



Beach Music by Pat Conroy

List Price: \$7.99

Pages: 800

Format: Paperback

ISBN: 0553574574

Publisher: Bantam Books

About This Book

The novel tells of Jack McCall, an American who moves to Rome to escape the trauma and painful memory of his young wife's suicide leap off a bridge in South Carolina. The story takes place in South Carolina and Rome, then reaches back in time to the Vietnam War era and the horrors of the Holocaust.

It is a novel that concerns itself with the loss of innocence. It is about the acquisition of self-knowledge and about learning to accept where we come from. It is about the eternal quest for forgiveness--seeking it in others, finding it in ourselves--so that we can begin to live again. Ultimately, it is about reclaiming the past in order to prepare a background on the canvas of the future from which hope can finally flourish.

Remembrance. Reconciliation. Redemption.

With resonant prose and unmatched insight, Conroy throws open all of the doors and windows on the human condition, revealing to us with crystal clarity the perils of the war without as well as the war within.

Discussion Questions

1. Conroy's fiction has always been imbued with cadences particular to the South, and *Beach Music* is no exception. How much do you feel that the narrative voice is both affected and informed by place? If we removed all references to the South from this work, do you believe that you would be able to situate it geographically based solely on voice and style alone? If so, what are the salient features that make this a particularly Southern novel, even though much of the action takes place abroad?

2. The novel repeatedly points out the difficulty of maintaining any sort of faith in the face of great despair. Following his mother's death, Max Rusoff finds himself "cursing God's name and cursing him especially for making people hopeless before he graciously allowed them to die" (180). It cannot be argued against that there is an ample, abundantly sad beauty to the world that Conroy reveals, but is there any hope here, and if so, where does it make itself evident? How can we retain faith and hope against the catastrophic backdrop of events in our own present world (e.g., Croatia, Rwanda, Oklahoma City)?

3. A case can be made that laughter, in the McCall family, functions as the ultimate coping mechanism--but one with a definite downside. Jack concedes: "We used laughter as both a weapon and a vaccine" (206). Can you isolate instances in the novel where a character utilizes laughter when another coping mechanism might be more effective?

4. It is patent in every phrase and sentence that Jack both reveres and reviles the institution of family. On the one hand, it is understandable that after the pain of the custody trial, he would want to remove both himself and Leah from the association of his in-laws. But what of his own family? What evidence is there to explain his refusal to maintain contact with them when they acquitted themselves so well in coming to his defense?

5. Jack repeatedly makes allusions to life as a "sweepstakes." Jordan claims: " 'God made a terrible mistake. He delivered me to the wrong people' " (281). There is a definite tenor that much of the events in a life can be attributed to random chance or the activities of some outside agent. Do you believe that all of these characters are mere victims of one grand crap shoot, helpless pawns in some other being's larger design? Or do you see them exerting an element of control and choice over their circumstances, which they themselves are perhaps unaware of? What about in your own world: Are you a driver or a passenger?

6. Time's arrow never moves in a line here, neither straight into the future, nor directly back into the past. Instead, it winds and weaves, now backward, now forward again, repeating on itself, and taking on the texture of waves. What effect does this technique contribute to the tale --what is present here that would be lost--had Conroy adopted a more linear approach in the telling?

7. Concerning Shyla's suicide and its aftermath, the narrator claims: "Shyla was the rarest of suicides: no one held her responsible for the act itself; she was forgiven as instantly as she was missed . . ." (4). Granting that this statement is true, why *do* we normally blame the suicide? Who does Jack blame for Shyla's death? Whose failing do you see as being greater and/or who do you hold most accountable: the individual, the close family and friends, or society at large? Further, Jack feels personally that had he known of Shyla's obsession, he could have helped her more. Is this just a typical survivor's reaction, or do you find some merit in this?

8. John Hardin's brothers, in their quest to deal with his emotional problems, make free use of their characteristic sarcasm, caustic wit, and irony. What effect, if any, do you believe this treatment has on John Hardin? In what other ways might you imagine them treating him differently, and what effects do you imagine such changes would make? Are family members' behavior more a cause or an effect of mental illness?

9. Ledare accuses: "None of you men will be satisfied until bulimia becomes part of the wedding vows" (155). Do you believe this is true? Is modern women's obsession with personal appearance imposed on them by men, by other women, or from within? How does beauty work in the novel to help/hinder the women who possess it?

10. In the first portion of the story, Jack seems tired, bored--even annoyed--with Ruth's and George's repeated references to the Holocaust. Yet, when he finally hears their individual stories, Jack, as well as the reader, must come face-to-face with the fact that, as horrible as they are, these are only two told stories. In spite of the relative comforts of time and distance, it is very difficult for the reader to look at these almost unimaginable images that are held up for our inspection. What value does the telling of these unspeakable tales hold for Jack, and further, what value do they hold for the modern reader?

