

Author to Author with Mindy Friddle

The Author: Joshilyn Jackson

The book: *gods in Alabama* by Joshilyn Jackson (Warner Books Hardcover; April 13, 2005; \$19.95)

Joshilyn Jackson is the first to admit she is “living a freaking fairy tale.” Her first novel, *gods in Alabama* is the lead book this spring from her publisher, Warner Books. Book Sense, the national marketing campaign on behalf of the independent bookstores of America, announced *gods in Alabama* as the top pick for the group’s monthly selection of new books. Embarking on a book tour encompassing more than a dozen cities, Jackson, who lives outside Atlanta with her husband and two children, is enjoying not just being published, but being published *well*.

gods in Alabama has earned accolades from seasoned writers such as Adriana Trigiani and Cassandra King. Part murder mystery, and featuring a sardonic, headstrong heroine, the novel offers an intriguing premise: Arlene Fleet, when she headed off to college in Chicago, made three promises to God: She would never again lie, she would stop fornicating, and she’d never go back to her tiny hometown of Possett, Alabama (the “fourth rack of Hell”). All God had to do in exchange was to make sure the body of high school quarterback Jim Beverly was never found. Ten years later, Arlene has kept her promises, but an old schoolmate has recently turned up asking questions. And now Arlene’s African-American beau has given her a tough ultimatum: introduce him to her family, or he’s gone.

“I think there are deeper themes beyond the murder mystery, the mother daughter conflict, the pathological liar,” Jackson said about her literary novel. “There’s another level about the power of redemption, about how we find our way back to grace,” a theme about which the southern author, who holds an English degree from Georgia State University and MA in English from the University of Illinois at Chicago, often finds herself writing.

Jackson’s publisher sent her on a “presale tour” in January, months before her publication date, giving her the opportunity to meet face to face with numerous booksellers all over the country. Advertisements were placed in trade journals such as *Publishers Weekly*, and an aggressive marketing campaign planned, which pushed for reviews in newspapers and magazines. Such support of a debut novel from a publisher is uncommon, and it can make a real difference in a writer’s career. But Jackson has kept her eyes open, feet firmly grounded. Realistic. “I know what happens with most first novels,” she said. “Writing is not just an artsy pursuit. Most first novelists are lucky to sell a few thousand copies and you’re happy. I didn’t expect all this.”

How did “all this” happen? Jackson recounts how her editor at Warner had “everyone” (in the publishing house) read the manuscript of *gods in Alabama*. “I went up to New York several times,” Jackson said, “and I met the foreign rights department, the

marketing and publicity people, the sales reps. Everyone was reading *gods in Alabama*. Before I knew it, it was named Warner's lead book for spring." The lesson? "My editor was a rabid enthusiast. You get the right editor for your book, and everyone in house gets excited."

Any fairy tale is not without its shadowy specters, however, and Jackson's challenge was making her way through the prickly forest of rejection before she landed her current two-book deal with Warner. A children's book she'd co-written was nixed by publishers. Undeterred, Jackson began writing a novel in 1999. By then a young mother, Jackson would send her husband and toddler son away to her parents' or in-laws for the weekend in order to hold "Writers Prison. I would write all weekend in my pajamas in the quiet of the house." That novel was shopped around by her agent, but had no takers, although a few editors came close.

"Not this book, yet. But this writer," is the message she came away with. "Oh, those kinds of rejection letters are harder than flat out rejections," she said. "People say if you're writing a good book, good literature will find success. That's true to a point. But you have to be tenacious. Unable to stop. The word 'no'—I don't hear it."

By the time *gods in Alabama* sold to Warner, Jackson said she realized, "There's a lot more to the job than writing the book and waiting for acceptance." These days, she's discovered "There are parts of being a novelist I love. I loved my pre-sale tour. I love meeting people. I'm extroverted. I'll talk to anyone. Of course, I don't like rejection and I leave the business side to my agent."

Happily ever after? For now, maybe, but Joshilyn Jackson isn't resting on her laurels. Her second book, *Between, Georgia* will be published by Warner next year. Meanwhile, traveling on her book tour with a laptop, Jackson is completing her third novel. "It's such a pleasure to write novel—to get in the 'zone' of writing," she said. "If no one ever published me, I'd still be writing."

Mindy Friddle is the author of the novel "The Garden Angel" (St. Martin's Press/Picador.) Visit her website, www.mindyfriddle.com, for more information on writing and publishing.