

Western Carolina University's Sixth Annual Spring Literary Festival April 7-10, 2008

WCU's Sixth Annual Spring Literary Festival will feature Lee Smith, Barbara Bates Smith, Ron Rash, Pat Conroy, Russell Banks, Thomas Lux, Gloria Vando, Joseph Bathanti, Sarah Lindsay, Carolyn Beard Whitlow, Cathy Smith-Bowers and the Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet Series, and Dagoberto Gilb. All events are free and open to the public.

Monday, April 7

4:00 pm - Coulter Auditorium

Lee Smith and Ron Rash discuss their novels *On Agate Hill* and *The World Made Straight*.

7:30 pm - Coulter Auditorium

Novelist Lee Smith reads from *On Agate Hill*. Performance of *On Agate Hill* by Barbara Bates Smith and Jeff Sebens immediately follows.

Tuesday, April 8

4:00 pm - UC Theatre

Poet Thomas Lux reads from his work.

7:30 pm - UC Theatre

Author Dagoberto Gilb reads from his work.

Wednesday, April 9

4:00 pm - Coulter Auditorium

Poet's Panel: Joseph Bathanti, Sarah Lindsay, Carolyn Beard Whitlow

7:30 pm - Coulter Auditorium

Novelist Pat Conroy reads from his work.

Thursday, April 10

12:00 pm - UC Theatre

Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poets Series
Cathy Smith Bowers, presiding

4:00 pm - Coulter Auditorium

Poet Gloria Vando reads from her work.

7:30 pm - Coulter Auditorium

Novelist Russell Banks reads from his work.



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sixth annual LITERARY FESTIVAL WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY



Hazel Larsen Archer, "Elizabeth Jennerjahn
at Black Mountain College," ca. 1950.
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Reader's Guide



Pat Conroy

Pat Conroy was born on October 26, 1945, in Atlanta, Georgia, to a young career military officer from Chicago and a Southern beauty from Alabama, whom Conroy often credits for his love of language. He was the first of seven children. Since the family had to move many times to different military bases around the South, Conroy changed schools frequently, finally attending the Citadel Military Academy in Charleston,

South Carolina, upon his father's insistence. While still a student, he wrote and then published his first book, *The Boo*, a tribute to a beloved teacher.

After graduation, Conroy taught English in Beaufort, where he met and married a young woman with two children, a widow of the Vietnam War. He then accepted a job teaching underprivileged children in a one-room schoolhouse on Daufuskie Island, a remote island off the South Carolina shore. After a year, Conroy was fired for his unconventional teaching practices—such as his unwillingness to allow corporal punishment of his students—and for his general lack of respect for the school's administration. Conroy evened the score when he exposed the racism and appalling conditions his students endured with publication of *The Water Is Wide* in 1972. The book won Conroy a humanitarian award from the National Education Association and was made into the feature film *Conrack*, starring Jon Voight.

Conroy then moved to Atlanta, where he wrote *The Great Santini*, which was published in 1976. This autobiographical work, later made into a powerful film starring Robert Duvall, explores the conflicts of his childhood, particularly his confusion over his love and loyalty to an abusive and often-dangerous father.

The Citadel became the subject of his next novel, *The Lords of Discipline*, published in 1980. The novel exposes the school's harsh military discipline, racism, and sexism. This book, too, was made into a film.

Conroy moved from Atlanta to Rome, where he began *The Prince of Tides*, which, when published in 1986, became his most successful book. The book was made into a highly successful feature film directed by Barbra Streisand, who also starred in the film opposite Nick Nolte, whose performance won him an Oscar nomination.

Bibliography

The Pat Conroy Cookbook, 2004

My Losing Season, 2002

Beach Music, 1995

The Great Santini, 1976

The Prince of Tides, 1986

The Lords of Discipline, 1980

The Water Is Wide, 1972

The Boo, 1970

The Great Santini Plot Summary

The Great Santini depicts the family of a Marine Corp Colonel, Bull Meecham. Because Meecham's wife Lillian was raised in the South and he was raised in the North, they fuss over how their children should be raised. He wants them to be Marines and be tough; she wants them to be southern belles and southern gentlemen.

The book unfolds with the family having to move because Meecham has been transferred to a Marine base in South Carolina after having been gone for a year in a war. When he gets back, he complains that his wife has made his children seem weak in turning them into belles and gentleman instead of Marines. The novel details how his children first rebel under his influence before coming to terms with his sudden death.

