

# MY READING LIFE

Pat Conroy



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PAT  
CONROY

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MY READING LIFE



DRAWINGS BY WENDELL MINOR

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*This book is dedicated to my lost daughter,*

*Susannah Ansley Conroy. Know this: I love you  
with my heart and always will. Your return  
to my life would be one of the happiest moments  
I could imagine.*

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## THE LILY

Between the ages of six and nine, I was a native son of the marine bases of Cherry Point and Camp Lejeune in the eastern coastal regions of North Carolina. My father flew squadrons of slant-winged Corsairs, which I still think of as the most beautiful warplanes that ever took to the sky. For a year Dad flew with the great Boston hitter and left fielder Ted Williams, and family lore has it that my mother and Mrs. Williams used to bathe my sister and me along with Ted Williams's daughter. That still remains the most distinguished moment of my commonplace career as an athlete. I followed Ted Williams's pursuit of greatness reveling in my father's insider knowledge that "Ted [has] the best reflexes of any marine pilot who ever flew Corsairs." I read every book about baseball in the library of each base and town we entered, hoping for any information about "the Kid" or "the Splendid Splinter." When the movie of *The Great Santini* came out starring Robert Duvall, Ted Williams told a sportswriter that he'd once flown with Santini. My whole writing career was affirmed with that single, transcendent moment.

The forests around Cherry Point and Camp Lejeune were vast to the imagination of a boy. Once I climbed an oak tree as high as I could go in Camp Lejeune, then watched a battalion of marines with their weapons locked and loaded slip in wordless silence beneath me as they approached enemy territory. When I built a bridge near "B" building in Cherry Point, I invited the comely Kathleen McCadden to witness my first crossing. I had painted my face like a Lumbee Indian and wielded a Cherokee tomahawk I had fashioned to earn a silver arrow point as a Cub Scout. My bridge collapsed in a heap around me and I fell into the middle of a shallow creek as poor Kathleen screamed with laughter on the bank. Though I failed bridge maker, I showed more skill in the task of the tomahawk and I felled Kathleen with a wild toss that deflected off her shoulder blade. My mother handled the whipping that night, so further discipline by my father proved unnecessary. For the rest of my life, I would read books on Native Americans and I once coached an Indian baseball team on the North Side of Omaha, Nebraska, after my freshman year at The Citadel. Pretty Kathleen McCadden never spoke to me again, and her father always looked as if he wanted to beat me. I was seven years old.

Yet an intellectual life often forms in the strangest, most infertile of conditions. The deep forests of those isolated bases became the kingdom that I took ownership of as a child. I followed the minnow-laced streams as they made their cutting way toward the Trent River. Each time in the woods, I brought my nature-obsessed mother a series of captured animals from snapping turtles to copperheads. Mom would study their scales or fur or plumage as I brought home everything from baby herons to squirrels for her patient inspection. After she looked over the day's catch, she would shower me with praise, then send me back into the

woods to return my captives where I'd discovered them. She told me she thought I could become a world-class naturalist, or even the director of the San Diego Zoo.

At the library she began to check out books that gave me a working knowledge of those creatures that my inquisitive, overprotective dog and I had found while wandering the woods. When Chippie jumped between me and an eastern diamondback rattler and took a strike on the muzzle before she broke the snake's back, my mother decided that I'd do my most important work in the game preserves of Africa with the scent of lions inflaming Chippie's extraordinary sense of smell. By the time I had finished fifth grade, I knew the name of almost every mammal in Africa. I even brought her a baby fox once and had a corn snake in a pickle jar. She answered me with trips to the library, where I found a whole section labeled "Africa," the books oversized and swimming with photographs of creatures with their claws extended and their fangs bared. Elephants moved across parched savanna and hippopotamuses bellowed in the Nile River; crocodiles sunned themselves on riverbanks where herds of zebra came to drink their fill. Books permitted me to embark on dangerous voyages to a world of painted faces of mandrills and leopards scanning the veldt from the high branches of a baobab tree. There was nothing my mother could not bring me from the library. When I met a young marine in the woods one day hunting butterflies with a net and a killing jar, my mother checked out a book that took me far into the world of lepidoptera with hairstreaks, sulphurs, and fritillaries placed in solemn rows.

Whatever prize I brought out of the woods, my mother could match with a book from the library. She read so many books that she was famous among the librarians in every town she entered. Since she did not attend college, she looked to librarians as her magic carpet into serious intellectual life. Books contained powerful amulets that could lead to paths of certain wisdom. Novels taught her everything she needed to know about the mysteries and uncertainties of being human. She was sure that if she could find the right book, it would reveal what was necessary for her to become a woman of substance and parts. She outread the whole generation of officers' wives but still wilted in embarrassment when asked about her college degree. I was a teenager when I heard Mom claim that she had just finished her first year at Agnes Scott when she dropped out to marry my father. By the time I graduated from The Citadel, my mother was saying that she had matriculated with honors from Agnes Scott with a degree in English. Though I feared the possibility of her exposure, I thought that the lie was harmless enough. Her vast reading provided all the armor she needed to camouflage her lack of education. At formal teas, she talked of Pasternak and Dostoyevsky. She subscribed to the *Saturday Review*, then passed it on to my sister Carol and me after she had read it from cover to cover. After Mom fell in love with John Ciardi, I checked out her translation of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. She spoke about the circles of Hell for the rest of her life. Even if Dante daunted and intimidated her, she cherished Eudora Welty and Edith Wharton and knew her way around the works of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Whenever she opened a new book, she could escape the exhausting life of a mother of seven and enter into cloistered realms forbidden to a woman born among the mean fields of Georgia.

