

# Birmingham

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The miraculous book  
and life of  
Shelby County's  
James Redfield.

## *The Celestine Prophet*



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# The Celestine Prophet

That *The Celestine Prophecy*, a million-seller guide to life, has topped the national fiction lists is amazing enough; that it was given life by a first-time novelist from the outskirts of Birmingham is almost a miracle.

In a nation where both reading and religion are woefully neglected, *The Celestine Prophecy* has caught fire and spread from coast to coast, defying its New Age beginnings and crossing into the mainstream of popular literature. James Redfield, an unobtrusive man who grew up in Shelby County and graduated from Thompson High School, has captured the nation's imagination with his very first book, a blend of philosophical ideas dispensed in an Indiana Jones-style adventure tale of intrigue and suspense.

Few seasoned writers ever hit the number one spot on *The New York Times* Bestseller List. Fewer still do it with their first book. Publishers can't even estimate the odds that an unknown from Birmingham, Alabama, could publish his own little paperback, give it away to booksellers in towns scattered across the country, and watch it explode into national prominence.

BY MELANIE REYNOLDS PATRICK

But that's exactly what happened to James Redfield, who used to be a youth counselor and who wrote the book as an outgrowth of his own spiritual angst. "I needed more clarity for myself, more experiential knowledge," he says. "I was looking for the common denominators among all the experiences of God's presence." A searching Redfield devoured psychology and philosophy, finding some sense in works by Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, and books like *The Future of the Body* by Michael Murphy and *The Phenomenon of Man* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

The result was a personal philosophy that spawned a book. Redfield calls it a parable. A critic in *The New Yorker* calls it "a self-help guide, a how-to manual with a little plot piped around the edges." Whatever it is, *The Celestine Prophecy* lines the shelves of the nation's bookstores, waiting to be snapped up by new readers who want to follow along as the hero, his friends, and his enemies search Peru in a race to uncover a lost manuscript containing critical insights about life.

To be sure, the insights in *The Celestine Prophecy* aren't earth-shaking. They're drawn from a variety of sources fairly familiar to a well-read spiritual seeker, including Eastern and Western religious thought, mythology, ecology, popular psychology, and modern health and physiology.

According to Redfield, the First Insight occurs in a person who feels a profound sense of restlessness and becomes aware that the coincidences in his or her life are meaningful. The Second Insight places that awareness in historical perspective with man's progression from dependence on the Church to dependence on material things. According to this Insight, humankind is poised on the brink of a new spirituality.

Other insights address the subtle energy given off and received by living things, the causes of conflict and the way to ease it, "control dramas" in human relationships, ways to deal "consciously" with other people, and our ultimate purpose on earth.

"The book is a synthesis of the mystical side of our religious tradition," Redfield says, "heightened by what we know about healthy living. Psychologically, it comes from the human potential movement. It's a way to open



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up a new picture, a new image of what's possible for us as human beings in terms of experiencing the divine."

The book's success bespeaks a crying need for such a guide. "As a culture, we've been searching for something more to life," Redfield says. "We've been looking for more substance. We know our routines and the ways we've been schooled to connect with God, but we feel instinctively that there must be a deeper way.

"I think this questioning has always been true throughout history, but it's become more intense in this age of mass media and constant change and immediate access to information. We've done a fairly decent job of settling into the world and creating a complex economy. We're not looking to contradict our religious heritage, but to expand it and give our lives more meaning—to open up a spiritual adventure and make life a lot more fun. And I really believe there is more to life than what we've been settling for."

Apparently lots of people are looking for that something in Redfield's book. He sold 23,000 copies of self-published stock and then sold the rights to Warner Books. To date, over a million copies have been sold. At the same time, the 44-year-old Redfield is in hot demand for talk show and radio appearances. He estimates he's received as many as 400 letters per day from readers. At press time he was juggling five offers for movie rights to *Celestine Prophecy* (he'd like William Hurt or Patrick Swayze to play the lead) and he's preparing to come out with a second book, *The Tenth Insight*, that will take up where the first one left off. Publishers are already calling it a guaranteed best-seller.

Although Redfield says he's surprised by the enormity of his success, early readers around Birmingham thought the book had an intangible appeal. "When Jim brought the book to me, he'd already sold several thousand copies," says James Lunsford of Southern Publishers Group, which helped distribute some of the original paperback printings of the book. "Jim Redfield sat right here in my office and told me he had a winner, but then, writers always say that about their books. We took it on, and two days later the phones were

ringing off the hook for *The Celestine Prophecy*. Bookstores and individuals were ordering the book—big orders—and people were wild to get to Redfield."

