

John Jakes: The Entertainer

The atmosphere around John Jakes' household in Hilton Head, South Carolina, could not be more serene. Lush coffee table books lie stacked like calling cards. A Searle original in a quality frame hugs one eggshell-colored wall. Through a plate glass window, three elderly duffers eye a golf hole with the seriousness they once gave million-dollar corporate decisions. Another window offers a view of a half-dozen oaks dressed in moss which hangs down as elegant as ballroom earrings. A full-grown alligator holds dominion over a pond alongside the house.

John Jakes has come a long way since those days up to 1973 when he labored as an ad man [in Dayton, Ohio] by day and hacked out novels of every genre by night while jacked up on an overload of caffeine and nicotine.

A large man of English and German stock, he is the son of a Railway Express wagon driver. His big break came in 1973 when independent book producer Lyle Engel commissioned him to whip out a series for the American Bicentennial. Engel's first choice of authors had been an ad agency buddy of Jakes' named Don Moffit who turned down the job but recommended his friend. The rest is publishing history. Jakes' Kent Family Chronicles not only sold nearly 40 million copies but attracted a lucrative television contract as well. Jakes' original contract with Engel was for a paltry five grand a book, but because the author's real name was on the series, he was able to renegotiate the contract when the series became a national hit. Since that series he has written a well-received Civil War novel, North and South, that is part of a trilogy which has earned him an enthusiastic following.

Jakes is interviewed at home after serving a light lunch to his wife, Rachel, and his interviewer. He wears a blue button shirt and yellow pants. Around his neck, attached by a cord, are his reading glasses. He's somewhere in his early fifties but has an easy grin and wide eyes that give him the look of a mischievous adolescent. Leo Durocher might not have liked his "nice guy" approach, but Jakes has had no trouble finishing first in the hearts of his readers.

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NUWER: What is your true profession?

JAKES: Oh, I think novelist and storyteller, although I think novelist certainly would embrace many more types of writing. Joyce Carol Oates is a novelist and a fine one. James Dickey's *Deliverance*, I think, is one of the best novels ever written. I think it has almost as much poetry as

fiction. I suppose if I had to be precise, I would probably choose storyteller because novelist is a much bigger task.

NUWER: Who else do you read?

JAKES: Of all the books that I've read the two that stick most strongly in mind were [Norman Mailer's] *The Naked and the Dead*, because it was such a powerful wallop, but even higher I would rank as a personal favorite, *The Young Lions*. Irwin Shaw was not only a fine writer, but also a man who kept producing a body of work. It's one thing to write one brilliant novel and then hang it up. But to keep going ahead decade after decade to produce a body of work as good as his is really remarkable.

NUWER: I read both those books in college. Did you participate in a war?

JAKES: No, I never did. I was to be drafted for Korea as soon as I got out of graduate school, but I never was. I was 1-A. I went to my draft board in Chicago, a combined draft board with several boards in one large room, and it was just a whole mess. There were stacks of files falling behind cabinets. I don't know what ever happened. The war was over about a year after I was due, and Rachel and I were married then. In a way I have always regretted that at the time I did not inquire too strenuously about it.

NUWER: Stephen Crane was never in a war.

JAKES: I think it's possible to write about things you've never experienced because, in another sense, you really have experienced them. You have experienced the fear when your stomach is all churning—everybody has in one way or another.

NUWER: Have you ever had any experience with the harsher side of life in any sort of way, tough neighborhood or anything?

JAKES: Oh, I was raised in a very safe middle class neighborhood, but I had my share of fist fights as a kid. It was usually because I was the fat kid on the block. I usually lost them unless I could fall on the opponent—which I did once in a while. I could always get them that way. No, I didn't have the kind of background that some writers have where they come out of extremely poor circumstances and it's kind of like the basketball player or the sports personality fighting to get up and out. I didn't have that at all but I've had my share of hard knocks.

NUWER: How about poverty?

JAKES: No, my dad had a good job. I grew up in just an average middle class household. Not wealthy, not poor.

NUWER: At lunch you mentioned that some day you want to write a libretto and lyrics for a Broadway play?