Peg Conroy used reading as a text of liberation, a way out of the sourceless labyrinth that devoured poor Southern girls like herself. She directed me to every book I ever read until I graduated from the eighth grade at Blessed Sacrament School in Alexandria, Virginia. When I won the Martin T. Quinn Scholarship for Academic Achievement, Mom thought she had

produced a genius in the rough.

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In high school, my mother surrendered my education up to the English teachers who would lead me blindfolded toward the astonishments that literature had to offer. In Belmont, North Carolina, Sister Mary Ann of the Order of the Sacred Heart taught a small but serious class on that Book of Common Prayer that makes up the bulk of a fourteen-year-old American's introduction to the great writers of the world. It took me six months to fathom the mystery that my mother was copying out my homework assignments in an act of mimicry that made me pity her in some ways but admire her indefatigable trek toward self-improvement for others. It was a year my father made dangerous for me, and there was a strange correlation between his brutality and my reaching puberty that was then incomprehensible to me. My father infuriated him when he found my mother and me discussing an Edgar Allan Poe short story or Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." He found me showing off and vain. It marked the year my blue eyes began to burn with hatred whenever he entered a room. Though I tried, I could not control that loathing no matter what strategies I used. He would take me by the throat in that tiny house on Kees Road, lift me off my feet, strangle me and beat my head against the wall. When later I was living by myself in Atlanta in 1979, my father came to visit me after an extended visit with all his children. He recounted a story that my brother Jim had told him, and said, "Jesus, my kids can make shit up. Jim claimed that his first memory of you was me beating your brains out against some wall. Isn't that hilarious?"

"I can show you the wall," I said.

On the day Sister Mary Ann handed out copies of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, I understood at last that I was coming face-to-face with the greatest writer who ever lived. The strangeness of Elizabethan dialogue stymied me at first, but I was taking turns reading it with my mother and noted her own puzzlement as we encountered a diction and elaborate phrasing that was unfamiliar to us. When Orsino opens the play with his famous declaration, "If music be the food of love, play on," we were fine, but both of us were stopped in midsentence by a word unknown to us—"surfeiting."

"Look it up, Pat," Mom said. "If we don't know a word, we can't understand the sentence."

I looked up the word and said, "You eat too much. You get too full."

"Like the radio, if they play a song too much, you get sick of it. It happened to me with 'Tennessee Waltz,'" she said.

The next stoppage of our kitchen performance took place when the servant Curio asked the duke if he would go hunting the "hart."

"Maybe it's a misprint," Mom said. "What does it mean?"

"In England it's a deer. A red deer," I said, consulting the dictionary.

"Okay, the duke says that music is the food of love," she said. "I got it. It's a pun. A pun. The duke is in love, so he's going to be hunting the human heart of a young woman."

I've never been a great admirer of the pun, so I didn't quite catch my mother's drift because there lives a strange literalist inside me who swats away at puns as though routing a swarm of flies. It's hard to take pleasure in something you don't understand and in my own psyche, a "hart" could never pass for a "heart." But looking back at the play I haven't read for

fifty years, it strikes me now that my mother was correct in her assessment of the Shakespearean world. For the rest of my high school and college career, she read every short story, poem, play, and novel that I read. I would bring notebooks home from The Citadel and Mom would devour those of each literature course I took. Only after her death did I realize that my mother entered The Citadel the same day I did. She made sure that her education was identical to mine. She knew Milton's *Paradise Lost* a whole lot better than I did.

In my junior year, she developed a schoolgirl crush on Col. James Harrison, who taught American literature. He filled his lectures with a refined erudition, a passion for good writing, and a complete dedication to the task of turning his cadets into well-spoken and clear-thinking young men. But Mom fell head over heels for the lovely man the day Colonel Harrison read the Whitman poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." With the softest of voices, he read to his class the poet's moving elegy on the death of Abraham Lincoln. Halfway through his recitation, he confessed to us that he always wept whenever he read that particular poem. He apologized to the class for his lack of professionalism. He wiped his glasses and, with tears streaming down his face, he dismissed the class and headed toward his office. The grandson of a Confederate officer had been moved to tears by a poem commemorating the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. For me that day will last forever. I had no idea that poetry could bring a grown man to his knees until Colonel Harrison proved it. It ratified a theory of mine that great writing could sneak up on you, master of a thousand disguises: prodigal kinsman, messenger boy, class clown, commander of artillery, altar boy, lace maker, exiled king, peacemaker, or moon goddess. I had witnessed with my own eyes that a poem made a colonel cry. Though it was not part of a lesson plan, it imparted a truth that left me spellbound. Great words, arranged with cunning and artistry, could change the perceived world for some readers. From the beginning I've searched out those writers unafraid to stir up the emotions, who entrust me with their darkest passions, their most indestructible yearnings, and their most soul-killing doubts. I trust the great novelists to teach me how to live, how to feel, how to love and hate. I trust them to show me the dangers I will encounter on the road as I stagger on my own troubled passage through a complicated life of books that try to teach me how to die.

