I’d discover the pain and abuse, particularly of children, that was going on behind closed doors, such as in Pat Conroy’s house, I didn’t know what to do with that either.**
- What about the acclaimed war hero, who was in fact a war criminal, turning into a transvestite? which may explain the sheriff’s taking that “little nigger gal on the island”, who herself turns respectable, and changes
- **Beaufort changes along the way from redneck to resort.**

University of South Carolina Press's editor says about FAOT:

"FAOT demands that readers reconcile what it means now, in the South of today, to be white, black, Jewish, Christian, sane, insane, male, female, gay, straight, and to be *of* a place versus merely in it."

- Yet could I have seen these characters had I not seen Bert Levy, the New York Jewish transplant, and Murray Gold, the Somerset native, also Jewish, had I not seen myself? Not a chance. I am a Jewish-Southerner, first and last. In that way, like everyone else, I too am an outsider, and like everyone

else in a small town back in the last century, I too was *Famous All Over Town*. And what makes me unique is what makes FAOT unique, different, novel.

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I've written a great deal about **my career teaching kids in middle school. My last book was IF HOLDEN CAULFIELD WERE IN MY CLASSROOM. Not surprisingly, I've been asked if over 40 years embedded in a classroom with pre-and early teens influenced *Famous All Over Town*. The answer is yes.**

A truly progressive classroom in which the highest standard is that kids be true to themselves so they can truly express themselves, means that they have to discover who they are, what and who they really want and need, and why. Who or what is in their way? What is their story? Who are they really? How do we best try and bring them out so they can truly and fully express themselves.

In our classroom, it was the biggest bully in the class who closed the covers on *Lord of the Flies*, claiming boredom, when we began discussing Simon's revelation. Simon is the character in *Lord of the Flies* who is imbued with spiritual human goodness and who later falls victim to characters who are bullies. "Maybe," Simon says early in the book, "the beast is us." The kids have taught me that, to one degree or another, we're all bullies, victims and suck-ups. That knowledge demystifies and disempowers the bully and empowers the victim. Often, in our class, "Government and the Court System," the victim would press charges against the bully for harassment, assault, social ridicule, you name it. And when a kid speaks up truly, through a story, poetry, speech, he speaks for just about everyone else. The victim then becomes the leader.

That's also what happens in *Famous All Over Town*. Death, illness, romance, sex, ruthless ambition, failure, friendship and betrayal, greed and acquisitiveness, sibling rivalry, family relations, identity issues, unrequited love, abuse, violence, the history if the world is in the heart and soul, to one degree or another, of every child. So

pardon me if I **make the claim that my middle school classroom of seventh and eighth graders was a microcosm of the adult world, a glimpse into human nature and into the possibilities of community.**

QUOTES ABOUT THE BOOK:

FAMOUS ALL OVER TOWN

Is a Comically Candid Novel of the Small-Town South

Bernie's close friend and best-selling author Pat Conroy (*The Great Santini*, *Prince of Tides*) has called Bernie Schein "the funniest man alive." And now, as if to prove Conroy right, Southern storyteller Schein has penned *Famous all over Town*, a comically candid multi-generational account of two Southern Jews, a low-country native and a Northern transplant, at the epicenter of momentous events in the sleepy Southern coastal hamlet of Somerset, a fictitious stand-in for Schein's native Beaufort, SC.

Schein's diverse and memorable cast in *Famous all over Town* (September 30, 2014, Story River Books, a Pat Conroy imprint of The University of South Carolina Press, ISBN 978-1-61117-439-7, hardcover, \$29.95, ISBN 978-1-61117-440-3, ebook, \$21.95)

CHARACTERS IN THE BOOK: Southern Jewish lawyer **Murray Gold** and his foil, displaced New York psychiatrist **Bert Levy**; emotionally scarred USMC **drill sergeant Jack McGowan** and his alluring and unconventional wife, Mary Beth; corrupt and **adulterous sheriff Hoke Cooley**, his deeply conservative wife, Regina, and their **violent son, Boonie**; African American madam and later city councilwoman **Lila Trulove** (also Hoke's mistress), her brilliant daughter, Elizabeth, and her conflicted Harvard-bound son, Driver; **fallen Southern belle turned voice of a generation Arlanne Palmer**; remorseful Vietnam veteran and flamboyant transvestite Royal Cunningham; and **inspirational schoolteacher Pat Conroy**.

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"*Famous all over Town* uses its web of interconnected story lines to make its **setting, the town itself, a central character** with a personality and an arc as complete as that of any other member of the deftly rendered cast."

QUOTES: “Delving beneath the surface of the Southern status quo, Schein's tale follows these interconnected lives through the private and public upheavals in small-town life from the turbulent 1960s to the eve of the new millennium, confronting the ramifications of the civil rights era, Vietnam, Watergate, and—closer to home—a fictionalized version of a deadly incident, in which a US Marine Corps drill instructor marched his assigned platoon into a swampy tidal creek. “

“In *Famous all over Town*, Somerset's colorful citizens confront their repressed memories, conflicted identities, burgeoning ambitions, and romantic entanglements. Even as events unfold to often-uproarious effect, Schein's novel holds true to a deeply realized sense of intimacy and authenticity in the interactions of its myriad characters, as revelations expose how these disparate lives are conjoined in surprising ways. Shifting points of view place readers squarely in the mindsets of many of Somerset's key citizens as Schein lovingly and laughingly invites us to reconsider what it means in the modern South to be white, black, Jewish, Christian, military, civilian, sane, insane, old, young, male, female, gay, and straight—and to be of a place rather than merely in it. “”

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