



By Margaret Evans, Editor

It's Saturday morning and I'm up early. I need to get this column off my plate before heading out to St. Helena Island for the day. To paraphrase "the most interesting man in the world," I don't always spend my Saturdays on St. Helena, but when I do, it's usually because of Pat Conroy.

To clarify, St. Helena Island is where Pat's buried. When I have time, I like to drive out there – past the marshscapes and vegetable stands and old Baptist churches, through the grey-green tunnel of trees called Martin Luther King Drive, to the fork in the road (bear left), then the swift left turn down Ernest Drive that brings me to the modest black cemetery Pat chose as his final resting place. The gravesite has become a shrine, and it's always touching to see the new tributes that've arrived since my last visit – toy basketballs and starfish and Mardi Gras beads and such. It's raucous and colorful and somewhat inappropriate, just like Pat, and his presence is palpable there. Bittersweetly so.

Today, I'm off to St. Helena again, and again, it's because of Pat Conroy – but it's not about visiting his grave, though I'm sure I will. Today is March 4th, the first anniversary of Pat's death, and I'm part of a daylong event in his honor hosted by the

[Pat Conroy Literary Center](#).

I've been asked to interview – or, specifically, to be "in conversation with" – J. Drew Lanham, Alumni Distinguished Professor of Wildlife Ecology at Clemson. Lanham is also an author, and we'll be talking about his book

The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature.

I feel wildly under-qualified to be "in conversation" with this man – in front of people, anyway – because while I am a nature lover, too, I'm hardly an expert. I'm just someone who likes to wander through it, wonder at it, and take pictures of it. I'm hoping the fact that I've now read Lanham's book – while most folks in the audience haven't – will be enough to make me sound authoritative. Or at least not clueless.

The Home Place is the story of a boy who grew up in the country and still has “country” in his blood. It’s the story of a boy whose parents and teachers wanted him to be a doctor or an engineer – he was good at math and science – but who ended up an ornithologist . . . the lyrical memoir of a man who calls himself “an eco-addict . . . a wildling, born of forests and fields and more comfortable on unpaved back roads and winding woodland paths than in any place where concrete, asphalt and crowds prevail.”

It’s also the story of growing up black – and specifically, of growing up to be that rarest of birds, a Black Naturalist.

“The chances of seeing someone who looks like me while on the trail are only slightly greater than those of sighting an ivory-billed woodpecker,” Lanham writes. “In my lifetime, I’ve encountered fewer than ten black birders.”

Drew Lanham would love to change that statistic. He laments the fact that so few African Americans seem to embrace their connection to the land . . . to “country,” as he calls it.

“Not Mother Africa, but our country here. Backwoods, dirt road, deeply dark, pin-pricked with stars at night, who-gives-a-damn-if-you-piss-in-your-own-backyard, hair-raising-hoot-owl country.”

Lanham, who is also a poet – and writes like one – believes this severed connection has something to do with history: a history that’s, perhaps, still too painful.

“For so many of us, the scars are still too fresh,” he writes. “Fields of cotton stretching to the horizon – land worked, sweated, and suffered over for the profit of others – probably don’t engender warm feelings among most black people.”

Still, having grown up on The Home Place, a working farm owned by his family, Lanham knows about land, about how it can empower and sustain. He writes, “the land, in spite of its history,

still holds hope for making good on the promises we thought it could, especially if we can reconnect to it. The reparations lie not in what someone will give us, but in what we already own. The land can grow crops for us as well as it does for others. It can yield loblolly pine and white oak for us as it has for others. And it can nurture wildlife and the spirit for us, just like it has for others.”

As I anticipate my conversation with Drew Lanham this afternoon, I take comfort in all the things we have in common. We both grew up in the South, the children of college-educated professionals. (His parents, along with being farmers, were both teachers.) Also, we’re exactly the same age, which means we have plenty of shared cultural references. For instance, we’ve both known the profound trauma of ordering – then actually receiving – “amazing sea monkeys” from the back of a comic book.

The ecstasy of expectation, the agony of realization. No crowns, no scepters, no cute curly tails, no nothin’... Just nebulous little specks of God-Knows-What (Drew Lanham says they were brine shrimp) wiggling around in cloudy water. Talk about a life lesson.

And then there’s *Roots*. Drew Lanham and I were both 12 years old when the mini-series based on Alex Haley’s bestselling novel captivated the whole nation. (I don’t think anything ever “captivates” the whole nation anymore. Not in a good way, anyhow. It was a very different time, the 70s.) We both have vivid memories of *Roots*.

Lanham remembers an early episode in which a strong black father held his infant son, Kunta Kinte, to the sky and declared: *Behold – the only thing greater than yourself!*

“The next day I went to school prouder than ever to be in my brown skin,” he writes. “A black kid living in the boondocks of Edgefield, South Carolina, was descended from people like Kunta – strong, proud and free.”

As the series unfolded and Kunta was sold into slavery, Lanham remembers his pride becoming more complicated . . . mixed with anger and shame. I remember feeling exactly the same way – minus the pride. We both remember that the whole country was talking about nothing but *Roots* for weeks on end – everybody but our teachers at school.

Drew Lanham and I will talk about all this and more today at Penn Center, and I confess, I'm nervous. Judging by his memoir, this is a man who watches closely and thinks deeply and harbors a bit of a grudge against the world – for its shames, its shortfalls, its myriad injustices. It is an eminently reasonable position; he is a black man in a country that has treated black people shabbily, an environmentalist in a country where far too many treat the environment shabbily. He's a man who thinks a lot about history, about the way the past can haunt the present. His experiences as a black birdwatcher in the wilds of the rural South have occasionally been frightening and even dangerous. To his credit, he's maintained a great sense of humor. (Please check out [“Rules for the Black Birdwatcher.”](#) You won't be sorry!)

I'm counting on humor – his and mine – to carry us through this delicate, hopefully enlightening, conversation at Penn Center. That, and our mutual love of the natural world — especially birds.

Lanham writes, “What I've learned from all the years looking for birds in far-flung places and expecting the worst from people is that my assumptions are more times than not unfounded. These nature-seeking souls are mostly kindred spirits, out to find not just birds but solace . . . As we gaze together, everything that's different about us disappears into the plumages of the creatures we see beyond our binoculars. There is power in the shared pursuit of feathered things.”

And if the bird connection doesn't work for us – if it doesn't open our hearts, break down our walls, and bind us together in our common humanity – I've always got the sea monkeys to fall back on.

‘The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature’ is available at www.amazon.com

. For more information about the Pat Conroy Literary Center, visit www.patconroyliterarycenter.org

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