JAKES: Yes, I'd like to. One of these days I would like to. I don't know if that's ever a dream that will be fulfilled, but we'll see. I've done eight or nine musicals, all of which are in the so-called stock play publishers' catalogs. I did most of them up in Dayton for a community theatre group and polished them up. They're done at various places around the country and one or two of them earn very good money. I would like to do a Broadway show one of these days. I'm working with a composer right now, a long-time friend who lives in New York, on two one-act operas which is an interesting project because I've never tried that before.

NUWER: Did you ever think of putting it on yourself Off-Broadway?

JAKES: I wouldn't spend my own money for it, no. That's probably conceit and folly. You know the trouble Joe Wambaugh got into with what is it, the *Black Marble*? He bankrolled it with his own money for creative control. I would just as soon that somebody else pony up the direction money. That's good enough.

NUWER: Do you have a vision or personal philosophy that you try to get into your books?

JAKES: Oh, I try to put a great deal of myself into every book. I don't write message boards, but I do put myself into each book.

NUWER: Can you put into words how you feel when you get a scene going just right?

JAKES: You just bubble. My kids will testify that in the early days of the first few Kent novels when we were all still together at home, I would come to the dinner table saying, "I just wrote the most terrific, gory, gut-grabbing Revolutionary War hospital scene I've ever done." There really is a terrific exuberance. People often say that writers in the writing mode are basically children. There is a kind of joyous sense of play. You've thrown the ring over the bottle.

NUWER: I think one of the hardest things for a writer is to visualize an action scene and get it down in a few words.

JAKES: Yes, that's difficult. In fact, one of the most difficult passages I ever wrote was the naval battle in *The Seekers* when *Constitution* gets her name, "Old Ironsides." First of all, I'm not a good sailor; I understand the parts of a ship only with great difficulty, and I had to go over and over that battle so that I was able even to explain it in a very elementary way. I find military actions are particularly difficult. I have talked to people who have been in combat—a friend from Vietnam and people like that—and have read enough to know that, in the Civil War, even the

highest commanders had very little sense of the flow of what was going on. Their sense of the engagement is just what's happening all around them. It's a very tricky thing to describe a large piece of action through the viewpoint of a single person.

NUWER: How do you feel about critics?

JAKES: Oh, I think it's a harmless pastime. It's not as antisocial as stealing hubcaps. I don't think it's socially very significant. I tend to take a very low view of most criticism because it's ephemeral. It's really a parasitic operation. Were it not for Harold Robbins, regardless what one thinks of him, there would be no way to attack Harold Robbins. Theodore Roosevelt did that wonderful speech about the man in the arena. The poor guy down there scrapping with his tiger is really a much more important role than sitting in the stands to criticize the gladiators.

NUWER: So, you walk away from your bad reviews?

JAKES: Yeah, I think you have to. There's a wonderful story that Charlton Heston tells about a play he once appeared in with Lawrence Olivier in New York. It was a bomb, and they both knew it on opening night. They repaired to Sardi's to drown their sorrows, and Heston, after he'd had a couple of belts, came up with this very profound philosophy which he laid on Sir Lawrence. "Well, Larry," he said, "I guess we have to forget our bad notices." And Olivier said, "It's even more important to forget the good ones." Meaning simply, you don't let them worry you too much. The short-term pluses or minuses you get from the critics are like dandelion thistles in the wind. You're grateful for the good reviews, you appreciate them, and your publisher puts them in the files to use. I'm a great lover of Shakespeare, not only as a poet and storyteller and genius, but as a man of the theatre. If you look into what little is known about his life you find out that he was over there mucking around the Globe cranking out plays for the company in which he was a participatory shareholder, and he was really getting critical knocks. His stuff was popular. It was Marlowe and the so-called University Poets who were getting all the kudos for writing the really profound, Sunday book review section stuff, and you see how history turned the tables.

NUWER: Do you get letters from readers who look for mistakes in your story?

JAKES: Every once in a while they'll get a little snide. There were a couple of historian howlers in the Kent books. But generally I'm appreciative of people who are conscientious enough to write and say, "hey, you may have slipped up on this." I'm not a computer; it's impossible to hold everything in your head, and if the suggestion is a worthy one, I'll make the fix and gratefully so. I've had a couple of what I call pedantic letters of the school-masterish tone. The blunder I use most often is in the third book in the Kent series. I had one of the characters homesteading in

Ohio around 1802, and in that first version he flushed a pheasant out of the shrubbery. I had one letter telling me that the pheasant was not imported until much later, but I changed it and happily so.

