

A Virgin Author Reports: *THE BABY GAME* signing tour

By Randall Hicks

I wet my pants on the way to my first book signing. On the good side, I can report it was from condensation dripping from my glass of ice water, rather than a bladder malfunction. On the bad side, a wet spot is a wet spot. If the sun had been shining into the car maybe I could have counted on the sunshine to dry me, but it wasn't so I had to create some heat via friction. In other words, rapidly rub the area, using my Boy Scout fire-starter training. This caused more than a few looks on my drive to Book Carnival in Orange, California.

Maybe every virgin author goes through it. Or, maybe I'm just a big wimp. Regardless, when my publicist proudly first presented me with my 14-stop, four-state signing tour (including Bouchercon), I felt a panic attack as severe as during my one ill-fated attempt to ask out a cheerleader in high school. Calling her a sadist would not be fair (the publicist, not the cheerleader); she was just doing her job. Still, I felt there was some malicious joy in her face at my horror.

I called T. Jefferson Parker, one of the authors who'd been kind enough to befriend me with a blurb, for some basic "Book Signing 101" guidance. "What page do I sign on?" "Black pen or blue?" "Date it or not date it?" "What about personal salutations?" Of course, all these questions presupposed someone was actually going to *show up* at the signings. Adding to my anxiety was the fact that my first signing was going to be in the town in which my parents live. The only thing worse than having no one show up would be having no one show up with my parents watching. I could imagine them valiantly trying to hide their pity, and offering comments designed to bolster my ego, but failing miserably, like "You survived the cheerleader humiliation, honey. You can survive this."

Jeff tried to lower my expectations. He pointed out I should not expect big crowds - or any crowds for that matter - as the purpose was to get to know booksellers. He told me about one of his signings on a rainy day, when the only two people present were two homeless men who came in to get out of the rain. I can still visualize Jeff's heartfelt reading to them. Still, his comments didn't actually help much as every signing I've seen Jeff do, he had a line out the door. But I appreciated the thought.

Despite all this, somehow I managed to leave my house and head for Book Carnival with some confidence in my step. I was just out the door when my wife stopped me.

WIFE: "You aren't wearing *that* shirt to your signing are you?"

ME: "What's wrong with this shirt?" It was my favorite shirt and did an admirable job of camouflaging my lack of both biceps and pecs.

WIFE: "Nothing's wrong with the shirt, but you wore it for your author photo on your book jacket. You can't wear the same shirt to a signing. It'll look like you only have one shirt!"

She had a point, so back upstairs I went for another shirt. While there my teenage son stopped me. Like all teenagers, he offers nothing but kind and helpful comments to his beloved parents.

SON: "Whoa! What's up with the pants, dad?"

ME: "What's wrong with my pants?" I knew *they* weren't visible in my author photo.

SON: "Looks like you're expecting a flood. Totally highwater."

I looked down. Yep. No matter how stylish my socks might be, I guess they weren't designed to be visible below my pants. But my son wasn't done.

SON: "And try to stand up straight, dad. It hides that you've got that little belly going on. Nothing's worse than a skinny man with a belly."

My daughter, who at age eleven, is still unabashedly sweet, gave me a hug as I finally made it back to the door, now standing straighter and in my new clothes.

DAUGHTER: "Don't worry, dad. I think you look great. And you can hardly see the blood where you cut yourself trimming your ear hairs."

On the drive to Book Carnival I gave myself a pep talk. I'd already met Ed, the owner, when I'd dropped by the week before to introduce myself, and view the scene of my future human sacrifice, I mean book signing. Actually, it had been a great drop-in, and I watched my first example of the *handselling* of my book, as Ed expertly sold a copy to a charming woman, Julie, then introduced me to her as the author. She was the first person I signed a book for and it was a pretty cool moment. Okay, I'll be honest. It made me so happy my eyes watered. The only bad moment was when Ed told me he'd ordered 48 copies for the signing. This filled me with as much performance anxiety as my first time with a woman. I just hoped the signing would last longer.

As my wet spot quickly dried, my confidence began to soar. In fact, I managed to convince myself there might even be a *line* waiting for me when I arrived. (Ahh, a new writer's fantasies.) I'd received a call the day before that the main Orange County newspaper, *The Register*, with a readership of a whopping half million or so, ran a feature on THE BABY GAME on the front page of its Entertainment section. So with the uniquely optimistic reasoning of a new novelist, I figured that if only one-half of one percent of its readers saw it and came, that'd be two hundred fifty people! Right? I mean, what could *possibly* be more exciting than a book signing? Plus, the reviews had been great, and *everyone* reads book reviews. Don't they? I mean, doesn't everyone subscribe to *Library Journal*?