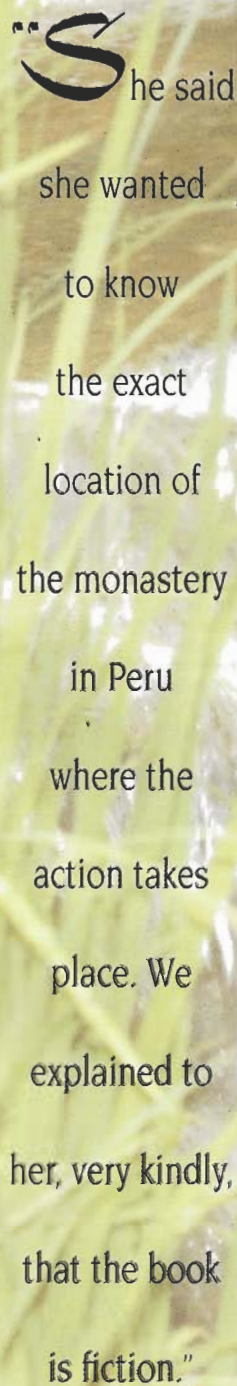
Since Warner has taken the book, people have flocked to Redfield's seminars in which he describes and expands on his ideas. Some determined pilgrims have even traveled to Saginaw, Alabama, to try for a private audience. And in the meantime, magazines like *People* and *Redbook* and *New Age Journal* (and *Birmingham*) are jockeying for time to interview the bright new writer. Says Lunsford, "I went out on the West Coast and visited bookstores in all kinds of towns. *The Celestine Prophecy* was everywhere. One of my friends just got back from Paris—the book was in stores over there, too."

"A lot of people want to attribute Jim's success to accident or luck," Lunsford says, "but I think Jim was just plain smart. He knew his market. He's a counselor, and he knows people are out there searching, looking for something to believe in."

Some people wanted to believe so badly that they mistook the book for fact, Lunsford says. "I remember one woman in particular who called our office, just frantic to talk to Redfield. She said she wanted to know the exact location of the monastery in Peru where the action takes place. We explained to her, very kindly, that the book is fiction. She just went hysterical when she realized what we were saying. Apparently she'd lined up 25 people to make a pilgrimage to that monastery in Peru."

While some may find the book a little too realistic for comfort, others decry its style and literary merit. *The New Yorker* calls books like *The Celestine Prophecy* "the very worst fate that could have befallen literature" and assures its readers that James Redfield has no ear for English prose.

Redfield simply laughs in response. "Great literature is in the eye of the beholder," he says. "Most people who criticize me or criticize the book as a novel are looking at the form of the book and not the substance. As for the critics...they seem to get points for discovering a book or saying they discovered it. Then when a book becomes popular, they



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"I've had people tell me Jim isn't a good writer," say Lunsford. "And even though I personally don't agree with them, I let them talk on for awhile. Then I always tell them, it doesn't really matter whether he's a good writer or not. Fact is, the book is selling like crazy."

If the book's form calls into question Redfield's literary talent, its message must give rise to even more speculation about his sincerity. Is Redfield really just heaping platitudes on a nation of lost souls?

Local public relations expert June Cunniff has watched Redfield's rise to success and says he has a "pure" attitude and a universal system of values. "Jim lives his beliefs. I only helped him a little when he first published the book, but I've watched him succeed and remain unchanged by the success."

"I wondered myself at first whether Jim really believes all this stuff in the book," says Lunsford, "and I've had some deeply religious people tell me they were troubled by the book, that they found it anti-religion. But after reading it and listening to what people say about it and watching Jim's reaction to his success, I'd have to say that he really does seem to believe in what he says. And I don't think there's anything in this book that could hurt anybody."

Redfield agrees. "Very few readers have said anything negative to me about the book. In spite of its mystical nature, it's basically a book about loving one's neighbors, the possibilities in life, and making contributions to the world. It's pretty hard to find fault with those ideas."

For himself, Redfield believes *The Celestine Prophecy* has been his way of making a contribution to the world. "This is a true grass roots word-of-mouth book. It's not a book that Oprah or anybody else made. I'm very proud that people read it and then want their friends to read it. I hope it makes a difference for people."

"I certainly didn't intend it as a modern-day Bible. It's just a parable—an adventure parable. I consider myself a parablist, not a prophet. I'm laying out ideas people can think

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about and test in their own lives. They can see if the ideas ring true for them and help them. If not, then they can explore other avenues. This is only an effort to lay out ideas and create a dialogue about the search for true spiritual liberation.”