I take it as an article of faith that the novels I've loved will live inside me forever. Let me call on the spirit of Anna Karenina as she steps out onto the train tracks of Moscow in the last minute of her glorious and implacable life. Let me beckon Madame Bovary to issue me a cursory note of warning whenever I get suicidal or despairing as I live out a life too sad by half. If I close my eyes I can conjure up a whole country of the dead who will live for all time because writers turned them into living flesh and blood. There is Jay Gatsby floating face downward in his swimming pool or Tom Robinson's bullet-riddled body cut down in his Alabama prison yard in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Hector can still impart lessons about honor as he rides out to face Achilles on the plains of Troy. At any time, night or day, I can conjure up the fatal love of Romeo for the raven-haired Juliet. The insufferable Casaubon dies in *Middlemarch* and Robert Jordan awaits his death on the mountains of Spain in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, the death of Ben Gant can still make me weep, as can the death of Thomas Wolfe's stone-carving father in *Time and the River*. On the isle of Crete I bought *Report to Greco* by Nikos Kazantzakis and still see the immortal scene when the author's father took him to a devastated garden to witness

the swinging bodies of Greek patriots hanging from the branches of fruit trees. In a scene that has haunted me since I first read it, the father lifted his son off the Cretan earth and made the boy kiss the bottom of the dead men's feet. Though nearly gagging, the young Kazantzakis kisses dirt from the lifeless feet as the father tells him that's what courage tastes like, that what freedom tastes like.

When Isabel Archer falls in love with Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady*, I still wanted to signal her to the dangers inherent in this fatal choice of a husband, one whose cunning took on an attractive finish but lacked depth. She has chosen a man whose character was not only undistinguished, but also salable to the highest bidder.

To my mother, a library was a palace of desire masquerading in a wilderness of books. In the downtown library of Orlando, Florida, Mom pointed out a solid embankment of books. In serious battalions the volumes stood in strict formations, straight-backed and squared away. They looked like unsmiling volunteers shined and ready for dress parade. "What furniture! What furniture!" she cried, admiring those books looking out on a street lined with palms and hibiscus.

I was eleven years old that year, and my brother Jim was an infant. Mom walked her brood of six children along the banks of Lake Eola on the way home to Livingston Street. My uncle Russ would leave his dentist's office at five, pick up the books my mother had checked out for herself and her kids, and hand-deliver them on his way home to North Hyer Street. On this particular day, Mom stopped with her incurious children near an artist putting the finishing touches on a landscape illuminating one corner of the park surrounding the lake. She gazed at the painting with a joyful intensity as the artist painted a snow-white lily on a footprint-shaped pad as a final, insouciant touch. Mom squealed with pleasure and the bargaining began. From the beginning, the Florida artist Jack W. Lawrence was putty in my comely mother's hands. Flirtation was less of an art form with her than it was a means to an end, or a way of life. Jack demanded fifty dollars for his masterwork and after much charming repartee between artist and customer, he let it go for ten.

That painting hangs in my writing room today. I am staring at the singular lily nesting like a dove in that ethereal place where my mother purchased her first work of art in 1956 in a backwater city dimpled with lakes. The next week, she checked out large art books from the library and spread them out for Carol and me and read out names seething with musicality and strangeness. A library could show you everything if you knew where to look. Jack W. Lawrence led my mother, who led her children to Giotto, the shepherd, to Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, to Raphael and his exquisite Madonnas. Years later, I took Mom to the Vatican Library and a tour of the Sistine Chapel; then we visited the tomb of Raphael at the Pantheon. As we spoke of Raphael, she remembered the book she checked out on the Renaissance in that Florida library. We remembered our chance encounter with Mr. Lawrence and our awed eyewitness to that final, emblematic lily.

My mother hungered for art, for illumination, for some path to lead her to a shining way to call her own. She lit signal fires in the hills for her son to feel and follow. I tremble with gratitude as I honor her name.



## GONE WITH THE WIND

The novel *Gone with the Wind* shaped the South I grew up in more than any other book. During my childhood, my mother bought countless copies to hand out as gifts or to replace the ones she read so frequently that they came apart in her hands. Few white Southerners, even today, can read this book without conjuring up a complex, tortured dreamscape of the South handed down by generations of relatives who grew up with the taste of defeat, like the bluing of gunmetal, still in their mouths. What Margaret Mitchell caught so perfectly was the sense of irredeemable loss and of a backwater Camelot corrupted by the mannerless intrusions of insensate invaders. The Tara invoked in the early chapters of the book is the wistful image of a Southern utopia, a party at Twelve Oaks that might have gone on forever if the hot-blooded boys of the South could have stemmed the passions of secession and held their fire at Fort Sumter. It is the South as an occupied nation that forms the heart of this not impartial novel. This is *The Iliad* with a Southern accent, burning with the humiliation of Reconstruction. It is the song of the fallen, unregenerate Troy, the one sung on a lower key by the women who had to pick up the pieces of a fractured society when the sons and husbands returned with their cause in their throats, when the final battle cry was sounded. It is the story of war told by the women who did not lose it and who refused to believe in its results long after the occupation had begun. According to Margaret Mitchell, the Civil War destroyed a civilization of unsurpassable amenity, chivalry, and grace. To Southerners like my mother, *Gone with the Wind* was not just a book; it was an answer, a clenched fist raised to the North, an anthem of defiance. If you could not defeat the Yankees on the battlefield, then by God, one of your women could rise from the ashes of humiliation to write more powerfully than the enemy and all the historians and novelists who sang the praises of the Union. The novel was published in 1936 and it still stands as the last great posthumous victory of the Confederacy. It will long be a favorite book of any country that has ever lost a war. It is still one of the most successful novels ever published in our republic.

