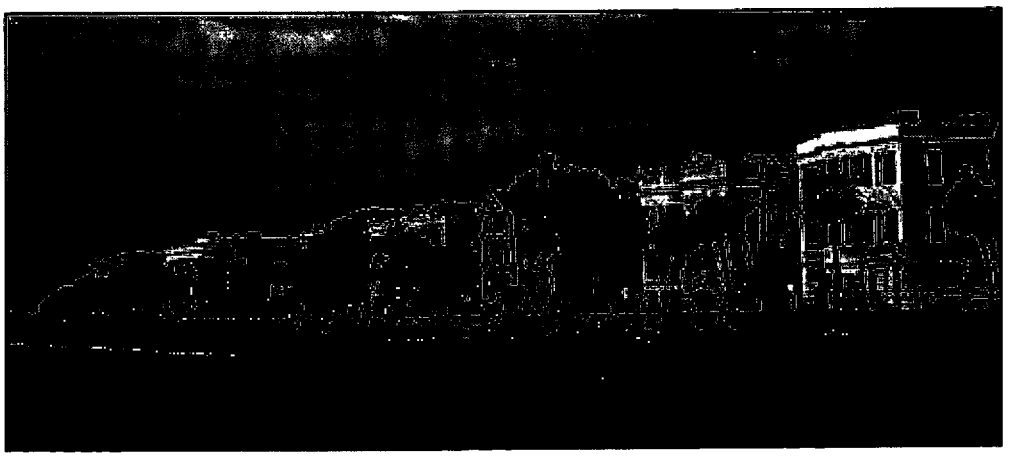
Books by Pat Conroy | South of Broad Reader's Guide



Reading Group Questions and Discussion Topics for South of Broad

- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?

- 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"?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- Discuss the scene in which Leo and Molly rescue the porpoise. What does the event symbolize?
- Why do you think the discoveries about Leo's mother and Monsignor Max begin and end the novel? What theme do these incidents convey?
- 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?

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South of Broad (Conroy)

Summary | Author Bio | Book Reviews | Discussion Questions | Full Version | Print

South of Broad

Pat Conroy, 2009
Knopf Doubleday
528 pp.
ISBN-13: 9780385344074

Summary

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 ten, 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. (*From the publisher.*)

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South of Broad (Conroy) - Author Bio

Summary | Author Bio | Book Reviews | Discussion Questions | Full Version | Print

Author Bio

- Birth—October 26, 1945
- Where—Atlanta, Georgia, USA
- Education—B.A., The Citadel
- Currently—lives in San Francisco, California, and Fripp Island, South, Carolina

Pat Conroy was born in Atlanta, Georgia, to a young career military officer from Chicago and a Southern beauty from Alabama, whom Pat often credits for his love of language. He was the first of seven children.

His father was a violent and abusive man, a man whose biggest mistake, Conroy once said, was allowing a novelist to grow up in his home, a novelist "who remembered every single violent act.... My father's violence is the central fact of my art and my life." Since the family had to move many times to different military bases around the South, Pat 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, Pat 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 the 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.

Writings

Following the birth of a daughter, the Conroys moved to Atlanta, where Pat wrote his novel, *The Great Santini*, published in 1976. This autobiographical work, later made into a powerful film starring Robert Duvall, explored the conflicts of his childhood, particularly his confusion over his love and loyalty to an abusive and often dangerous father.

The publication of a book that so painfully exposed his family's secret brought Conroy to 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, racism and sexism. This book, too, was made into a feature film.

Pat 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 made into a highly successful feature film directed by Barbra Streisand, who also starred in the film opposite Nick Nolte, whose brilliant 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. The story took place in South Carolina and Rome, and also reached back in time to the Holocaust and the Vietnam War. This book, too, was a tremendous international bestseller.

While on tour for *Beach Music*, members of Conroy's Citadel basketball team began appearing, one by one, at his book signings around the country. When his then-wife served him divorce papers while he was still on the road, Conroy realized that his team members had come back into his life just when he needed them most. And so 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 flashbacks of his childhood and insights into his early aspirations as a writer, is *My Losing Season*, Conroy's seventh book and his first work of nonfiction since *The Water is Wide*.

South of Broad, published in 2009, 14 years after *Beach Music*, tells the story of friendships, first formed in high school, that span two decades.

He currently lives in Fripp Island, South Carolina with his wife, the novelist Cassandra King. (*Adapted from the author's website and Barnes & Noble.*)

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Book Reviews

South of Broad is a big sweeping novel of friendship and marriage—and, perhaps, vintage Pat Conroy... Conroy is an immensely gifted stylist, and there are passages in the novel that are lush and beautiful and precise. No one can describe a tide or a sunset with his lyricism and exactitude. My sense is that the millions of readers who cherish Conroy's work won't be at all disappointed—and nor will anyone who owns stock in Kleenex.

Chris Bohjalian - Washington Post

Echoing some themes from his earlier novels, Conroy fleshes out the almost impossibly dramatic details of each of the friends' lives in this vast, intricate story, and he reveals truths about love, lust, classism, racism, religion, and what it means to be shaped by a particular place, be it Charleston, South Carolina, or anywhere else in the U.S. —*Mark Knoblauch*

Booklist

Charleston, S.C., gossip columnist Leopold Bloom King narrates a paean to his hometown and friends in Conroy's first novel in 14 years. In the late '60s and after his brother commits suicide, then 18-year-old Leo befriends a cross-section of the city's inhabitants: scions of Charleston aristocracy; Appalachian orphans; a black football coach's son; and an astonishingly beautiful pair of twins, Sheba and Trevor Poe, who are evading their psychotic father. The story alternates between 1969, the glorious year Leo's coterie stormed Charleston's social, sexual and racial barricades, and 1989, when Sheba, now a movie star, enlists them to find her missing gay brother in AIDS-ravaged San Francisco. Too often the not-so-witty repartee and the narrator's awed voice (he is very fond of superlatives) overwhelm the stories surrounding the group's love affairs and their struggles to protect one another from dangerous pasts. Some characters are tragically lost to the riptides of love and obsession, while others emerge from the frothy waters of sentimentality and nostalgia as exhausted as most readers are likely to be. Fans of Conroy's florid prose and earnest melodramas are in for a treat.