The Great Santini Discussion Questions

1. What are your first impressions of Bull? Lillian? Ben? Mary Ann? Karen? Matt?
2. Besides the fact that he is a Marine, why do you think Bull is so hard on his family?
3. What role does religion play in the book? Why?
4. Describe Ben's relationship with Toomer.
5. Why do you think Ben has such difficulty standing up to his father?
6. Why do things start to escalate for Ben after he is kicked off of the basketball team?
7. How do you feel about the main characters at the end of the book?
8. In your opinion, what happens to the Meecham family after they leave Ravenel?

The Water is Wide Plot Summary

Pat Conroy's autobiographical novel *The Water is Wide* is the story about a young schoolteacher dealing with the trials of teaching at Yamacraw Island in during the 1970s. The main character, Conroy, or "Conrack" as many of his students call him, writes about his

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struggles as a teacher in an all African-American class in the racist deep South. The title, *The Water is Wide*, is an appropriate because it symbolizes how Conroy arrives to his classroom everyday as well as the gap between the prejudiced ideas of the characters. At school, Conroy struggles to teach the young black students that there is life outside of Yamacraw by helping them understand that they can overcome the trials and tribulations of their childhood. Conroy also struggles with the principal's attitude and disciplinary actions directed at the students. Conroy finds her actions unhealthy and restricting to the students' education. As a result of Mrs. Brown's behavior, Conroy becomes committed to teaching the children they can surpass the negative boundaries created around them. He is able to gain the students' trust and teach them to look outside the narrow box of Yamacraw.

[The Water is Wide Discussion Questions](#)

1. Why is Conroy so relentless in trying to get a job teaching on Yamacraw Island?
2. In Conroy's youth, he described himself as a bit of a racist; do you think that trying to pursue the job on Yamacraw Island is his way of repenting for the so-called "nigger knocking" that he participated in when he was a teenager?
3. In April of 1968, Conroy experiences an event that was life changing. What was the event, and how does he deal with racism now that it was directed towards his race?
4. As the story progress, you see that Conroy has made a connection with his students; he has noticed an improvement in all of them in that they all are making an attempt to learn. Does the administration approve of his unorthodox styles of teaching? Why or why not?
5. During the middle of the school year, Conroy falls in love with Barbara Jones. Compare and contrast his attitude and willingness to teach before and after his marriage. Can you tell any differences in the way he approaches the situation?
6. How does Dr. Piedmont deal with the school on Yamacraw Island in comparison to the rest of the schools in the District? How does Conroy feel about the treatment that Dr. Piedmont gives his school? What is the meaning behind Conroy trying to teach his students how to swim?
7. What is the meaning behind Conroy trying to teach his students how to swim? Does their learning to swim reflect their learning style in the classroom?
8. Do you think the fact that Conroy is the first teacher to successfully teach the island children and the fact that he is white have any negative effects on the way the Island natives would view the teaching styles of someone else, for instance Mrs. Brown?



Lee Smith

Lee Smith was born in 1944 in Grundy, Virginia, a small coal-mining town in the Blue Ridge Mountains, 10 miles from the Kentucky border. Having grown up in the Appalachian mountains of southwestern Virginia, a nine-year-old Lee Smith was already writing and selling, for a nickel apiece, stories about her neighbors in the coal boomtown of Grundy. The sense of place infusing her novels reveals her insight into and empathy for the people and culture of Appalachia.

It was 1966 during her senior year at Hollins University that Smith's literary career began. She submitted an early draft of a coming-of-age novel to a Book-of-the-Month Club contest and was awarded one of twelve fellowships. That novel, *The Last Day the Dog Bushes Bloomed*, became Smith's first published work of fiction two years later.

Following her graduation from Hollins, Smith married James Seay, a poet and teacher. Smith accompanied her husband from university to university as his teaching assignments changed. She worked for newspapers and raised two sons, but found little time for her own fiction. By 1971 she had completed her second novel, *Something in the Wind*, which garnered favorable reviews. Her next novel, *Fancy Strut* (1973), was widely praised by critics as a comic masterpiece.

While writing *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Smith says she discovered an "intrusive, down-home narrative voice" that allowed her to write about the kind of people she had known in Grundy, using an Appalachian dialect without sounding like an actor from *Hee Haw*. She has expanded on this colloquial voice in each of her subsequent works.