*Gone with the Wind* is as controversial a novel as it is magnificent. Even after its publication a year, then after Margaret Mitchell won a Pulitzer Prize, the book attracted a glittering array of literary critics, including Malcolm Cowley and Bernard DeVoto, who attacked the artistic and politics of the novel with a ferocity that continues to this day. Margaret Mitchell was a partisan of the first rank and there never has been a defense of the plantation South so implacable in its cold righteousness or its resolute belief that the wrong side had surrendered at Appomattox Court House. In this book, the moral weight of the narrative is solidly and iconoclastically in line with the gospel according to the Confederate States. It stands as a furious counterpoint to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which Margaret Mitchell ridicules on several occasions by scoffing at Stowe's famous scene of bloodhounds pursuing runaway slaves across ice floes.

Margaret Mitchell writes of the Confederacy as paradise, as the ruined garden looked back upon by a stricken and exiled Eve, disconsolate with loss. If every nation deserves its own defense and its own day in the sunshine of literature, then Margaret Mitchell rose to the task of playing the avenging angel for the Confederate States. There have been hundreds of novels about the Civil War, but *Gone with the Wind* stands like an obelisk in the dead center of American letters casting its uneasy shadow over all of us. It hooked into the sweet-smelling attar that romance always lends to the cause of a shamed and defeated people. Millions of Southerners lamented the crushing defeat of the Southern armies, but only one had the talent to place that elegiac sense of dissolution on the white shoulders of the most irresistible spiderous, seditious, and wonderful of American heroines, Scarlett O'Hara.

*Gone with the Wind* is a war novel, a historical romance, a comedy of manners, a bitter lamentation, a cry of the heart, and a long, coldhearted look at the character of this lovely Machiavellian Southern woman. It is beautifully constructed into fine, swiftly moving paragraphs and sixty-three chapters. Margaret Mitchell possessed a playwright's ear for dialogue and the reader never becomes confused as the hundreds of characters move in and out of scenes throughout the book. She grants each character the clear imprimatur of a unique and completely distinct voice. Once Miss Mitchell has limned the outlines of the main characters they live eternally in the imagination of the reader. She was born to be a novelist, but she withdrew, having given voice to the one novel bursting along the seams of consciousness. Margaret Mitchell sings her own song of a land-proud, war-damaged South, and her voice is operatic, biblical, epic. Her genius lay in her choice of locale and point of focus and heroine. She leaves the great battlefields of Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Bull Run and Antietam to the others and places the Civil War in the middle of Scarlett O'Hara's living room. She has the Northern cannons sounding beyond Peachtree Creek as Melanie Wilkes goes into labor, and she has the city of Atlanta in flames as Scarlett is seized with an overpowering urge to return home that finds her moving down Peachtree Street with the world she grew up in turning to ash around her.

The book begins and ends with Tara, but it is Scarlett herself who represents the unimaginable changes that the war has wrought on all Southerners. It was in Southern women that the deep hatred the war engendered came to nest for real in the years of Reconstruction. The women of the South became the only American women to know the hard truths of war firsthand. They went hungry just as their men did on the front lines in Virginia and Tennessee, they starved when these men failed to come home for four straight growing seasons, and hunger was an old story when the war finally ended. The men of Chancellorsville, Franklin, and the Wilderness seemed to have left some residue of fury on the smoking, blood-drenched fields of battle, whose very names became sacred in their retelling. But Southern women, forced to live with that defeat, had to build granaries around the heart to store the poisons that the glands of rage produced during that war and in its aftermath. The Civil War still feels personal in the South, and what the women of the South brought to peacetime was Scarlett O'Hara's sharp memory of exactly what they had lost.

With the introduction of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, Miss Mitchell managed to create the two most famous lovers in the English-speaking world since Romeo and Juliet. Scarlett springs alive in the first sentence of the book and holds the narrative center for more than a thousand pages. She is a fabulous, one-of-a-kind creation, and she does not utter a dull line.



the entire book. She makes her uncontrollable self-centeredness seem like the most charming thing in the world and one feels she would be more than a match for Anna Karenina, Lady Macbeth, or any of Tennessee Williams's women. Her entire nature shines with the joy of being pretty and sought after and frivolous in the first chapters and we see her character darkening slowly throughout the book. She rises to meet challenge after challenge as the war destroys the world she was born into as a daughter of the South. Tara made her charming but the war made her Scarlett O'Hara.