NUWER: To what do you attribute your own popularity?

JAKES: I think every once in a while that strange chemistry between an individual writer and reader takes place, and the writer is plucked out of the great mass of writers who are doing equal or frequently better work. There's some chord that is struck that appeals to the reader, and it doesn't lie in the perfection of the work or even the great skill with which it's accomplished. I think there's sort of a strange intangible feeling that the reader has for the person who's doing the writing and the way they do it. They happen to like that person and his or her opinions, attitudes, ways of selecting detail, style, the whole thing. I have a kind of unprovable feeling that it goes much beyond the written work. They feel the personage behind the book and respond. I feel it's very definitely the case with Michener, that it's not only Michener the craftsman, but Michener the man who generates the great strength of his work. Because he is very much a part of what he writes, I think that comes through.

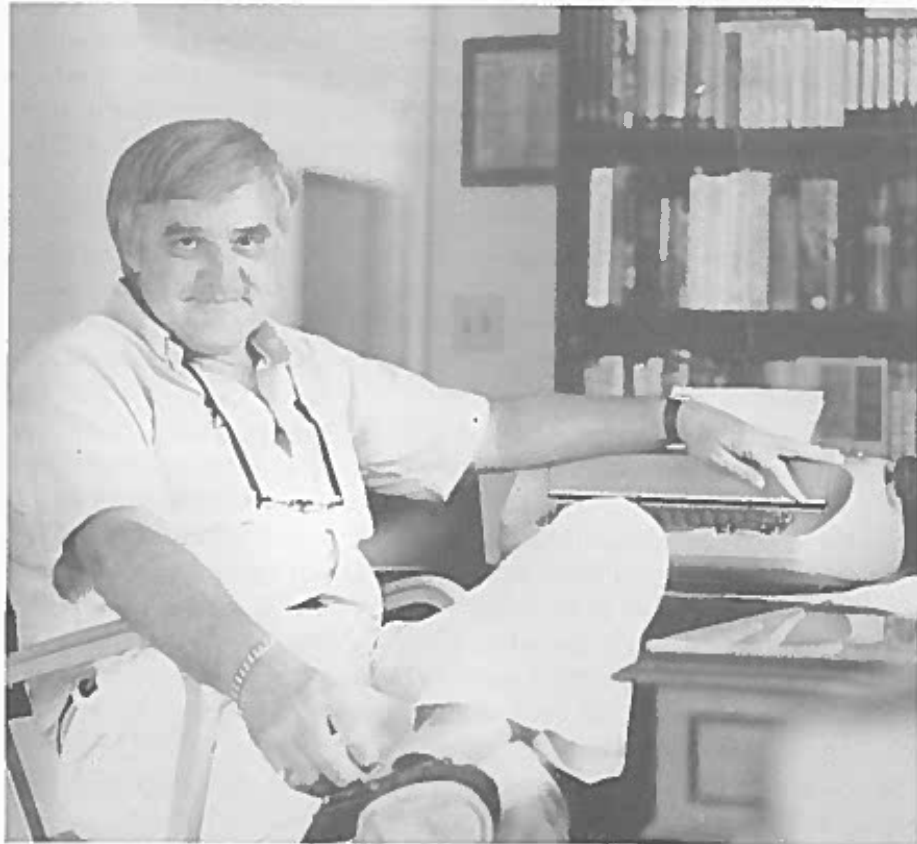
NUWER: Is there a special reader you desire?

JAKES: Yes, anybody I can get. The mail tells me that I get people from all over the spectrum—from extremely well-educated people to people who have not had much education. Men and women are about equally split, but I think my audience is probably made up of people a lot like I am. I consider myself in the very center mainstream of the country where indeed most of the people really are. Theodore White, a wonderful journalist, says that the country is governed from the middle, that's the great central body of people who are neither on one fringe nor the other. I think there is a certain sanity and balance in that central group, and I think that's where my audience comes from. America is really full of them. They certainly aren't the famed Silent majority, but I think they're the good, decent, honorable people who aren't too busy to take time to support their schools and plow a little back into the world that's given them some kind of livelihood.

