



GEORGE CHRISTY



Jay Penske

"In all these years that Bel-Air's been a part of Los Angeles – maybe a century? – why hasn't there been a bookstore when clearly the owners and residents are highly educated, affluent and love to read?" asks Jay Penske, 28, an heir to the Penske Automotive empire. Jay fell in love with books during his childhood, and not long ago relocated to Los Angeles from New York. In addition to his Internet media technology company VSI and creating the children's cellphone Firefly,

he recently opened Dragon Books, specializing in rare and fine editions, in the Beverly Glen Circle near Mulholland Drive. Jay's named the store after a book, *Dragon Dragon*, written by John Gardner and G. Morrow, that appealed to him as a youngster.

Annette Bening (husband Warren Beatty's office is around the corner), Joni Mitchell, Jon Voight, Sly Stallone and other local and out-of-town bibliophiles and collectors are discovering Dragon Books' formidable literary treasures. Within its inviting high-ceilinged room with mahogany paneling, one finds a carved, 18th century French mantelpiece adorning the fireplace, comfortable tobacco-brown leather armchairs and a sofa, a Persian rug, even a children's armchair alongside the section for young readers. An upstairs gallery includes more books, and, on occasion, Jay, when he's on hand, hosts a rare book collector to a sip of one of his rare Scotches. Jay says the design of Dragon Books was inspired by his favorite library in the world at Trinity College in Dublin. "I've told my mother that I want to be married there."

Chad Reingold lately has joined Dragon Books as manager, after being with Heritage Books on Melrose Avenue for 15 years, which owners Ben and Lou Weinstein are now closing. And children's author Peter Thompson alternates as Dragon Books manager during mid-week. "Dynamic, kind and passionate about books" is how Chad describes Jay, who for the past three years was selling his rare finds on line. If you're going for top dollar, Chad points to the first 1851 American edition of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, which came from the collection of the estate of the murdered Edward Doheny. Price is \$48,000. Although Chad notes there are many good books priced at \$20 to \$30, and I, bibliobibulous as I am, bought one, seductively written about Marrakesh and Morocco for \$20 that was published in England in 1954 by Peter Mayne. Not the current best-selling author Peter Mayne, who writes rapturously about his days in Provence.

A letter, handwritten in 1917 by Marcel Proust in which he mentions *Swann's Way*, is priced at \$6,500. A first edition of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* without the original jacket but with a facsimile is \$5,000. "If we had the original jacket," adds Chad, "it would be \$200,000. The typos in this first edition make

it more valuable." An 1867 first edition published in England of Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* is \$9,000. And a first American edition of *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, published in 1885, is \$20,000. A very rare issue of Charles Bukowski's *It Catches My Heart in Its Hand*, only 700 copies were hand printed, is inscribed with a poetic message dated 12-17-63 and priced at \$8,000. And a scarce American edition of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* that Chad claims is "a rare first issue, only 15 or 20 known copies," is priced at \$32,000.

The Sunday afternoon I visited Dragon Books, actor Rico Simonini dropped by and browsed, having already bought three books as gifts during past weeks – a book of Shakespeare's sonnets, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and a memoir of the flapper era. Rico finds it "a literary oasis" in the Beverly Glen mall, and wonders why aren't there more bookshops like Dragon Books, with Chad explaining that "rents and the chain stores are driving booksellers out of business, many are now working out of their homes." Chad adds that he reads to his 2-year-old daughter, Lilly Rose, every night to instill the "book habit" into her psyche.

We were able to reach Jay Penske by telephone. He maintains offices in Century City and El Segundo and says that his favorite authors are Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain and Herman Melville, and social satirists George Orwell, H. L. Mencken and Edmund Wilson. He's fond of Herman Hesse, Franz Kafka and William Faulkner, and German, Russian, French and Spanish authors. We asked about the vitrine of antique bookends, which Jay says bibliophiles love seeking them out. Chad notes that they acquire books via auction or through estates, and suggests that it's best for those who believe they may have books of interest to call with details to see if there's a market. "Any first edition by J. D. Salinger is of great interest."

In the upstairs gallery, a portrait in charcoal and pastels of George Bernard Shaw is autographed and dated 2/7/27. Posing for the portrait, Shaw writes, "I now have considerable experience as an artist's model, but my terms – about \$3,750 an hour – are prohibitive. Also, I shall not be disengaged for at least a year." Price is \$4,500.

Not for sale is a framed letter from H. L. Mencken, typewritten in 1931. "My one hope is that, if war breaks out, the Japanese will seize Los Angeles at once and put the inhabitants to the sword. I have always prophesized that they will never really molest San Francisco. It is too noble a town. But Los Angeles certainly deserves to be stamped out, and the site sown with (an unreadable scribbled word) weeds." If Mr. Mencken were to visit Dragon Books and Los Angeles these days, he might have a different opinion.



The Dragon Books interior was inspired by the library at Dublin's Trinity College