The cynicism of Rhett Butler is still breathtaking and his black-hearted, impudent humor resonates throughout the book. He serves as the clarifying eye in the midst of so much high-toned discussion of the cause and the Southern way of life. His is the first sounding of the New South, rising out of the chaos left in the passing of the old order. Yet in the arc of his character, it is Rhett and Rhett alone who seems to change most dramatically. He, who never lets an opportunity pass to mock the pieties and abstractions of Southern patriotism, joins the Confederate Army only when its defeat is certain. Rhett Butler, who profited greatly while blockade running, food speculating, and bankrolling prostitutes, turns out to be the softest of fathers, the most self-sacrificing of friends, the most flamboyant and ardent of lovers; yet it is his wounded masculinity that reveals the secret toll the war took on the South. His one great flaw was making the terrible and exhilarating mistake of falling in love with Scarlett O'Hara.

Both Scarlett and Rhett are perfect representatives of the type of Southerner who prospered amid the ruins of a conquered nation. They both collaborated with the occupying army, both survived by embracing pragmatism and eschewing honor. Rhett and Scarlett are the two characters who let you know what the South will become. Ashley Wilkes and Melanie Hamilton Wilkes let you know what the South was and will never be again. The practicality of both Rhett and Scarlett make them the spiritual parents of Atlanta. Born of fire, Atlanta was the first Southern city to fall in love with the party of hustle and progress. The burning of Atlanta increased the city's lack of roots and made it even more like Dayton than Charleston. Rhett and Scarlett were masterful at cutting deals and playing the percentages and not looking back, and they bequeathed these gifts to the reborn city itself.

I owe a personal debt to this novel that I find almost beyond reckoning. I became a novelist because of *Gone with the Wind*, or more precisely, my mother raised me up to be a "Southern" novelist, with a strong emphasis on the word "Southern," because *Gone with the Wind* set my mother's imagination ablaze when she was a young girl in Atlanta, and it was the one fire of her bruised, fragmented youth that never went out. I still wonder how my relationship with the language might be different had she spoon-fed me Faulkner or Proust or Joyce, but my mother was a country girl new to the city, one generation removed from the harsh reality of subsistence farming, and her passion for reading received its shaping through when *Gone with the Wind* moved its heavy artillery into Atlanta to fight its rearguard action against the judgment of history itself.

When my mother described the reaction of the city to the publication of this book, it was the first time I knew that literature had the power to change the world. It certainly changed my mother and the life she was meant to lead. She read the novel aloud to me when I was five years old, and it is from this introductory reading that I absorbed my first lessons in the authority of fiction. There is not a sentence in this book unfamiliar to me since my mother

made a fetish of rereading it each year. The lines of *Gone with the Wind* remain illustrated in gold leaf in whatever disfigured Book of Kells I carry around with me from my childhood. I can close my eyes today and still hear my mother's recitation of it in the same reverent voice she used when she read to me from the story of Genesis.

When she drove me to Sacred Heart School and we moved south along Peachtree Street she could point out areas where the two armies of the Americas clashed. She would take me to the spot outside the Loew's Grand Theatre and show me where she was standing in the crowd on the night that the movie premiered in Atlanta and she saw Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh and Margaret Mitchell enter the theater to great applause. Though she could not afford a ticket, she thought she owed the book the courtesy of standing among the crowd that night. Together, we visited the grave of Margaret Mitchell at Oakland Cemetery, and Mom would say a decade of the rosary over her tombstone, then remark proudly that the novelist had been a Roman Catholic of Irish descent. On weekends, she would drive me to Stone Mountain to view the half-finished effigies of Southern generals on horseback carved into the center of that massive granite outcropping, then off to Kennesaw Mountain and Peachtree Creek where she taught me the battle of Atlanta according to the gospel of Margaret Mitchell. My mother, during these visitations, taught me to hate William Tecumseh Sherman with my body and soul, and I did so with all the strength I could bring to the task of malice. He was the Northern general, presented as the embodiment of evil, who had burned the pretty city where I was born. Mom would drive me near the spot where Margaret Mitchell was struck down by a taxicab in 1949 and look toward the skyline at Five Points, saying, "Can you imagine how beautiful Atlanta would be if Sherman had never been born?"

But the story of this novel and my mother goes deeper than mere literary rapport. I think that my mother, Frances Dorothy Peek, known to all as Peg, modeled her whole life on the life of Scarlett O'Hara. I think that fiction itself became such a comfortable country for me because Mom treated the book as though it were a manual of etiquette whose dramatic personae she presented as blood relations and kissing cousins rather than as creations of an artist's imagination. She could set our whole world against this fictional backdrop with an alarming ease. Mom, the willful, emotional beauty with just the right touch of treachery and flirtation, was Miss Scarlett herself. Dad, the Marine Corps fighter pilot, flying off the deck of his aircraft carrier, dropping napalm on the enemy North Koreans an entire world away, played the role of the flashy, contemptuous Rhett Butler. Aunt Helen was the spitting image of Melanie Wilkes, Mom would inform me as she prepared our evening meal, and Aunt Evelyn acted just like Suellen. Uncle James could play the walk-on part for Charles Hamilton and Uncle Russ the stand-in for Frank Kennedy. Mom could align our small universe with the world of *Gone with the Wind* while she stirred the creamed corn. Once she had read the novel, she lived inside her the rest of her life, like a bright lamp she could always trust in the darkness.

Even my young and tenuous manhood was informed by lessons of instruction from her interpretation of the novel, which she would fight about with my father. "No matter what the girls say," Mom would say, "they'd much rather marry a man like Ashley Wilkes than Rhett Butler."