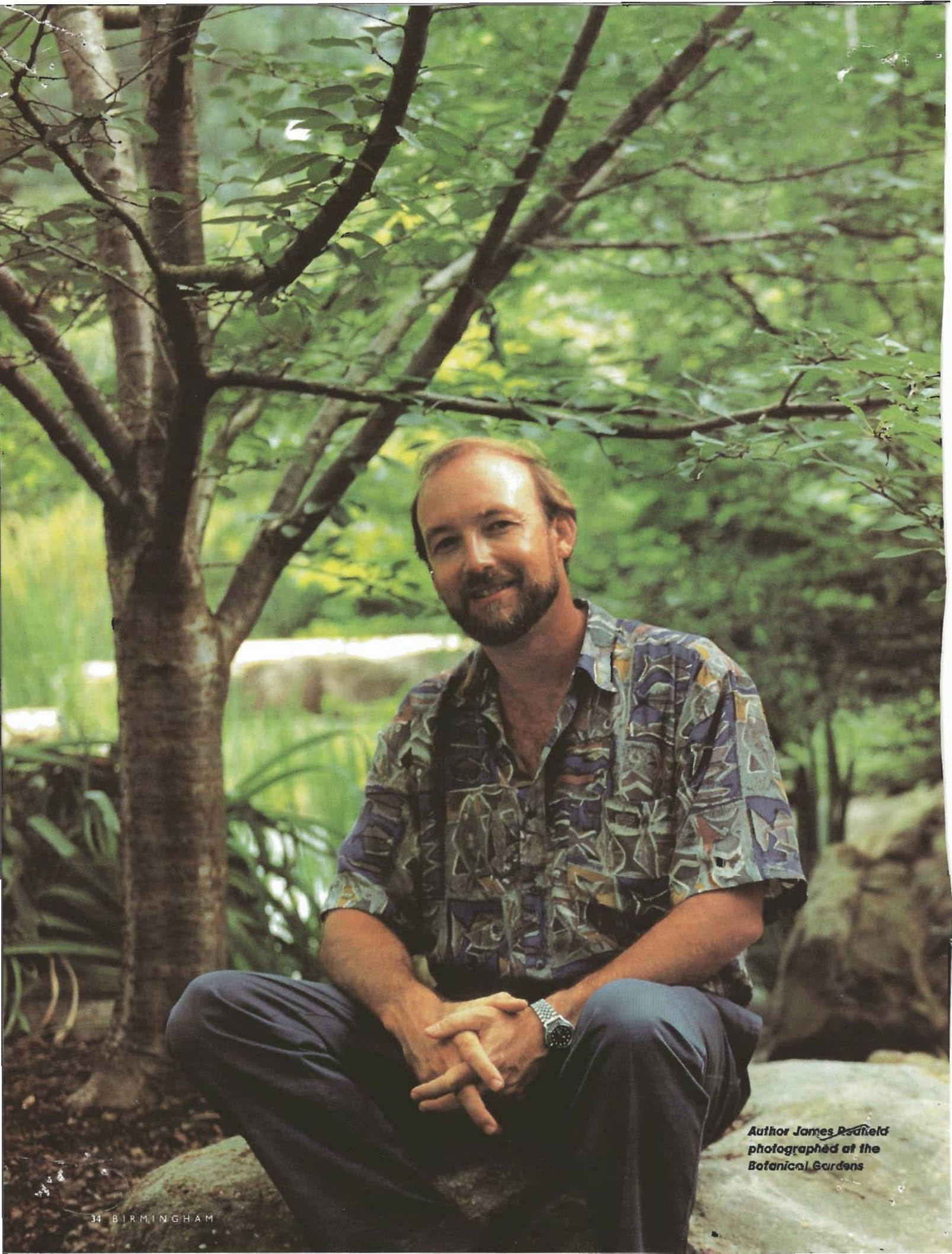
Redfield says the more popular the book has become, the more he has felt the need to retreat. “I want the focus to be on the message, not on me personally. That’s one reason I continue to live in Saginaw. My wife Salle and I want to live a normal, everyday life. People around here let us do that.”

Everyday life for the Redfields hasn’t changed much, even though Warner’s check for the rights to *Celestine Prophecy* opened some new doors. “We’re building a new house on our land in Saginaw, and we’ve gotten to travel,” Redfield says. “We’re in touch with many of the people who are making a difference out there in solving some of the major problems we have on this planet. It’s fun to have a chance to talk with truly inspired people—people who are living in open connection with their idea of the spiritual.”

“I saw James in my office the day after he’d gotten his big check from Warner,” says Lunsford, “and there he was in his tennis shoes and his jeans. I thought surely he’d do something grand with all that money, but he said he was just going on with life as usual.”

“Since all this has happened, we’ve had to work at slowing the pace down,” Redfield admits. “As the book has become more popular, quality of life has become the watchword for me and my family.

“And really, quality of life is the watchword for our whole culture nowadays. Life fully perceived sometimes seems short, and quality of life is what more and more people are after.” B



*Author James Redfield  
photographed at the  
Botanical Gardens*