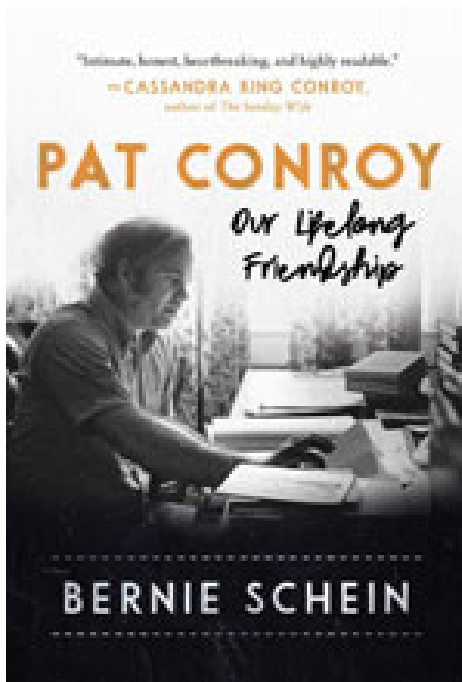




By Margaret Evans, Editor



The friendship of Pat Conroy and Bernie Schein is near legendary in these parts. Not only does Bernie show up as a character in most of Pat's books, but anybody who ever saw the two together will attest to the depth of their devotion. It was a real love match, albeit complicated.

In fact, says Bernie, it was a bona fide "bromance," complete with petty resentments, mutual betrayals, a devastating breakup, and a joyful reconciliation.

"Pat and I used to say it was a shame we weren't born gay, because we really were like an old married couple," he says. But how many old married couples do you know who divorce, go fifteen years without speaking, then reunite for ten more years of wedded bliss?

You can read about all that – and so much more – in Bernie's new memoir *Pat Conroy: Our Lifelong Friendship*.[□](#)

□□□□□□□□ I confess, I approached this book warily – maybe even wearily – wondering if the world really needed another book about Pat Conroy right now. Since his death in March of 2016, there have been plenty: *My Exaggerated Life* (Pat’s oral biography as told to Katherine Clark); *The Lost Prince* (a memoir by Michael Mewshaw); *Our Prince of Scribes* (a large collection of essays about Pat, including my own), and possibly some others I’m forgetting. On top of all that, Pat’s wife Cassandra King has a Pat-centric memoir coming out in October. I worried about Bernie stealing her thunder, or her stealing his, or each of them diluting the other’s readership. Though Pat, himself, was endlessly interesting, I worried we might be doing him a disservice with all these books. I feared people might actually – at some point – find themselves All Conroy’d Out. Like, maybe even *me*.

But then I started reading Bernie’s book. Lord have mercy, it’s a doozy.

Consider the opening paragraphs:

*Pat Conroy, even as a child, long before he became a world-renowned writer and public figure, was either blessed or cursed, depending on how you looked at it, with a greater-than-life, love-your-ass, break-your-balls personality. As he himself so cheerfully noted, it was “fabulous.” It was.*

□□□□□□□□ *He was unremittingly open-hearted and hospitable, especially when he didn’t mean it. Of all the actors – John Voight, Michael O’Keefe, David Keith, Nick Nolte – who ended up playing his character in the movies based on his novels, none had his charisma, his outsize capacity for joy, for love, for hatred, for tragedy, to say nothing of his sense of humor. His personality was simply too much for them to grab hold of and contain, to internalize, to take on, even though they were just pretending, as he often did, which no doubt complicated their understanding of him even more. Throw in his false modesty and sanctimony, his Irish mischief, and his warrior-like mentality, and the cup really overfloweth.*

I dare you to stop reading after that. I couldn’t. And dammit, I didn’t have the time! Bernie

handed me the book on my way out of our interview, though I'd repeatedly said I was too busy to read it. *Oh, just scan a few pages*, he said. *To get the flavor...*

He knew.

So, what is it that makes Pat Conroy so fascinating, even after death? Why should the literary world make room for yet another take on the man? And another? And another?

Bernie has an idea. "Pat was such an intimate writer, and such an intimate *person*, that people felt like they knew him," he told me. "And, in fact, if they read his books, they *did* know him. But Pat had so many faces. So many layers. And all these books, they come from such different perspectives. Sandra's book is wonderful, but it's a romance. A love story. Mine's a love story, too, but completely different. Fortunately, I never had to go to bed with Pat."

That kind of throwaway humor is woven through the book and absolutely indicative of the way Bernie and Pat talked to each other. But make no mistake: Funny as it is – and it's very funny – *Pat Conroy: Our Lifelong Friendship* is also a deep dive into dark and treacherous waters. This relationship was not for the faint of heart.

The friends had a falling out around 1990 – Bernie speculates about the source, but isn't certain – and it lasted almost fifteen years. Both men were living in Atlanta at the time, but Pat soon moved his family to San Francisco for reasons left hazy in the book. Despite having been inseparable for 30 years, the two didn't speak again until sometime in the mid-2000s, when they both found themselves back in Beaufort, where they'd first met as teenagers.

The narrative begins in that era – the early 60s – when Pat arrived at Beaufort High, where Bernie was already a big man on campus. "I heard of Pat long before I met him," he writes. "Two really pretty girls, Gretchen Maas and Kathleen Kennedy, who sat at our *For Seniors Only* table, were themselves military brats and couldn't shut up about him. Pat Conroy this... Pat Conroy that. 'Oh, he's so funny... Oh, he's so cute, nice and friendly.' And he wasn't even a senior! Just some snot-nosed junior wannabe."

I don't want to include too many spoilers, because if, like me, you think you already know this story, you're in for a revelation. There's new material here, not to mention a wealth of illuminating hindsight.

*Our Lifelong Friendship* is the surprising tale of a relationship forged in paradox. A tale of two men as radically different as they were simpatico . . . who perfectly complemented each other, though often via insult. It's a tale of two people who had each other's back even while stabbing each other in the back, who loved each other madly even when they hated each other's guts. It's the story of two friends who were really more like brothers – brothers who almost teetered into Cain and Abel territory, but ultimately found their way back to Eden. Yes, it's a story of biblical proportions.

Think I'm exaggerating? Well, that was Pat and Bernie for you.

Considering the depth and breadth of their relationship, I couldn't help wondering what life's been like for Bernie since Pat's death. How does one go on after losing such a friendship?

"I talk to him just as much as I ever did," he told me. "On his deathbed, Pat said to me, 'We've had great conversations,' and we're still having them, all the time." The final chapter of *Our Lifelong Friendship* records one of those conversations across the veil, with Pat dispensing "heavenly wisdom" so tender, truthful, and hilarious that I found myself laughing through tears for the thousandth time. It's that kind of book.

I should admit that I read it out of order, in bits and pieces – because "I knew the story already" and was too busy for reading, remember? – but each time I started a bit or a piece, I was helplessly compelled to follow that narrative thread to its end. By the time I'd finished all those glorious threads, I was forced to conclude that, yes, the world really *does* need another book about Pat Conroy.

I'm awfully glad Bernie Schein wrote this one.

*The public is invited to a book launch for Pat Conroy: Our Lifelong Friendship at The Anchorage 1770 on Tuesday, September 10 from 7-8:30 pm. Bernie Schein will sign books on Saturday, September 14 from 10am-noon at the Beaufort Bookstore (843-525-1066), and from 2-5pm at McIntosh Book Shoppe (843-524-1119). Books may be pre-ordered (signed and personalized) from either store and picked up any time after September 3.*