"I hate Ashley Wilkes," Dad would say. Literary criticism was not an art form conducted at a high level in my family, and I still do not believe my father ever read my mother's sacred

text. "That guy's a pansy if I've ever seen one. Of course, Rhett Butler's a pansy compared to me." Mom would turn to me, sniff, and say, "Your father's from Chicago. He doesn't even know what we're talking about."

*Gone with the Wind* presented my mother and people like her with a new sense of themselves. She hailed the book as the greatest book ever written or that ever would be written, a nonpareil that restored the South's sense of honor to itself after the unimaginable horrors of war and occupation. I have come across legions of critics who deplored my mother's taste in fiction, but this was my mother and I was heir to that taste, for better or worse. Mom's hurt childhood had damaged something irreparable in her sense of self, and I think she won it back by her obsessive identification with Scarlett O'Hara. My mother's family suffered grievously during the Depression, but Scarlett taught that one could be hungry and despairing, but not broken and not without resources, spiritual in nature, that precluded one from surrendering without a fight. When Scarlett swears to God after rooting around for that radish in the undone garden of Tara that she will never go hungry again, she was giving voice to every American who had suffered want and fear during the Hoover years. It was this same Scarlett who gave Southern women like my mother new insights into the secrecies and potentials of womanhood itself, not always apparent in that region of the country where the progress of women moves most slowly. *Gone with the Wind* tells the whole story of a lost society through the eyes of a single woman, and that woman proves matchless enough for a world at war, an army of occupation, and every man who enters those sugared realms of her attraction. Rarely has a heroine so immoral or unscrupulous as Scarlett O'Hara held the deed to center stage during the course of such a long novel.

Whenever the movie version was released again by MGM, Mom would march all her children to the local theater with a sense of religious anticipation. I remember that feeling of participating in some rite of sacred mystery when the movie began and my mother let herself be taken once again by this singular, canonical moment in Southern myth-making. She would hum along when the theme from Tara began playing and she would weep at all the right places. I would observe her watching her heroine, Scarlett O'Hara, mouthing the words that Scarlett spoke them to Ashley, to Rhett, to Melanie, to the Yankee interloper who desecrated the sanctuary of Tara, and I would be thinking what I think now—that my mother was as pretty as Scarlett O'Hara; that she had modeled herself on this fictional creation and had done so as an act of sheer will and homage. I would wonder if anyone else in the theater could see what was so obvious to me—that this movie belonged to my mother; that it was the site of her own invention of herself, the place where she came to revive her own deepest dream of her lost girlhood. The movie version of *Gone with the Wind*, like the book, was a house of worship my mother retired to so she could experience again the spiritual refreshment of art.

Yet it is as a work of art that *Gone with the Wind* has been most suspect. From the beginning, the book has endured the incoming fire of some of the nation's best critics. It is a book of Dickensian power, written after the dawn of the age of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Its vigorous defense of the Confederacy was published three years before the German panzer division rolled across the borders of Poland. In the structure of Margaret Mitchell's perfect society, slavery was an essential part of the unity and harmony of Southern life before Fort Sumter. No black man or woman can read this book and be sorry that this particular wind has gone. The Ku Klux Klan plays the same romanticized role it had in *The Birth of a Nation* and appears

to be a benign combination of the Elks Club and a men's equestrian society. Critics took the novel apart from the beginning, then watched as it proceeded to become the best-selling book in American history. Its flaws may have doomed a lesser book, but this one rode out into literary history with Rhett and Scarlett in complete command of the carriage.

Literature often has a soft spot for the lost cause. Defeat lends an air of tragedy and nostalgia that the victors find unnecessary. But history will forgive almost anything, except being overwritten. None can explain the devotion that *Gone with the Wind* has inspired from one generation to another, but one cannot let this ardor go unremarked upon either. Because its readers have held it in such high esteem, it has cheapened the book's reputation as a work of art. Democracy works because of the will of the people, but it has the opposite effect when scholars begin to call out those books that make up the canon of our nation's literature. *Gone with the Wind* has outlived a legion of critics and will bury another whole set of them after this century closes.

The novel works because it possesses the inexpressible magic where the art of pure storytelling rises above its ancient use and succeeds in explaining to a whole nation how things came to be this way. There has never been a reader or a writer who could figure out why things happen to only a very few books. It involves all the eerie mysteries of enchantment itself, the untouchable wizardry that occurs when a story, in all its fragile elegance, speaks to the times in a clear, original voice and answers some strange hungers and demands of the Zeitgeist. I know of no other thousand-page book that grants such pleasure. The characters are wonderful, and the story moves with bright, inexorable power. The book allows you to lose yourself in the glorious pleasures of reading itself, when all five senses ignite in the sheer happiness of narrative. The Civil War and its aftermath may not have felt like this at all, but it sure seems that way when one gets carried away in the irresistible tumult and surge of *Gone with the Wind*. This book demonstrates again and again that there is no passion more rewarding than reading itself, that it remains the best way to dream and to feel the sheer carnal joy of being fully and openly alive.

*Gone with the Wind* has many flaws, but it cannot, even now, be easily put down. It still glows and quivers with life. American letters will always be tiptoeing nervously around the room where Scarlett O'Hara dresses for the party at Twelve Oaks as the War Between the States begins to inch its way toward Tara.

