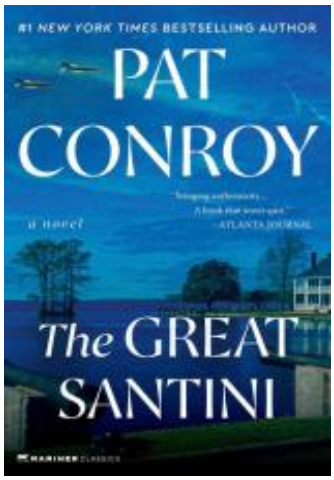
The Great Santini

by Pat Conroy



About the Book

This is the story of Bull Meecham, the epitome of the Marine officer. Demanding, authoritarian, as tough a disciplinarian at home as at the base, Bull is a difficult man to please, and even harder to love. This is also the story of Ben Meecham, Bull?s oldest son. A gifted athlete whose best never satisfies his father, Ben must balance his own ambition with his father?s expectations --- and decide what course he will chart for himself and what kind of man he will become.

Piercing, bittersweet and unforgettable, THE GREAT SANTINI is Pat Conroy?s semi-autobiographical lens into fathers and sons, and the powerful legacy one man can leave behind.

Discussion Guide

1. The reader is first introduced to Colonel Bull Meacham at his going-away party in Barcelona. What was your first impression of this character? Did it change over the course of the book?

2. Mary Anne Meecham claims that her dad is ?hard to figure out. He loves his family more than anything in the world, except the Marine Corps, yet none of us ever have a real conversation with him.? What does the Marine Corps have to offer Bull that his family doesn?t?

3. One of Bull?s best friends is Col. Virgil Hedgepath, although the two could not be more different: ?Bull ruled the men under his command by his physical size and the power of his voice. Bull never understood how Virgil accomplished the same results; he could not fathom the mystery that Virgil speaking quietly but firmly could inspire a quality of fear that men who yelled could never approach.? Who do you think is a more effective leader, and why?

4. Is the origin of Bull?s nickname, the Great Santini, ever fully explained?

5. When Ben goes up against his dad in one-on-one basketball and beats him for the first time, what does Bull?s over-the-top reaction tell you about his character?

6. Lillian reminds her son, Ben, ?Remember, I?m the one that?s in the middle. I?m the one that catches it from both sides. It?s me that?s got to walk the tightrope.? Do you think life with Bull is tougher for Lillian than for Ben?

7. Ben swears that he?ll never be a Marine like his dad. His sister, Mary Anne, counters, ?Yes you will. You?ll go to some two-bit southern college and then go into the Marine Corps after you graduate?. Slowly, all that?s good about you will dissolve over the years and you?ll begin believing all the stuff Dad believes and acting like Dad acts. You?re a golden boy? You?ve got to have people love you and fuss over you?. That?s where you and I are different. I?ve never had anybody?s approval, so I?ve learned to live without it.? How accurate a prediction is this?

8. Pat Conroy often writes about a certain kind of military machismo, like the extreme training technique utilized by Sgt. Hicks, making his recruits think (falsely) that he killed one of them. Why does Bull want Ben to witness this on his 18th birthday?

9. Lillian and Bull seem like polar opposites. What do you think keeps them together besides their four children?

10. Prepping for his mission to Cuba, ?Bull allowed his fantasies to roam the country of his eyes. He needed a war. He needed it badly.? Why does he need a war so badly?

11. Lillian, in her southern lady circa 1962 way, tries to urge Mary Anne to be more feminine and take better care of her appearance: ?A woman has one job. To be adorable. Everything else is just icing. Dressing nice to catch a man?s eye is part of the game.? Mary Anne swiftly refutes this advice, claiming, ?You don?t know how to relate to an ugly daughter. Ugliness disgusts you.? Is she right about her mother?

12. At the Calhoun vs. Peninsula basketball game, after being jeered by Bull, Ben causes an opposing player to break his arm. Principal Dacus finds Ben crying in the locker room and tells him he?s off the team for the rest of the season. Do you think he was doing this as more of a preservation of Ben from his father?s wrath than punishment?

13. After Principal Dacus rescues Ben at the jail, Ben tells him, ?I play basketball because I have to win a scholarship.? But Dacus replies, ?No, that?s not true? That?s not even close to the truth. You play basketball because you love your father.? Is he right? Dacus goes on to say, ?All your dad is doing is loving you by trying to live his life over again through you. He makes bad mistakes, but he makes them because he is part of an organization that does not tolerate substandard performance. He just sometimes forgets there?s a difference between a Marine and a son.? Do you agree? How is Dacus a better father figure for Ben?

14. When Ben defies Bull?s orders and goes to help Toomer, how is he like his father in that moment? How is Bull like Ben?

15. After his father?s death, Ben realized that ?he lived in a Santiniless world now and he trembled when he thought that he was, in many ways, relieved that his father was dead. It made him angry that a burden was lifted from him at his father?s funeral and it made him suffer.? Is it possible to love someone you hate?

16. This story, based on Conroy?s own Marine father, is steeped in the South of 1962. How jarring was the casual racism and misogyny to today?s reader? In 2013, Conroy penned his memoir, THE DEATH OF SANTINI, a touching coda to his turbulent relationship with his larger-than-life father, who didn?t suffer the same fate as Santini in this novel. He lived many more years and, in the wake of Conroy?s searing portrait, became a ?kinder and gentler Santini.? Are you interested in reading it now that you have read the novelized version?

17. Have you ever seen the 1979 film adaptation of THE GREAT SANTINI starring Robert Duvall in the title role? If this were to be remade today, who would you cast?

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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