11. Jack blames Shyla's parents for her sadness and his own parents for many of their children's problems. Dallas asks: "Can you ever forgive Mom and Dad for being exactly who they were born to be?" (97). Is the wish to have one's parents be something different a futile desire for the leopard to change its spots? How do you assess Jack's own talents when it comes to child rearing?

12. Jack speaks of his own sense of helplessness as a child when witnessing violent acts. Yet, in a sense, he subjects Leah to the same emotions when he beats up Mimmo DeAngelo, even if it is in defense of Mimmo's wife, Sophia. Is Conroy perhaps showing us here, with brutal honesty, that it is impossible to escape our own genetic/environmental past? Do you believe that it is possible to break out of our familial molds, or is each generation doomed to re-create in some fashion the wrongs of its predecessor?

13. It is interesting that Capers--arguably one of the least sympathetic characters in the novel--is often granted the discerning vision of the realist. "Yours, Jack, is a world of either-or, all or nothing" (153). With one sentence, he nails the fact that the very same fault that Jack finds with Catholicism, Judaism, and zealous patriotism--the extremity of it all--is one that he is guilty of himself. Is it just human nature, or is it a tragic flaw peculiar to Jack, this inability to see the thing we hate in ourselves, and so turn it outward on humanity?

14. It can be said that "place" almost functions as another character in this book. Vietnam. The South. Poland. These are places that elicit such monolithic images and association in our memory that they are as much about ideas as they are about geography. In light of this, what do you make of Jack's choice of Italy as a refuge for himself and Leah?

15. It used to be a standard joke among mental health professionals in the seventies that a paranoiac was merely a realist who saw life too clearly. Applying this view of the paranoiac to the more general neurosis and psychosis of Shyla and John Hardin, what is your opinion of their so-called "illnesses" and the manifestations of them? What is your interpretation of some of the specific ideas they hold or actions they perform (e.g., John Hardin building a coffin as the perfect present for his not-quite-dead Mama) that society in general might label as mad or, at the very least, disturbed?

16. Jack's juvenile complacency on the moral high ground is shaken by an earthquake of stories that reaches out from the past, rattling the very foundations of his existence. George says: "Let me test you to the limit and find out where civilization ends and depravity begins along the edges of your soul" (505). After hearing George's story, does Jack feel that George should have--could have--behaved any differently? Do you? Who has the right to sit in judgment on George? In a related issue, during the mock trial everyone--except for the General--finds Jordan not guilty and they exonerate him. All well and good, we might say. But what do you believe the parents of the dead boy and girl might say?

17. One of the chief problems peculiar to the confessional first-person mode is the inherent difficulty of separating the storyteller from the story, the dancer from the dance. Elsewhere, Conroy has stated that: ". . . my father's violence is the central fact of my art and my life." To what extent do you believe that Jack's views are Conroy's views? At what points, if any, do you feel that they diverge? Finally, can you find instances where Conroy steps back and is actually critical of Jack?

18. Virtually all of the characters here are affected in some way by the concept of masks--both metaphorical and literal--and the converse issue of nakedness. At one extreme, we have Lucy calling for her makeup first thing after waking from a near-death coma. At the other end of the spectrum, we have John Hardin talking to the turtle ladies on the beach while stark naked. Is the relative ability to don masks or abide one's own nakedness an asset or a hindrance to these characters? How is the mask/nakedness issue related to both the physical and emotional survival of other characters, particularly the Foxes?

19. When reviewing the activities of World War II, many social historians and critics have found the German citizenry, who did nothing, to be as greatly to blame as the Nazi soldiers who actually committed the atrocities. Further, Shyla clearly has drawn parallels in her mind between World War II and the American involvement in Vietnam. From your own viewpoint, do you see any parallels between the two wars, and if so, how culpable do you find the American people who didn't fight, didn't resist, but just sat at home while it happened?

20. John Hardin speaks for many characters in the novel, as well as real-life codependents everywhere, when he says: "`I'm the victim of a dysfunctional family . . . I'm not responsible for the actions I commit . . .'" (589). This kind of alibi has become the rallying cry of a whole generation: ours. How does Conroy's opus make you feel about such catch phrases of the self-help movement?

21. We see much inflexibility here: Catholic; Judaic; militaristic. Capers says: "`Rules are a form of discipline. They have their own reason for existing'" (430). And Martha says of George, "`he thought he was being a good Jew'" ; to which Jack responds, "`And a bad human being'" (64). Whose intolerance is greater: George's or Jack's? Is it the code that is wrong or the unwillingness to respect it? Think of the religions with which you are most familiar. Then think of your definition of a good human being. Do you think it is possible to adhere to the tenets of *any* religion exactly to the letter of the law and still remain at all times a "good" human being?

