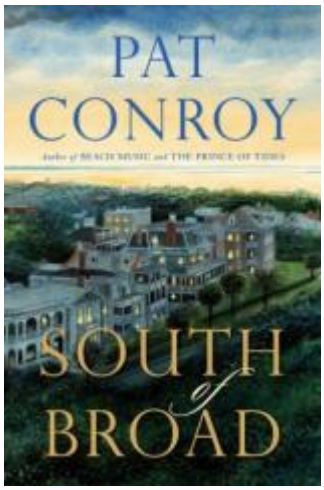
South of Broad

by Pat Conroy



About the Book

Against the sumptuous backdrop of Charleston, South Carolina, SOUTH OF BROAD gathers a unique cast of sinners and saints. Leopold Bloom King, our narrator, is the son of an amiable, loving father who teaches science at the local high school. His mother, an ex-nun, is the high school principal and a respected Joyce scholar. After Leo's older brother commits suicide at the age of 10, the family struggles with the shattering effects of his death, and Leo, lonely and isolated, searches for something to sustain him. Eventually, he finds his answer when he becomes part of a tightly knit group of high school seniors that includes friends Sheba and Trevor Poe, glamorous twins with an alcoholic mother and a prison-escapee father; hardscrabble mountain runaways Niles and Starla Whitehead; socialite Molly Huger and her boyfriend, Chadworth Rutledge X --- and an ever-widening circle whose liaisons will ripple across two decades, from 1960s counterculture through the dawn of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s.

The ties among them endure for years, surviving marriages happy and troubled, unrequited loves and unspoken longings, hard-won successes and devastating breakdowns, as well as Charleston's dark legacy of racism and class divisions. But the final test of friendship that brings them to San Francisco is something no one is prepared for. SOUTH OF BROAD is Pat Conroy at his finest: a long-awaited work from a great American writer whose passion for life and language knows no bounds.

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Discussion Guide

1. At the beginning of the novel, Leo is called on to mitigate the racial prejudice of the football team. What other types of prejudice appear in the novel? Which characters are guilty of relying on preconceived notions? Why do you think Leo is so accepting of most people? Why is his mother so condemnatory?

2. What do you think of the title SOUTH OF BROAD? How does the setting inform the novel? Would the novel be very different if it were set in another city or region?

3. As a teenager, Leo is heavily penalized for refusing to name the boy who placed drugs in his pocket. Why did he feel compelled to protect the boy's identity? Do you think he did the right thing?

4. When Leo's mother asks him to meet his new peers, she warns, "Help them, but do not make friends with them." Do you think such a thing possible? Through the novel, how does Leo help his friends, and how do they help him?

5. Leo's mother tells him, "We're afraid the orphans and the Poe kids will use you," to which he responds, "I don't mind being needed. I don't even mind being used." Do you think this is a healthy attitude toward friendship? Do any of the characters end up "using" Leo? Does his outlook on friendship changed by the end of the novel?

6. Leo admits that the years after Steven's suicide nearly killed him. How was he able to cope? How do Leo's parents deal with their grief? What does the novel say about human resilience and our propensity to overcome tragedy?

7. When Sheba suggests to Leo that he divorce his wife, he says, "I knew there were problems when I married Starla so I didn't walk into that marriage blind." Do you think that knowledge obligates Leo to stay with his wife? In your opinion, does Leo do the right thing by staying married? Would you do the same?

8. Both Chad and Leo are unfaithful to their wives, but only Leo is truthful about it. Do you think this makes Chad's infidelity a worse offense? Why or why not?

9. At two points in the novel, the group tries to rescue a friend: first Niles, then Trevor. But when Starla is in trouble, they don't attempt to save her. Why do you think this is? Has Starla become a "lost cause"?

10. At one point Leo remarks, "I had trouble with the whole concept [of love] because I never fully learned the art of loving myself." How does the concept of self-love play into the novel?

11. In the moment before Leo attacks Trevor's captor, he recites a portion of "Horatio at the Bridge," a poem about taking a lone stand against fearful odds. What is the significance of the verse? Do you think it's appropriate to that moment?

12. The twins are the novel's most abused characters and also the most creative. Do you think there is a connection between suffering and art?

13. What do you make of the smiley face symbol that Sheba and Trevor's father paints? How does the novel address the idea of happiness coexisting with pain?

14. At several points in the novel, characters divulge family secrets. Do you believe that this information should stay secret, or is there value in bringing it to light?

15. Leo examines his Catholicism at several points in the novel. What do you think he might say are the advantages and drawbacks of his religion? Do you think all religions are fraught with those problems?

16. One might interpret Leo's mother's attitude toward religion as one of blind faith. If Steven had admitted his abuse to her, do you think she would she have believed him? How do you think the information might have affected her?

17. Sheba and Trevor are literally tormented by their childhoods, in the form of their deranged father. How are some of the other characters hindered by the past? Are they ever able to escape its clutches and, if so, by what means?

18. Discuss the scene in which Leo and Molly rescue the porpoise. What does the event symbolize?

19. Why do you think the discoveries about Leo's mother and Monsignor Max begin and end the novel? What theme do these incidents convey?

20. Chapter one begins with the statement, "Nothing happens by accident," and Leo often reflects on the way that destiny has shaped his life. How does destiny affect the other characters? Do you agree that real life is the result of predetermined forces? Or can we affect our fate?

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.

The Citadel became the subject of his next novel, THE LORDS OF DISCIPLINE, published in 1980. The novel exposed the school's harsh military discipline and racism.

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

"Blockbuster writing at its best."

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