

That's So Conroy

Written by By Margaret Evans, Editor



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In the days immediately following Pat Conroy's death, I



couldn't write a word.

It happened on a Friday night, and by Saturday morning there were already long, comprehensive tributes appearing in publications as nearby as the *Beaufort Gazette*, as far-flung as the *New York Times*, and everywhere in between.

Lowcountry Weekly was scheduled to go to print the following Monday morning. I'd already written my column – some trifle, or so it now seemed, about the Trump phenomenon – but there was still time to bump it for a Conroy homage.

And I couldn't write a word.

Apparently, I was in that stage of grief known as “lame.” To my everlasting shame, we went with Trump. The Wednesday after the Friday we lost the great Pat Conroy, I gave my column space to Donald Trump.

Pat would have gotten a tremendous kick out of that. It's just *so Conroy*.

“So Conroy” is an expression some of us who knew him have been using for a while now. It's a wide net of a catchphrase. It typically means something like “perversely hilarious” or “ridiculously tragi-comic.” But “so Conroy” can also describe a certain operatic grandiosity – equal parts agony and ecstasy – with which events often unfolded around the man . . . and everyone in his charmed/cursed radius.

For instance, when Pat's dear colleague and protégé Jonathan Haupt, of USC Press, spent a year meticulously planning a glorious, three-day celebration of Pat's life and legacy – the “Pat Conroy at 70” Literary Festival – it was only natural that Jonathan's mother-in-law would die unexpectedly during this illustrious event. Because . . . that's so Conroy.

When Pat's best friend Bernie Schein and his wife Martha planned their dream trip to Italy – long before Pat had a clue he was sick – they should have predicted that Pat would be lingering on his deathbed the day they were to leave on that long-awaited journey. Because that, too, is so Conroy.

And as Pat lingered on that deathbed, tenderly arranged in front of a large window so he'd have a view of his beloved Battery Creek – where the sun sets golden over the marsh and egrets rise up like spirits on the wind – we should all have known the Conroys' septic tank would burst, and that the only view out that window would be a giant backhoe digging an enormous, grave-like hole in his backyard.

So, so Conroy . . .

If I sound flip and irreverent, I learned from the master. I debated the appropriateness of the preceding paragraphs . . . then I remembered who I was writing about. This is the man who penned the funniest funeral scene I've ever read about his own *brother's* funeral. The one who jumped off a building to his untimely death.

For Pat Conroy, tragedy and comedy were faithful companions, yin and yang, Siamese twins impossible to separate, conceived in love and born of a painful labor.

And nothing was sacred. Except everything.

So those of us who have lost him – and that's all of us, really – are left laughing through our tears as we remember him. And those of us who write – and there are many, many writers in Conroy's wide circle – are left wondering what we can possibly say about this man for whom so many rivers of ink have already been spilled, and who was, himself, the king of spilled ink.

Almost everything you ever wanted to know about Pat Conroy, he told you himself. You know about his tortured childhood in the house of Santini, about his harrowing days at the Citadel among the Lords of Discipline. You know he was fired by the school board for teaching poor black island children that the water (and the world) is wide. You know he loved basketball and books, cooking and beach music. He told you all of this.

And then he died, and journalists all over the country told you more.

I've been trying to think of things I could tell you – little things you might not know about Pat Conroy. Since I went to work for him again, almost three years ago, I'd been writing about him on my blog from time to time, so I went there to review.

Did you know Pat had lately become enamored of fantasy fiction? He was fanatical about George R.R. Martin's "Song of Ice and Fire" series, and compared Martin to Shakespeare. He had also discovered C.S. Lewis late in life, and was so enthusiastic about him – and his friendship with J.R.R. Tolkien – that he ran the idea by me, about a year ago, of getting a group together to travel to an Inklings weekend in Black Mountain, NC. (How I wish

we'd done it.)

You might not know that Pat was very interested in God. Though he didn't go to church much, he still considered himself Catholic, and he wrestled mightily. During our chats about the Inklings, he once told me he wished he had a writers' group like that of his own. "Wouldn't it be great?" he said. "For those guys, the question of God was always on the table. Maybe you struggled with the idea of God. Maybe you rejected it altogether. But the question was always on the table. It mattered, and it mattered a lot. So many writers I know today don't even address the question. They're not even God-curious. I still think that's the difference between a great writer and a merely good writer. Great writers – whether they're believers or not – are God-haunted."

Pat Conroy was God-haunted. Maybe you didn't know.

About his politics. Famously and proudly liberal – a natural position for someone with his immense heart and deep affinity for the downtrodden and disenfranchised – you might not know he was also tireless about policing liberalism. In *My Reading Life*, he wrote, "As an American liberal with impeccable credentials, I would like to say that political correctness is going to kill American liberalism if it is not fought to the death by people like me for the dangers it represents to free speech, to the exchange of ideas, to openheartedness, or to the spirit of art itself. Political correctness has a stranglehold on academia, on feminism, and on the media. It is a form of both madness and maggots."

Pat was particularly horrified by current developments on college campuses across the country, and one of the last emails he sent me was a column by conservative pundit George Will about the shame of trigger warnings, speech codes, safe spaces, et. al. "Read this!" he said in the email. "Preaching to the choir," I wrote back.

Unlike most people I know, Pat loved to talk on the phone. His favorite time to call – and he called *lots* of folks – was late at night. If you missed that call, you'd end up with a voice mail beginning, "Clearly it's up to Conroy to keep this dying (expletive) friendship alive . . ." If you were lucky enough to answer, you'd end up in a rollicking conversation ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous . . . to a high school level gossip session. I'll never forget the time he called me right after the 2010 Beaufort International Film Festival. I was idling in the school pick-up line that Monday afternoon, waiting for my daughter, when my cell phone buzzed. "Just wanted to dish about the film festival," Pat said. He'd had such a great time, couldn't believe "our little Beaufort" had pulled it off, gushed on and on about how beautiful Blythe Danner still was.

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Like most men, he loved beautiful women. But he was always courtly about it. Never roguish. His wife Cassandra King is one of the most beautiful women you'll ever meet, and he was devoted.

I saw Pat's friend, poet/novelist Ellen Malphrus, the other day and we discussed the fact that Pat doesn't really seem gone to us. "It's not like we can't still talk to him . . . or hear his voice," she said. And she's right. He left himself to us. In so many words.

And I, for one, feel Pat Conroy all around me as spring unfurls here in his cherished Lowcountry. While I was out walking in the Cypress Wetlands last week – thinking about Pat, and how he adored this season – a cardinal zoomed across my path at warp speed, eye level, so close to my face I felt the wind on my cheek and heard its whoosh. His feathers may even have brushed my sunglasses; I'm still not sure. It was all so swift and sudden, so frightening and wondrous, I was left shaking as I watched the red bird disappear into the rookery.

They say a cardinal encounter is a visitation from a loved one who has passed. Leave it to the son of Santini to go all 'fighter pilot' on me.

That's so Conroy.

Pictured above: The columnist and Pat Conroy sharing a laugh at the 2014 Beaufort Chamber of Commerce Civitas Awards, where Conroy received the inaugural Pat Conroy Palmetto Achievement Award.

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. (Read more of her [Rants & Raves](#) here or visit her blog at

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Until recently, she was also honored to call herself editorial assistant to Pat Conroy.