About the Book

Bestselling author Pat Conroy acknowledges the books that have shaped him and celebrates the profound effect reading has had on his life.

Pat Conroy, the beloved American storyteller, is also a voracious reader. He has for years kept a notebook in which he notes words or phrases, just from a love of language. But reading for him is not simply a pleasure to be enjoyed in off-hours or a source of inspiration for his own writing. It would hardly be an exaggeration to claim that reading has saved his life, and if not his life then surely his sanity.

In MY READING LIFE, Conroy revisits a life of passionate reading. He includes wonderful anecdotes from his school days, moving accounts of how reading pulled him through dark times, and even lists of books that particularly influenced him at various stages of his life, including grammar school, high school and college. Readers will be enchanted with his ruminations on reading and books, and want to own and share this perfect gift book for the holidays. And, come graduation time, MY READING LIFE will establish itself as a perennial favorite, as did Dr. Seuss’s OH, THE PLACES YOU’LL GO!

Discussion Guide

1. Conroy claims he became a novelist—or more precisely a “Southern” novelist --- because of Gone with the Wind. What does he like about that book, and what echoes of it do you see in his work?

2. In “The Teacher,” Conroy writes that Mr. Norris’s life was “rich in the guidance of children not his own.” What do you make of this observation? Why might Conroy emphasize the importance of non-familial ties?

3. In “The Librarian,” Conroy’s teaching colleague Miss Hunter opposes school integration, a cause that is close to his
heart. He writes, “She and I would clash often over her treatment of my black students.” How is Conroy’s compassion for his black students echoed in the essay’s final scene? Do you think Miss Hunter was deserving of Conroy’s kindness?

4. In the last section of “The Old New York Book Shop,” Conroy mourns the closing of a store that played a significant role in his life, finding it “sad beyond commentary.” Considering the rise of e-readers and online retailers, do you think bookstores are necessary, or dispensable? Do bookstores have an effect on your reading habits? Has Conroy’s evocation of the Old New York Book Shop altered your opinion about bookstores?

5. In his chapter on Paris, Conroy writes about his vivid experiences in that particular city, and the ways in which he was profoundly influenced by his surroundings. He learned so much not only about others, but also about himself - his own temperament and spirit. Have you ever had a similar connection to a place? In what ways did it shape you, and what did you learn about yourself as a result?

6. Conroy writes, "Here's what I love: when a great writer turns me into a Jew from Chicago, a lesbian out of South Carolina, or a black woman moving into a subway entrance in Harlem. Turn me into something else, writers of the world.” What book has most transformed you into one of its characters? Was this character markedly similar to or completely different from you? How, in your opinion, did the author achieve this?

7. War and Peace is a touchstone book for Conroy. He has read it multiple times throughout his life, and each reading revealed new aspects to him and provided new interpretations he had not considered before. Is there a book that you have returned to and found new meaning in on a second (or third, etc.) read? What is it about that particular book that draws you back to it?

8. Throughout the book, Conroy mentions instances in which books provided a means for talking about and coming to terms with difficult aspects of his own life. For example, when discussing Look Homeward, Angel with his mother, he found that "the book made areas accessible to us that has carried the impediment of taboo before. We began to talk more freely about my father’s violence and how that family secret had extracted a price from us." What do you think about this notion that books have the power to strengthen our relationships with others, that they can have a measurable positive impact on our lives? Can all books achieve this, or only specific kinds? Has a book ever changed your life in that way?

Author Bio

Pat Conroy, born in Atlanta in 1945, was the first of seven children of a young career military officer from Chicago and a Southern beauty from Alabama, to whom Pat often credits for his love of language. The Conroys moved frequently to military bases throughout the South, with Conroy eventually attending The Citadel Military Academy in Charleston, South Carolina, where, as a student, he published his first book, THE BOO, a tribute to a beloved teacher. Following graduation, Conroy taught English in Beaufort, where he met and married a young mother of two children who had been widowed during the Vietnam War.

He soon took a job teaching underprivileged children in a one-room schoolhouse on Daufuskie Island off the South Carolina shore but, after a year, was fired for his unconventional teaching practices --- such as his refusal to allow corporal punishment of his students --- and for his personal differences with the school's administration. Conroy was never to teach again but he evened the score by exposing the racism and appalling conditions his students endured with
the publication of a memoir, THE WATER IS WIDE published in 1972. The book won Conroy a humanitarian award from the National Education Association and was made into the feature film *Conrack*.

Following the birth of a daughter, the Conroys moved to Atlanta, where Pat wrote his novel, THE GREAT SANTINI, published in 1976, and later made into a film starring Robert Duvall, that explored the conflicts of the author's childhood, particularly his ambivalent love for his violent and abusive father. The publication of a book that so painfully exposed his family's secret brought Conroy a period of tremendous personal desolation. This crisis resulted not only in his divorce, but the divorce of his parents; his mother presented a copy of THE GREAT SANTINI to the judge as "evidence" in divorce proceedings against his father.


Conroy remarried and moved from Atlanta to Rome, where he began THE PRINCE OF TIDES which, when published in 1986, became his most successful book. Reviewers immediately acknowledged Conroy as a master storyteller and a poetic and gifted prose stylist. This novel has become one of the most beloved novels of modern time. With over five million copies in print, it has earned Conroy an international reputation. THE PRINCE OF TIDES was later made into a highly successful feature film directed by and starring Barbra Streisand, as well as actor Nick Nolte, whose performance won him an Oscar nomination.

BEACH MUSIC (1995), Conroy's sixth book, was the story of Jack McCall, an American who moves to Rome to escape the trauma and painful memory of his young wife's suicidal leap off a bridge in South Carolina. While he was on tour for BEACH MUSIC, members of his Citadel basketball team began appearing, one by one, at his book signings around the country, Conroy realized that his team members had come back into his life just when he needed them most. He began reconstructing his senior year, his last year as an athlete, and the 21 basketball games that changed his life. The result of these recollections, along with his insights into his early aspirations as a writer, became MY LOSING SEASON.

Conroy's fifth novel and ninth book, SOUTH OF BROAD, offers readers a love letter to the city of Charleston. It also presents a Conroy first: a totally lovable father in the character of Leo Bloom King, the story's central figure.

He followed the novel with THE PAT CONROY COOKBOOK. His next book, MY READING LIFE, published in 2010, is a celebration of reading and the books that most influenced him. In what turned out to be his final book, THE DEATH OF SANTINI, Conroy revisits one last time his tortured family, where he describes his father's surprising evolution into a father he could finally love.

On March 4, 2016, Conroy succumbed to pancreatic cancer at the age of 70. He is survived by his wife, novelist Casandra King.

For more about Conroy's life and his complete bibliography, please visit his official website.
Critical Praise

"What a delightful little book . . . with a punch far sturdier than its compact size might suggest…Try to resist rereading it!"

My Reading Life
by Pat Conroy

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