I have had many many letters from people on the Kent books saying that when this character or that character died they wept. If that's true—and I have no reason to imagine that people would simply make up those things just to be gratuitously complimentary—that's the highest compliment they can pay to you.

NUWER: Have you ever wept for any of your literary characters?

JAKES: No, because I'm sort of your literary obstetrician; I'm bringing them into the world. While I'm very much interested in them, I have to have a certain degree of detachment to perform the job. I really care about them at the same time.



NUWER: But you're not the kind of person that would go to *E.T.*, the movie, and cry. You don't get emotional?

JAKES: Oh yes, I did. I certainly did cry at the end of *E.T.* I thought that was one of the most smashing pictures that I have ever seen.

NUWER: So you can get involved in another's character?

JAKES: Oh, in someone else's, yeah. I think that's what's missing from so much fiction today. It's all so laid back and doesn't really touch the great basic cords that ring in people's hearts and minds. The guy who was the best writing teacher I had at DePauw had many funny little maxims that he would give out, most of which were very good. One that sticks in my mind is that he always used to pound the desk or the table in the lecture hall in the seminar room where we sat around the table and say, "Write about earth, love, marriage, death, you'll never go wrong." It's really very true. I mean these are the basic bedrock experiences, and there's an infinity of variations in that framework. I try to create my characters to play on basic situations, love and hate.

NUWER: How important is fantasy in fiction?

JAKES: I think it's very important. I think family sagas about poor people would never succeed. I think an element of the family saga is that it's usually about people that are usually very well off, very powerful. I think it's one of the secrets of that particular genre. [Readers] don't particularly want to read about "just folks" like us, but the high and the mighty. I think fantasy there plays a role.

NUWER: What I admire about your career is the way you have stuck to it through tough times for so many years. You wrote copy as a copy writer all day and then sat down at night to write your own work? You rather endured like Faulkner's character's did. Did you feel heroic?

JAKES: Just the opposite, Hank. I felt like I was perhaps a damn fool to do what I did because I always knew there were more attractive things to do such as play golf. The writing was something I wanted to do—I needed to do—at a certain stage in my career to pay for my kids' college education. Sometimes I felt like I was a real idiot spending my nights in the basement when we lived in Dayton. I reached a certain point along about the age of 40 or so when I had doubts whether I would get anywhere. I thought perhaps I ought to hang it up. So no, I never felt the least bit heroic. I just felt I was doing a professional job.

NUWER: Did you feel that you had a demon on your back that kept you working all those years?

JAKES: Yes, I'm sure I did, I'm sure I did. It was some sort of personal compulsion, I think, for some kind of recognition, but it was also financial, I was not really making that much in the advertising business, and we did have four children. I knew we had to educate them.

NUWER: What did that basement look like?

JAKES: I was told that the room I worked in was a kitchen partitioned off which was put in for a divorced daughter by previous owners. They had built an additional bedroom on the second floor and given her her own kitchen in the cellar. There were no more plumbing fixtures down there, but it was all what I call wallboard or particle board—a drab yellow-green color with some shelves. I had a large desk that I carried around for years that I made myself out of a hollow door that I'd stained and put on some cheap hardware store legs. It had the advantage of being seven feet wide. It had a florescent light clipped to one end of it, and my typewriter set up beside it. It was rather cramped, but it was well-lit, it was warm, and it had a little space heater in the wintertime. Oh, yes, one feature that I don't have here was a six-foot wide bulletin board—a cork-board I'd put up. I don't have that here at all, and I miss that. The rest of the walls were taken up with bookshelves and piles of books sitting on the floor. There were two little cellar windows on one side that overlooked the backyard. If you just craned to look out you could see the kids playing.

NUWER: This is a wonderful house you live in here in Hilton Head.

JAKES: I think, comparatively, if you were to spend a day or two on Hilton Head, I could send you to a dozen houses compared to which this one would look like a shack. I mean there really are some—not necessarily in size—although that's true there are some big homes—but there are some that are just so *furnished*. You know the old saying about the "edifice complex" is really rampant down here because these corporation executives come down here and build their dream homes. They pack them with every bit of memorabilia, sometimes in very good taste and sometimes not, but obviously with a lot of money. I think we live relatively simply. This is a house that I characterize as a house for all the kids to come home to and live and where we can entertain our friends. It's not a museum. There are a great many museums on Hilton Head. I don't own any Picassos or Matisse paintings.

