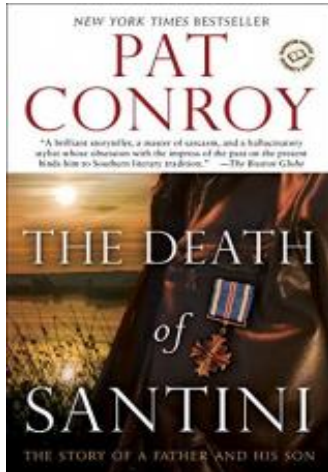


## The Death of Santini: The Story of a Father and His Son

by Pat Conroy



### About the Book

Pat Conroy's father, Donald Patrick Conroy, was a towering figure in his son's life. The Marine Corps fighter pilot was often brutal, cruel and violent; as Pat says, "I hated my father long before I knew there was an English word for hate." As the oldest of seven children who were dragged from military base to military base across the South, Pat bore witness to the toll his father's behavior took on his siblings, and especially on his mother, Peg. She was Pat's lifeline to a better world --- that of books and culture. But eventually, despite repeated confrontations with his father, Pat managed to claw his way toward a life he could have only imagined as a child.

Pat's great success as a writer has always been intimately linked with the exploration of his family history. While the publication of *THE GREAT SANTINI* brought Pat much acclaim, the rift it caused with his father brought even more attention. Their long-simmering conflict burst into the open, fracturing an already battered family. But as Pat tenderly chronicles here, even the oldest of wounds can heal. In the final years of Don Conroy's life, he and his son reached a rapprochement of sorts. Quite unexpectedly, the Santini who had freely doled out physical abuse to his wife and children refocused his ire on those who had turned on Pat over the years. He defended his son's honor.

*THE DEATH OF SANTINI* is at once a heart-wrenching account of personal and family struggle and a poignant lesson in how the ties of blood can both strangle and offer succor. It is an act of reckoning, an exorcism of demons, but one whose ultimate conclusion is that love can soften even the meanest of men, lending significance to one of the most-often quoted lines from Pat's bestselling novel *THE PRINCE OF TIDES*: "In families there are no crimes beyond forgiveness."

### Discussion Guide

1. Certain members of the Conroy clan viewed Pat's writings as a betrayal of the family, exposing their dirty laundry to the public and tarnishing their reputation. Do you agree? How would you react if someone close to you novelized your life?
2. How do you think the real-life Conroys compare to their fictional counterparts in the Meecham family?
3. Conroy describes the lessons about love that he learned from his parents' marriage in startlingly vivid terms, writing: "[love] was a country bristling with fishhooks hung at eye level, man-traps, and poisoned baits. It could hurl toward you at breakneck speed or let you dangle over a web spun by a brown recluse spider." How do you evaluate this assessment of love and marriage? Do you think Conroy's attitude shifts at all throughout the book? How did the example of his parents' relationship influence his own marriages?
4. Conroy writes of his "high contempt" for literary critics, claiming that "no writer has suffered over morning coffee because of the savagery of my review of his or her latest book, and no one ever will." How do you reconcile this attitude toward literary critics with the suffering his writing caused the members of his family? Do the two positions contradict each other, or are they compatible? Why?
5. In the introduction to this book, Conroy claims that other writers often consider autobiographical fiction to be a low form of literature. What do you think of this claim?
6. Conroy writes "I don't believe in happy families," going on to explain that "A family is too frail a vessel to contain the risks of all the warring impulses expressed when such a group meets on common ground." Do you agree with this claim? Is there such a thing as a happy family?
7. Conroy describes his mother as playing the part of Scarlett O'Hara throughout her life. What part does Conroy play? Do we all play a role different from who we really are? If so, what part do you play?
8. Conroy sometimes describes his parents and childhood in mythic terms, comparing his father to Thor and the Greek God of War. Is it human nature to make myths of our childhoods and deify our parents? What myths exist in your family lore?
9. *THE DEATH OF SANTINI* explores the impact of Conroy's Southern and Irish heritage on his upbringing. Discuss the importance of family heritage and ancestry in Conroy's life and in your own.
10. Conroy eloquently writes that "Your birthplace is your destiny" (pg. 100). What do you think of this statement?
11. The Conroy children sometimes have very divergent perspectives on their shared childhood memories. What do you think of this phenomenon? Can you think of similar instances in your own life? Is it possible to avoid editorializing memories?
12. In a much-discussed scene from *THE GREAT SANTINI*, Bull Meecham's son chases his father around the Beauford green yelling "I love you!" Why do you think Bull/Dan runs away from this onslaught of affection?
13. Peg stuck with her marriage to Dan through some terrible times, yet the marriage could not survive the publication of

The Great Santini. Why do you think that is? In what ways did the filming of The Great Santini change Pat's relationship with his father?

**14.** Conroy experiences the rare pleasure of watching his novel come to life on the silver screen. Who would play you in the movie of your life?

## Author Bio

Pat Conroy (1945-2016) was the author of THE BOO, THE WATER IS WIDE, THE GREAT SANTINI, THE LORDS OF DISCIPLINE, THE PRINCE OF TIDES, BEACH MUSIC, THE PAT CONROY COOKBOOK: Recipes of My Life, MY LOSING SEASON, SOUTH OF BROAD, MY READING LIFE and THE DEATH OF SANTINI.

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