Interview with Pat Conroy

from The Book Report on America Online

Bookpg JK: Good evening, we are delighted to have Mr. Conroy with us. I would like the first question or two. Pat, your books are all amazingly long --- Beach Music is 800 pages in paper --- and they are amazingly emotional. What is like to write them?

PatConroy: It is a piece of cake. They take a long time. My prose is overwrought, a little pretentious. I never know how a book will end. I start and then there is an accretion, like a coral reef.

Bookpg JK: I'm told 300 pages were cut out of PRINCE OF TIDES.

PatConroy: I think more. And 500-600 cut out of BEACH MUSIC.

Bookpg JK: Do you miss those words?

PatConroy: I don't. Once I finish editing, I can never go back and read them again. I can't say I miss them. I remember certain parts of them.

Bookpg JK: Emotionally, what is it like to do the Holocaust, say, just as PART of a book? BEACH MUSIC has every intense emotion available on the planet!

PatConroy: I do emotions well. It's good stuff. I like a book to be a world full of different personalities.

BookpgJK: How did you come to feel this way?

PatConroy: I wish I could introduce you to my mother. God gave me two parents: Zeus and Hera. My father was a Marine Corps pilot who flew nuclear weapons. My mother was a beautiful Southerner out of Gone With The Wind. There was a war for my psyche.

Bookpg JK: Flaubert wept when Bovary died. Do your scenes affect you as you write them?

PatConroy: Yes. You fall in love with your characters. You're the only one who knows they're alive. And when something happens to them, you are moved.

Question: Do you feel the movie version of THE PRINCE OF TIDES did your book justice? How involved were you in the filming?

PatConroy: Not at all in the filming. I did the first screenplay. And a revision. Then I was fired. Twelve other writers came on. I did three weeks of work at the end for Barbra Streisand. I don't feel proprietary about the movies. I do feel proprietary about the books. I would never have thought Robert Duvall could be my father. This has all been a surprise. I've liked these movies, but I never saw movies in my future.

Question: Have you had any contact with, or updates on the progress of, the children you taught in The Water is Wide? What are conditions like on the island now?

PatConroy: Periodically they show up at book signings, and I run into them around Beaufort. The only great surprise I've had in life is the swiftness of the passage of time. Some of these kids introduce me to their grandkids!

Question: Mr. Conroy, your protagonist in PRINCE OF TIDES was sharply drawn. What do you consider the most effective method of characterization?

PatConroy: When I choose my characters, here is what I do: If they bore me, I throw them out of the book! I don't like bad conversation. If I'm going to inhabit a city, I want interesting people living there.

Question: When will your next book be published?

PatConroy: I hope in my lifetime. It takes me a long time to write these books. I look at Updike with admiration. Joyce Carol Oates seems inhuman to me. I don't see how these people do it and have a life.

Question: The Great Santini is one of my favorite explorations of the effect the military has on people's hearts and minds. What do you think are some of the negative and positive effects the military mindset has on men and women?

PatConroy: When I wrote Santini, I thought I had been raised by a Martian. I thought Dad was different from every other military man in America. What I learned later was that my Dad raised all of us. There's a great book that explores the brass --- by Mary Wirtz --- that explores this. She found that military brats come out with great discipline. We are always on time. We are loyal friends --- because we had so few growing up. But it's also like being raised by Stalin. Discipline was so important they never gave you time to be a child. And with my father, I had the added pleasure of him beating us up.

Bookpg JK: I find your books, particularly BEACH MUSIC, to have resolved these issues, largely, it seems, through a kind of faith. You write: "All life connects. Nothing that happens is meaningless." And you end the book talking about "the eminence of magic." Is this recently acquired, or were these your thoughts all along?

PatConroy: The thing no writer can help is getting older, having more experience. And now that I'm in my early 50s, I've seen people die --- my mother, my grandmother, 6 members of my class at the Citadel in Vietnam. And I have to try to figure out what it means to gather something up so it doesn't look like chaos. The death of my mother was a major turning point ---- I didn't know mothers could die at 59. And I did not know she would be so courageous when she died. I think she was teaching her children how to die and do it right.

Bookpg JK: Having lived abroad, are you now, finally, at home in South Carolina?

PatConroy: No! Because I was a military brat and moved 23 times before I was 18, home will never be a place for me. At 15, we moved to Beaufort --- my third high school. I said "No one even knew I was at the old one, or that I left." My mother said: "Then make Beaufort your home." So I did. In the last two years, two guide books have appeared here --- and both have listed me as a native. I could see how that is.

Question: Pat, who was your biggest influence as a beginning author?