NUWER: Your [adult] children have been extraordinarily successful at college and in the work force. Even though you spent all those hours working, it doesn't seem to have hurt the way your children turned out?

JAKES: I sometimes think I shorted them a little bit on parental attention, but, on the other hand, I tried to keep my schedule flexible, particularly when they were growing up through seventh and eighth grade and high school which I think are the toughest years. Three of them—or I guess all of them—were all in various bands and orchestras at high school level, for instance. I'd try to set up my writing schedule so that I would work "X" number of nights a week, so that I was always available to go to the orchestra concert or the band's spaghetti supper. I always felt that my family came ahead of my advertising job or my writing job. I would have sacrificed either one of those for the welfare of my family. I always put them first and particularly in the advertising world, that wasn't too popular an attitude. But I didn't care what my employers felt; that was the way I felt.

NUWER: Reading a book such as *North and South* or the Kent books, I get the feeling that you have a strong love of family. That may be one reason why readers are attracted to your books.

JAKES: That could possibly be. I speculated about that many times. People would say, 'Why do you think the Kent books were popular?', and that's one of the reasons. I think the family saga as a genre is on the rise again. I had a professor at one university tell me an interesting thing. He thought their popularity was due to the fact that so many families are in disarray. As the number of shattered families goes up, the public interest in fictional families that are strong and relatively cohesive goes up as well. Maybe because they like to see some insights into family life or they like to read about successful families, or at least, families that stick together despite difficulties. I don't know if that's true, but it's an interesting theory.

NUWER: Do you find that your writing has changed now that you have more time to write?

JAKES: Yes, one would hope that it's better. I think with a little more time devoted to each book, I would hope they're a little better. I take more time editing, cutting out the purple adjectives, which of course I didn't do to start out with the pulp magazines. Everything was a penny a word, and if you could add five adjectives to a noun, why not? It's another nickel. So I would hope they're somewhat better. That's what I strive for anyway.

NUWER: Any kind of daily habits back in those days while you wrote?

JAKES: I would bring my coffee down there, and, of course, it got pretty choking at times because in those days I was an extremely heavy smoker. I smoked about three packs a day which I no longer do; I don't smoke at all any more.

NUWER: How did you quit smoking?

JAKES: In 1977, I had a physical, and they found a suspicious spot on my lung. I went into the hospital finally to have the upper right third of my lung taken out. I threw the cigarettes away as I walked into the hospital. I believe that my doctor really believed that I had cancer. I didn't, fortunately; there was no malignancy. But coming through this ghastly operation which was quite painful afterwards for several weeks, got me over the worst part of the smoking withdrawal, because I was on pain killers trying to get from under the discomfort. But I was back at work on one of the Kent books two weeks after I got out of the hospital. The hardest day I had was the day I went back to the typewriter. The old automatic reaching for the cigarettes with the yellow paper was very strong, but I got over it, rapidly. I've never had a desire since to smoke.

NUWER: Did you find out anything about yourself when you heard the news about the spot in those dreadful days before you went into the hospital?

JAKES: Yes, I did. I really went through one of those periods of settling up with myself. Rachel and I sat down and talked about it a good deal and made plans in case. You probably know once they find a malignancy on one X-ray you might as well pack it in. John Wayne was the one in a hundred thousand to live as long as he did after they found lung cancer. So we sat down and talked about what needed to be done in a practical sense. Fortunately, that was when I was working on the seventh Kent novel, and we had already gotten our kids' college paid for. But I sort of made peace with myself. I was a bit younger than 47 in 1977; I would have been 45. So I said to myself, "If I have to check out now, I'll do so reluctantly", but at least I had some success with writing, however modest. I felt that I had achieved what a lot of people never do with their lives—I had started out to get somewhere and I had gotten there.

NUWER: Didn't you ever consider that you were just arriving and—

JAKES: —No, I felt the other way around. I had reached a point that I was fortunate to reach. Many people go through life frustrated at what they do; they don't even enjoy their daily work—that seems to be more and more prevalent today. I had finally been able to work full-time at what I liked and had had some recognition for it.

NUWER: So you didn't feel good about the things you'd turned out before you reached 40?