Smith has gained a wider audience with the New York Times-bestseller *The Last Girls*, which was inspired by a raft trip she took with other Hollins girls down the Mississippi River in 1966. *The Last Girls* was also a Good Morning America Book Club Pick. Since 1968 she has published eleven novels and three collections of short stories and has received numerous writing awards.

[Selected Bibliography](#)

On Agate Hill, 2006
The Last Girls, 2002
Saving Grace, 1995
Fair and Tender Ladies, 1988
Oral History, 1983
Black Mountain Breakdown, 1980
Fancy Strut, 1973
Something in the Wind, 1971

[On Agate Hill Plot Summary](#)

Mingling the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction with that of a woman's search for meaning, Lee Smith upholds the South's veneration of storytelling in her novel *On Agate Hill*. The novel chronicles the events in life of the protagonist, Molly Petree, and explores the Civil War's undeniable effect on life in the South. Molly, an orphan, finds shelter in the remains of a plantation called Agate Hill in which she resides with her Uncle Junius. Her diary serves as the frame for the novel, and it is through Molly's own words as well as letters, ballads, and rhymes that we discover the secrets of her life. Agate Hill, though steeped in her childhood innocence and play, is not a safe refuge for Molly, and when her Uncle Junius falls prey to the wiles of the scheming Selena, Molly is thrown into turmoil.

Just as circumstances reach a boiling point, an unlikely hero shrouded in secrecy appears, and Molly leaves Agate Hill for Greenwood Academy, a school for young women. Here, Molly finds a place for herself through education, and despite the ill wishes of the headmistress, she thrives socially and emotionally. However, scandal seems to follow Molly once again: she and her beloved friend Agnes remove to the remote Appalachian town of Grassy Creek, where they teach school.

Although several bachelors attempt to gain Molly's hand, Henderson Hanes succeeds in garnering an engagement. At first, Molly is dazzled by his wealth and his seeming sophistication. In time, she finds that her ambitions have changed; she does not simply want to settle for a fine house and a chic honeymoon but longs for her very own "love story" to write for her childhood friend Mary White, to whom she still sends letters. Molly abandons Henderson for the disreputable, charming and charismatic Jacky Jarvis, with whom she falls in love and marries.

Molly's final journey takes her to Agate Hill, the place of her childhood that is haunted by her various "ghosts." Through her strife and final journey to Agate Hill, the secrets of Molly's past are revealed in a stunning and cleansing resolution. Molly's fate seems to be intertwined with that of the South, and through her eyes we are capable of resurrecting the Old South.

[On Agate Hill Discussion Questions](#)

1. As a girl Molly has many speculations about Agate Hill. It is the place that she has lived all her life. What is it about her home that makes her who she is? Why is the cubbyhole in her house so important to her and what does she see when she is there?
2. What happens to Molly at Gatewood Academy that changes her? Does she become a different person in a better way, or are her changes for the worst?

3. Throughout the story, Molly makes it known that she does not want to marry. She does not want to be like all the others and just get engaged to someone because she is supposed to. What changes her mind? Why?
4. The relationship between Agnes and Molly is very important. Agnes plays the mother figure that Molly never really had. Is it possible that Agnes played a part in Molly changing her mind about getting married? How does their relationship influence Molly?
5. At the end of the book, why does Molly become so softhearted toward Simon Black? Why does Selena not take care of her son before she dies?

[Oral History Plot Summary](#)

In the book *Oral History*, a college student named Jennifer decides to research her family for an oral history project. Jennifer doesn't have much information about her real mother's side of the family, but she has heard stories about curses and a house being haunted. Her teacher convinces her to visit her family and see if the stories are really true. Jennifer heads to Hoot Owl Holler, which is where her mother's side of the family is from. The family is a mountain family who has lived in the same area for generations. Jennifer learns the story each member has to tell. It is a story about family and life in a small mountain town and how the families live and deal with their problems.

[Oral History Discussion Questions](#)

1. Once Almarine's land was considered haunted. Why does his family never relocate?
2. Since the reader can interpret that Ora Mae had distaste for Dory, why did she fail to give Richard Burlage's letter to Dory that asks her to go back to Virginia with him?
3. Explain why you think Billy continued to sit in the porch rocking chair after his divorce and Pearl's death?
4. The latter part of the book depicts the Depression. Describe how the town and the way of life for most of the families are affected.
5. How is school described in *Oral History*? How does it affect students' education?
6. Why does Dory kill herself?