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## THE TEACHER

**M**y father confused me about what it meant to become a man. From an early age, I knew I didn't want to be anything like the man he was. If I'd become a wife- or child beater, it would be only a matter of time before I would've severed the carotid artery that carried blood into the troubled countryside of my brain. Among his fellow marines, Donald Conroy's horrible taste proved unerring, and he attracted a string of oddball friends who should've been eligible for any catch-and-release program. For the most part, they were third-rate men who spread rich marmalades of loathing over their own wives and children. I was on a lifelong search for a different kind of man. I wanted to attach my own moon of solitude to the strong attraction of a good man's gravitational pull. I found that man by luck when I walked into Gene Norris's English class in 1961. Though Gene couldn't have survived a fistfight with any of the marines I had met, I knew I was in the presence of the exceptional and scrupulous man I'd been searching for my whole life. The certainty of his gentleness was like a clear shot of sunshine to me. I had met a great man, at last.

In my career, I've written enough about Gene Norris's seminal role in my life to warrant Gene's own demurrals and notes of complaint. Even from his hospital bed, he would scold me for my constant advocacy of him as the grand irreplaceable lodestar of my boyhood. Gene would remind me that I had other fine teachers at Beaufort High School and that I should concentrate on celebrating them instead of chattering on and on about his influence. I replied that all teachers could sustain themselves if they read about the English teacher who found a profoundly shy and battered young man and changed the course of his life with the extravagant passion he brought to his classroom. I tried to visit Gene every time he went to the hospital in Columbia to receive chemotherapy treatment for his leukemia, and he and I would talk for hours. I'd depart when he entered into a comalike sleep that would sometimes leave him trembling with its fierce possession. On occasion he would lash out and cuss me for wasting time with him when I could be working on my novel. Once he screamed at me when he heard I was writing an article about him for *House Beautiful*.

"Creature, do I look like a house to you?" Gene asked.

"Yeah, you do, Gene. You look like an outhouse."

"Do I look beautiful to you, Irish Gypsy?" he yelled, drawing the attention of a pretentious nurse.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Norris?" she inquired.

"Damn right," Gene said. "Throw this scoundrel out with the morning trash. He's a constant irritant and lowbrow to boot. He was born nothing. His family is nothing. He's made a mess of his entire adult life. Call your largest orderly and have him thrown down the hospital steps."

on his ear.”

“Mr. Norris and I’ve been lovers for over twenty years,” I said to the nurse.

“I’ll be damned if that’s so. Scram, young lady. There’s no telling what filth will spew from his treacherous lips. He’s capable of saying anything. There’s no muzzle or governor on his gas pedal to stop him or even slow him down. His humbuggery knows no limits.”

“Humbuggery?” I repeated. “I feel like I’m living in London. I’m visiting Charles Dickens.”

“You’re nothing but a knave and a flibbertigibbet,” Gene said, his eyes fixed on the nurse’s reaction.

“You need anything, Mr. Norris?” the nurse asked.

“Another visitor. Remove this scoundrel when you go,” he demanded. “Or you’ll be checking the want ads tomorrow morning. This is no idle threat, Nurse.”

“Thanks for what you’re doing for Mr. Norris,” I said to the nurse. “All the nurses have been wonderful.”

“We’re all in love with Mr. Norris,” she said as she shut the door.

“Hogwash. Just pure hogwash,” Gene said after she left; then he turned to me to say, “I think we put on a pretty good show. The nurses love it when we talk nonsense to each other. They love the piffle, the endless banter.”

“I need to be going, Gene.”

“What do you have better to do than visit your old English teacher?”

“Gotta get back to watch the fender on my Buick rust,” I said. “Then I got to buy work gloves at Belk’s.”

“Don’t go yet. Please. Tell me a story, one about us. Tell what it meant. How on earth did it happen? The story, Pat—tell it to me.”

Gene extended his left hand, and I took it with both hands and held it as I told him of the fifteen-year-old boy who did not know the name of another student at Beaufort High School. That boy had been taught by nuns and priests his whole life, and like most Catholic school veterans, he could diagram complicated English sentences as gracefully as a fly fisherman casting toward a still pool in a mountain stream.

The boy watched the teacher enter his class, surprised when the teacher noticed him standing beside his desk waiting for the teacher to lead the class in a prayer, then granting permission for the class to take their seats. The teacher walked down the aisle and pushed the boy into his seat and said, “Just sit, boy. You must be some kind of fool or something.”

I was not a fool, Gene Norris, but one of the ways I found that out was by attaching my fate to the unprepossessing man who began by telling his students what he expected us to learn over the course of a year, the number of books he required us to read, and the quality of essays we would write. With English department funds, he had gotten each of us a subscription to *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s Magazine*. He expected us to have an intimate knowledge of current affairs and required that we become familiar with the *New York Times*. Segregation was still the law of the land in South Carolina. We were an all-white school with all-white teachers, but the world was changing at a bewildering pace around us.

and we needed to make ourselves knowledgeable and informed as we ripened into students who would one day offer leadership to the communities we lived in. His eloquence was understated that it was almost unnoticeable. He displayed a complete assurance in the composure and ease he brought to the art of teaching. At the end of the first day, I was impressed with the man; by the end of the first week, I was in love with him.