JAKES: Oh, yes. Occasionally. Every writer has ups and downs about the work he is doing. I did a great number of children's books for high school-age juveniles on assignment that I would not have picked for myself. I did the best I could but I wasn't particularly juiced up. I worked very hard on those science fiction novels. I gave them everything I had. They didn't do particularly well, but I was quite proud of them and I still am of three or four of those.

NUWER: Which ones?

JAKES: One was called *Six Gun Planet* which is still nominally in print. It came along two years before Michael Crichton did *West World*, interesting enough. It was about a planet where the mores of the Old West had become standard, and robots were running the country. My favorite was *Black in Time*—which sank like a rock—which was a book my editor suggested. It was all about some white extremists and black extremists struggling for control of a time machine to try to change black history one way or the other. There was a sort of middle-of-the-road black professor caught in the middle. It was kind of a self-taught course in black history, because it flashed back and forth from Harriet Beecher Stowe's parlor to Timbuctoo, the great city state. I thought it was a little presumptuous of a white writer to try to write what was on the mind of a black man, but I tried it. I didn't get any flack, but that book sank like a rock. It's completely gone; it's disappeared altogether. Then I did one called *On Wheels* several years before Arthur Hailey did *Wheels*. It's about a future American society in which about 15 percent of the population lived on the 16 lane freeways in great, interconnected chains of vans driving all the time. They never went below 40, and they had clans much like those of North Carolina's hill country.

NUWER: Sounds like life was one great tailgating party.

JAKES: It really was. It was a combination of what I would call a Tennessee or North Carolina mountain folktale flavor with the automotive culture we had going back in the 'Sixties before the gasoline crunch hit. It was inspired by a passage from Tom Wolfe's terrific essay ["The Last American Hero"] about Junior Johnson; that's where I got the idea. That [*On Wheels*] is still in print. In fact, I just got some money the other day from the French edition. It proved a steady seller in Europe.

NUWER: How many books *have* you written?

JAKES: I've never stopped to count, but they have been printed in every market on every continent: South American, all through Scandinavia, Europe, Turkey, Israel, Japan, Australia.

NUWER: How high a stack would your manuscripts be?

JAKES: Oh gosh! Maybe two or three stories. I'm going to give all mine to the University of Wyoming. There is even one mystery novel that I've lost track of—that I don't have a copy of. It was called *This Will Slay You*, and it was done under a pen name. I've only used two pen names in my career. I've used Alan Payne back in the 'Fifties when I was trying to get that [name] established as a detective byline; I did a couple of short stories under that name. Then I used Jay Scotland as a historical novel pseudonym.

NUWER: As a historical novelist, do you notice any mistakes we are repeating today that were committed in Civil War times and so forth?

JAKES: I'll give you an example. You know the famous Santayana quotation about those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. I think regardless of which side of the ERA struggle one is on we could have saved ourselves a powerful lot of inflated rhetoric if people had simply gone back and read the rhetoric of the woman's movement in the 1850's. That sort of said it all and those who were particularly opposed to ERA just trotted out the same old arguments, slightly modernized. I'm very strongly in favor of ERA; I'm sorry it didn't pass, but I was astonished at the way the same old arguments were trotted out—with maybe a little more contemporary language about unisex bathrobes and all that stuff. They didn't say that when Lucy Stone and Elizabeth Stanton were campaigning for woman's rights, but most of the other arguments were put forth.

I think there are some interesting lessons to be learned from history. We never seem to have the sense of where we've been in this country, and I think to know where we've been can be very helpful. Another example—I've always been a great admirer of John Adams, particularly in regard to his defense of the British soldiers in the Boston Massacre before the Revolution in 1770, I think. Although he, of course, loathed the whole idea of the British presence, he defended those soldiers who inadvertently gunned down some Americans, because he believed firmly that every man was entitled to the best legal defense he could get. That kind of understanding on the part of a brilliant man who became one of this country's patriots and a fairly good president helps you to take a little different position on some of these extremely popular public trials when somebody absolutely loathsome is being defended. It helps you to realize that however reprehensible the guy or woman may be, he or she must be defended however unpopular they are. You may not like the verdict when it's rendered.

I've kind of wandered from the question. I don't know that we have anything as undigestible in this nation today as the slavery question, although certainly I think the shock waves are still reverberating. I think there's a good deal of the black and white issues within the debate over the social support programs. I think it's sort of under the surface. It's not spoken, but it's there.