I arrived at Book Carnival about thirty minutes early - too early to go in - so I just slowly drove by. Nope. No line. Not a single person, actually. I made a quick tour of the city and arrived back about five minutes early. Still no line. In fact, it appeared it must be Super Bowl Sunday, as the entire town seemed suddenly empty. Or maybe a plague had hit. Never had the sidewalk in front of a store looked more desolate. I went inside. No one there who wasn't paid to be there. At this point I was praying for rain, so at least Jeff Parker's two winos would show up.

I was escorted to a desk in the back. Waiting for me were fourteen books, which I was told were pre-solds. Suddenly, the store didn't feel so empty. I'd sold fourteen books! Somebody liked me after all! Even better, signing them gave me something to do, since evidently no one was coming to my signing. I suddenly became the slowest signing author in history, calculating that if I spent four minutes per signature, I could stretch the signings to a full hour, and manage to look busy the entire time.

Soon though, people started to filter in, and not just my parents. Over the next hour, about fifty people came, trickling in a few at a time. For brief moments, there was even *a line*. Maybe all of four people deep - and true, it was actually a family standing together - but a line! How to signal someone with a camera to quickly capture this momentous event, perhaps never to be repeated, without being too obvious? *Quick, take my picture and make sure you get the line in the shot!*

The people who came to this first signing immediately earned "best friend for life" status. There were some wonderful people I'd met through the internet sites I post on like 4 Mystery Addicts and Dorothy L, some clients from my law practice, book store customers, and people my parents had forced to come through a mixture of intimidation and guilt. Forty-four books sold in all, plus best of all, I had lunch out with my 4MA and Dorothy L pals afterwards.

Once past the terrors of book signing number one, I immediately transferred them to signing number two, my official "launch party" at Brentano's in Los Angeles. As if the word "party" wasn't enough to intimidate me, my publicist informed me she was bringing a cake, snacks and drinks. She also told me to invite "all my friends." Okay, all my friends in Los Angeles totals about, ah, two people. *Great*. Plus I couldn't count on mommy and daddy to wrangle up a dozen people like at Book Carnival. There, the fear of no one coming had been bad enough. Now I had an image of me standing next to a big cake, all alone. Talk about pitiful.

I solved part of this fear by dragging my wife, kids and our French exchange student along (which required bribes of excessive shopping in the mall afterwards). Naturally, when we arrived promptly at the time of the signing, there was no one there. This left my publicist, my family and me, gamely smiling at each other like we were having fun. But soon, people started filtering in - my first agent, my old dentist, a fellow writer friend Patricia Smiley, and others - to the point the chairs were full and people had to stand in the aisles. Admittedly, there were only six chairs, but hey, "standing in the aisles" sounds impressive. One gentleman pulled me aside and indicated the chair set up for me to sign in and said, "The last time I was here, Bill Clinton sat there." True, Clinton likely had a couple thousand people for his signing, but the comparison made me feel absurdly proud, kind of like when I saw my name next to Maya Angelou's in the L.A Times Book

Calendar. These little moments, like signing my first book, became some of my most treasured memories.

Several more signings have since come and gone. My second Los Angeles signing, at The Mystery Bookstore, had a total crowd of one mother and her baby which, damn it, I'm counting as two people. Even there though, despite the fact I felt I let them down by not pulling a crowd, I had a great time talking with the staff, wonderful people who share my love of mysteries. I've had some shared signings as well, with Terrill Lee Lankford, Zoe Sharp and Blake Crouch.

Just as when I attended my first Bouchercon last month, where I met tons of writers, it amazes me how nice a group of people mystery writers are, and how welcoming to a new writer. I had a nice lunch with Lee after our signing, and Zoe and her husband dropped by my house for a nice lunch together after our Arizona signings when her tour brought her to California. Barbara Seranella has been no stranger to our home-squeezed lemonade. Jeff Parker and I had a ping pong match more heated than the Yankees-Red Sox rivalry.

What have I learned? First, you sell the most books when you sign in the city in which your parents live. (I'm now actively recruiting foster parents in every city around the world.) Second, it's not the size of the crowd, but time spent with new people at book events, which is truly rewarding. Third, I'm so proud to be a mystery writer, and get to hang out with fellow mystery readers and other writers. I'm living my fantasy. There is no finer group of people.

Randall Hicks' debut mystery, *THE BABY GAME* (called "a must-have" by *Library Journal*, and "unbelievably wonderful" by his mother), is set in the world of adoption and features adoption attorney, Toby Dillon. It was released in August and is the first in a series. Randy is an adoption attorney and the author of *ADOPTING IN AMERICA: How To Adopt Within One Year*, now in its 4th edition, and the nation's bestselling "how to" adoption book. He's been featured on *The Today Show*, *The Leeza Gibbons Show*, *Sally Jesse Raphael* and *The Home Show*, and was the host of the PBS series, *Adoption Forum*. He lives in Fallbrook, California. His website is randall-hicks.com