“There you go again,” Gene said when I paused in telling the story. “Always gilding the lily. Always exaggerating. From the very start, I tried to get you to tone it down, reel it in. Pull back. But you were incapable of listening to a simple instruction. Oh, no, you did it your way, and no one else’s way counted for a thing.”

“Where did I exaggerate, Gene?”

“The love part. You talk about love like it’s for sale on the cheap. A week. You loved me after a week. What bull-oney. What shoddy thinking.”

“It wasn’t thinking. It was feeling.”

“You’ve already ruined the story,” he snapped. “I won’t listen to another word.”

“Let me defend myself. Over forty years have passed since I was your English student. Who is the man holding your hand in a Columbia hospital talking about a class so few remember? That whole class fell in love with you that year. I was a witness to it all. I remember everything.”

“Go on,” he said, relenting.

My first week in his class, Gene Norris played a record at the beginning of the period. It was called “The Death of Manolete,” a journalist’s awed account of a bull killing a legendary bullfighter during a corrida in Spain. Manolete’s footwork was magnetic and flawless and his cape work was a study in perfection as the great-horned beast and the clown-faced matador performed a demonic ballet to the joyous applause of the crowds. But on that day, the prodigies of Manolete met the instinctive genius of a bull bred for combat, and the goriness was terrible and forgotten by no one in attendance. I told Gene that he made us write an essay about what Manolete must have felt that day, or what the bull felt or what the men and women felt who watched in horror as Manolete was carried out on a stretcher.

“You wrote about how the bull felt,” Gene said. “The only one who ever did. That’s when I spotted you.”

On weekends, as I reminded Gene, he began to invite me to go “rambling” and we explored Charleston, Savannah, Bluffton, and Edisto Island. “You introduced me to every antique dealer in the Low Country,” I told him, including Mr. Schindler, whom I visited often during my cadet days at The Citadel. He always called me “the professor’s boy,” and his refinement and courtesy seemed to be native shrubs of Charleston itself. Those trips sealed Gene’s and my friendship forever and opened up a world I never imagined existed. “The basketball season started,” I continued, “and you always drove part of the team in your car on road trips. I always sat next to you in the front seat. You made those trips wonderful adventures for all of us.”

“After the first game I teased you about being a star,” Gene said. “You blushed down your toes. I said, ‘Lawdy, Lawdy, imagine little ol’ Gene Norris teaching a real star in my classroom. Praise the Lord, I’m not worthy of such an honor.’ ”

“You were a pain in the ass.”

“But I didn’t teach astronomy,” he continued, ignoring me. “I knew nothing about the heavenly bodies. What was I supposed to do with an actual star sitting in the front row of my classes? Buy a telescope? Read up on Galileo?”

In December 1961, Gene accompanied the basketball team on its annual road trip to Myrtle Beach. I stayed with the Diminich family, who owned an Italian restaurant named Roma where I tasted both garlic and olive oil for the first time in my life. Gene enjoyed the shrimp scampi so much that he served it at dinner parties for the rest of his life. Gene picked me up after I attended Mass with the Diminich family on Sunday morning and drove me to the Chesterfield Inn for lunch. Myrtle Beach is a shoddy, unplanned city that looks like it killed all its architects before it approved a master plan for its construction. But Gene and his family had stayed at the elegant Chesterfield Inn for as long as he could remember. Guests ate on real china and Gene had to instruct me on which utensil to use as impeccably dressed waiters served the meal. He taught me how to unfold my napkin and spread it on my lap. The crowd was hushed and appreciative as they conversed in murmurous tones at the tables around us. According to Mr. Norris, the Chesterfield reminded him of an inn in London where he had stayed for two weeks.

“Ah, England. Ah, England. There’s such beauty there, Pat. Beauty beyond my powers to describe. How is your Dover sole?”

“It’s great, Mr. Norris. I love Dover sole.”

“That’s good to know. But you aren’t eating Dover sole, boy. That’s a South Carolina flounder with a gussied-up, royal name.”

“The biscuits sure are good,” I said.

“When you are enjoying a superb cuisine in a marvelous restaurant like this one, elevate your language, Pat. Make your conversation fresh and exciting. Speak about the noble art of bread making. These biscuits are the grand result of hundreds of years of trial and error. At the table, bring up ideas, talk philosophy. To be boring is not just a sin; it’s a crime.”

“These biscuits sure are good, Mr. Norris,” I said, and he laughed with pleasure.

“Scalawag. What am I going to do about you, scalawag?”

The rest of the team had left early for Beaufort, and Mr. Norris drove down Highway 17 at a leisurely pace, taking time to show me the antebellum homes in the small coastal town of Georgetown and lamenting the fact that all the antique stores were closed up on the Sabbath. Passing by the Sunset Lodge, he commented dryly that it was the largest whorehouse in South Carolina and one of its most popular tourist destinations. Wide-eyed with curiosity, I stared at the unimpressive motor lodge, half expecting volcanic smoke to rise out of the provenance of such corruption. I stared hard at those contaminated grounds hoping that scantily clad beauties with For Sale signs hanging from their necks would prance into view.

“This place even smells funny,” I said to Mr. Norris.

“You ain’t smelling no women, son,” he said. “That’s the paper mill we just passed in Georgetown.”

A mist was rising off the Santee River as we crossed the bridge heading toward Charleston.



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