NUWER: Do you have faith in the great masses of people?

JAKES: I have faith in the great masses, I really do. I have the faith, I think, that Jefferson had. We as a people are frequently guilty of making the wrong decision over the short term, but my overview is that the great central mass is decent and honorable. I think that's what the record shows about the way we drifted into the Civil War. The Southern yeomanry was stoutly opposed to slavery, but they really didn't have access to the corridors of power at all. I think it's interesting that one of the greatest leaders that South Carolina and the Confederacy had, Wade Hampton, didn't go to the secession convention; he wasn't there when the deed was done. He didn't believe in it, [but] he believed in his own state and he believed in the South. Once the war started he was a very fierce fighter as so many of them were—like Lee, for instance.

NUWER: It's the idea of doing the right thing.

JAKES: Right, right!

NUWER: I wasn't aware before reading *North and South* of the nastiness of the common people on both sides well before the outbreak of the Civil War. There was underlying backbiting, insults, that sort of thing. How did you research that?

JAKES: Just by studying the temper of the times and some of the descriptions of the things that happened in the public's sphere, and of the brawlings and the canings that took place in Congress. One of the things I tried to do with *North and South* was to do away with the misconception that all this happened in two weeks. It was a thirty years-and-better wearing away of the nerves. When you study cadet behavior at West Point, very markedly shown in the memoirs and the writings of that period, [you see that] during the [18] '50s, things got worse on a parallel course with what was happening on a larger sphere. Things got pretty bitter toward the end. I believe it was Senator Sumner of Massachusetts who was the one who got beaten over the head. Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina caned him over the head, because Sumner had called the South "one vast bordello" in reference to slavery. This, of course, was far from the truth. The nastiness on both sides was escalating, and it escalated over a period of thirty years. There were extremists on both sides and finally, toward the end, they held sway. It wasn't the solid South or the solid North by any manner of means. There were very strong Union voices in the South and very strong pro-Southern sentiments in the North. That's all on the record, but people tend to forget.

NUWER: What do you like about living in South Carolina?

JAKES: I like the climate in South Carolina. I like the people in the South. I think they have an openness and a friendliness that has been largely beaten out of the people in the Northeast by a combination of high pressure urban living, cold weather, and industrial problems. This is quite obviously the boom part of the country. I'm speaking as a transplanted Yankee so it's very subjective, but I don't think Southerners have been spoiled by the kind of harsh challenges the Northerners have faced and given in to. The whole industrial belt from Chicago to New Jersey is in trouble, and it's tough living up there. The roads are decaying, the cities are falling rapidly into rack and ruin. The city where we came from, Dayton—we made wonderful friends there in fifteen great years—but it's in tough shape economically. The South, on the other hand, is on the upswing, and I think the people down here do take time to talk and be a little more friendly. They're probably like the Midwesterners that I grew up with who are fast disappearing up there because life is too stressful. I really do like it [here]. South Carolina is a very classy state in many ways. Historically, it's a treasure trove. All in all, I am quite happy to be here for the time.

I was curious as to what kind of reception I would get as a Yankee coming down here writing about events long past, in some places, rather sensitive events. I must say there hasn't been a single quibble or raised eyebrow. When I was up in Hartsville a couple of weeks ago—extremely deep in the center of South Carolina, physically and traditionally—I didn't find any lingering animosities over the war. I think that's all gone except in perhaps the very oldest citizens.

NUWER: Do you get to the ocean very much?

JAKES: Yes, we go down there quite a lot for walks on the beach.

NUWER: How about the foods that you like in South Carolina?

JAKES: I've really gotten the hots for Carolina barbeque. I'm not a connoisseur by any means but I really love it.

NUWER: What are you preparing for tonight?

JAKES: Probably pepper steak tonight and bananas foster for dessert. I just do fancy cookbook cooking and I have a great time at it. It's like golf, it just takes me completely outside of myself.

NUWER: Do you get into fine wines and beers?

JAKES: I like wine. Again, I'm no connoisseur. I like a good bottle of French wine, but I don't get into fifty dollar bottles or anything like that. I can appreciate the difference between a six dollar jug wine and a fifteen dollar French bottle, but beyond that the distinctions begin to blur.