PatConroy: No question. Thomas Wolfe. Look Homeward Angel. An English teacher gave them that when I was 15, and it changed my life.

Bookpg JK: Speaking of influences, a Book Report reader has suggested that you are a Jimmy Buffett fan --- for he wrote a song about Beach Music in the late 80s.

PatConroy: That song was about Prince of Tides. He called me on the phone. He said "Hi, I'm Jimmy Buffett." I said "Hi, I'm Paul McCartney." He said: "May I write a song called Prince of Tides?" I said: "You do, and I will kiss your behind." He said: "How much will I have to pay you?" I said: "I will kiss your behind --- I told you." So he wrote the song --- and at the end he sings "Beach music, beach music...." And that gave me the title.

Question: Mr. Conroy, it is a great joy to be able to communicate with you. I have a couple of questions. Is your book "The Boo" still in print and if so, where can I find a copy?

PatConroy: The Old New York Book Shop Press, in Atlanta [tel: (404)-881-1285 fax: (404) 881-6292] --- they're in the phone book --- they have copies. May I say it is one of the worst books written in our language!

Question: Mr. Conroy, do you write every day and how do you feel while you're working? And afterward?

PatConroy: I try to. I try to make it a regular business day. Get to the desk at nine. Write to lunch. After lunch, a nap. Then to 5. The phone is NEVER on. I write with legal pads and a pen.

Bookpg JK: Do you know the psychological term abreaction? It's when, in retelling an incident, you relive it --- like Vietnam Stress. When you are really, really into a scene, are you almost channeling it?

PatConroy: That certainly occurs. No question. And afterwards, I am exhausted. At night, I read. I always worried because I was raised in my family and went to The Citadel, that I would have to outread my contemporaries in order to have a chance to compete against them. So I read 200 pages a day. Now I'm reading Whistling Dixie by John Read. I just picked up The Obscene Bird of Night by Jose DeNoso.

Bookpg JK: You're not afraid of being "influenced?"

PatConroy: I hope I am! Tell me something I don't know. Show me a way to do scenes I haven't thought of. I particularly like foreign authors, they see the world differently.

Bookpg JK: So the writing life is really monastic --- it's a literal calling.

PatConroy: I believe that. It is easy to write one book. I think it's difficult to have a career.

Bookpg JK: You are surely asked to write screenplays, be on prize committees, write articles. Are you never tempted?

PatConroy: I will do screenplays. I'm doing BEACH MUSIC....so I can have health insurance. Very hard to get health insurance in this country --- and hey, I've got 100 children, I need it! Prize committees rarely, articles never.

Question: Mr. Conroy, I had the pleasure of meeting you this summer at a Beaufort debutante party. I am from Murrells Inlet and would like to ask you when we can expect to see Beach Music on the silver screen?

PatConroy: They say they will start in April, but they sometimes lie. It has not been cast. I'm on the final rewrite. They say they'll do it in Beaufort and Rome --- but it doesn't always come out that way.

Question: Pat, how much time did you put into research for Beach Music?

PatConroy: A ton. One does not approach the Holocaust as an American Christian writer without great caution. Much of the time was spent interviewing children of survivors in the South.

Question: What do you think about women getting into the military academies?

PatConroy: I was simply and totally delighted. I supported Shannon Falkner when she tried to get into the Citadel. I am proud of these four women.

Question: Pat, do you ever wish you were back teaching poverty-stricken children on a remote island off the east coast like in the Water is Wide?

PatConroy: No. But I wish I was 22 again.

Question: Pat, if you were not a successful writer, how would you earn a living?

PatConroy: I would be a teacher. And I would be a happy one.

Question: Mr. Conroy -- what are your feelings about the troubles the independent bookstores are facing?

PatConroy: It seems to be part and parcel of what is wrong with America today. These superstores ought to be ashamed of themselves. They're targeting the independent stores. On tour, whenever I am at a successful independent bookstore, I see a Borders or B&N going up across the street.

Question: EE from South Carolina: Where did you do the majority of your writing? I know your books are about the South but is it easier for you to write about the South in the South?

PatConroy: I wrote almost all of Beach Music in the South. There's an advantage about writing about the South elsewhere that you don't know until you go away. I like a strong sense of place in a book. I wrote Prince of Tides in Italy. I felt the South more sharply when I was away.

Question: Mr. Conroy, you write very well about sports. What influence has that had in your life?

PatConroy: My father signed me up for football, basketball, baseball. And that became a way to get his attention. It taught me about limitation --- and sportsmanship.

Bookpg JK: I think we are nearing an end. This has certainly been the quickest session we've had, and I can see there are many more questions to be asked. So let us hope, Pat, that you will visit us again --- and save the next to last dance for us.

PatConroy: Just ask.

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