Publishers Weekly

"Kids, I'm teaching you to tell a story. It's the most important lesson you'll ever learn," says the protagonist of Conroy's first novel in 14 years (since 1995's Beach Music). Switching between the 1960s and the 1980s, the narrative follows a group of friends whose relationship began in Charleston, SC. The narrator is Leopold Bloom King (his mother was a Joyce scholar), a likable but troubled kid who goes from having one best friend, his brother, to having no friends after a tragedy, to having, suddenly, a gang, of which he is perhaps not the leader but certainly the glue. Conroy continues to demonstrate his skill at presenting the beauty and the ugliness of the South, holding both up for inspection and, at times, admiration. He has not lost his touch for writing stories that are impossible to put down; the fast pace and shifting settings grip the reader even as the story occasionally veers toward the unbelievable.

Verdict: Filled with the lyrical, funny, poignant language that is Conroy's birthright, this is a work Conroy fans will love. Libraries should buy multiple copies. —*Amy Watts, Univ. of Georgia Lib., Athens*

Library Journal

First novel in 14 years from the gifted spinner of Southern tales (Beach Music, 1995, etc.)—a tail-wagging shaggy dog at turns mock-epic and gothic, beautifully written throughout. The title refers, meaningfully, to a section of Charleston, S.C., and, as with so many Southern tales, one great story begets another and another. This one starts most promisingly: "Nothing happens by accident." Indeed. The Greeks knew that, and so does young Leopold Bloom King. It is on Bloomsday (June 16) 1969 that 18-year-old Leo learns his mother had once been a nun. Along the way, new neighbors appear, drugs make their way into the idyllic landscape and two new orphans turn up "behind the cathedral on Broad Street." The combination of all these disparate elements bears the unmistakable makings of a spirit-shaping saga. The year 1969 is a heady one, of course, with the Summer of Love still fresh in memory, but Altamont on the way and Vietnam all around. Working a paper route along the banks of the Ashley River and discovering the poetry of place ("a freshwater river let mankind drink and be refreshed, but a saltwater river let it return to first things"), Leo gets himself in a heap of trouble, commemorated years later by the tsk-tsking of the locals. But he also finds out something about how things work ("Went out with a lot of women when I was young," says one Nestor; "I could take the assholes, but the heartbreakers could afflict some real damage.") and who makes them work right—or not. Leo's classic coming-of-age tale sports, in the bargain, a king-hell hurricane. Conroy is a natural at weaving great skeins of narrative, and this one will prove a great pleasure to his many fans.

Kirkus Reviews

The New York Times

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Reunited

By ROY HOFFMAN AUG. 20, 2009

The anguished and rhapsodic men who narrate Pat Conroy's novels may not be neighbors in the South Carolina Lowcountry, but they share the same psychic territory. In roiling confessions, in soaring prose, they tell of damaged families and desperate efforts to rescue their loved ones. When Tom Wingo of "The Prince of Tides" says, "My wound is geography," and Jack McCall of "Beach Music" declares that "no one walks out of his family without reprisals," they not only echo each other, they mirror aspects of their novels' plots.

"Beach Music" was jolted into motion by a suicide, and so is Conroy's fifth novel, "South of Broad." Its narrator, Leo King, is a newspaper columnist who has fought his own demons on a mental ward. "Somehow," homely Leo says, recalling his family's reaction to the death of his "dazzling" older brother, Stephen, who slit his throat and wrists with a razor, "we managed to survive that day, but none of us ever experienced the deliverance of recovery. I realize you can walk away from anything but a wounded soul."

With the Citadel, the Roman Catholic Church and "palm-haunted" Charleston as Conroy's familiar backdrops, "South of Broad" — named for the locale of historic houses and blueblood sensibilities near the Battery — sets out

to probe the lives of Stephen and Leo's family and friends. The novel alternates between 1969, when a group of high-school seniors — black and white, straight and gay, Appalachian-poor and old-Charleston-rich — become linked through Leo, and 1989, when they meet up again, a plot device reminiscent of "The Big Chill," the popular 1983 ensemble film, also set in South Carolina.

Leo tries to interweave his "deliverance of recovery" with portraits of these friends, including resilient Ike Jefferson, among the first black students to play football for Peninsula High, who later becomes the city's first black police chief; and the histrionic twins Trevor and Sheba Poe, derided by their alcoholic mother in early scenes as "a faggot and a harlot." Sheba returns two decades later as an Academy Award-winning actress, a sexy star who seems a throwback to an earlier era.

There are gorgeous and heartbreaking scenes in "South of Broad" — Leo's tales of his James Joyce-loving mother's former life in a convent and his parents' strange romance; his recollection of a languid day spent floating, "tide-carried and tide-possessed," on an inner tube with the Poe twins; an account of his discovery, on a mission to San Francisco to find the gravely ill Trevor, of a young stranger who has succumbed to AIDS in a seedy hotel.

But the mysteries of character — the revelation of how these teenagers are transformed into remarkable adults — remain just beyond Leo's grasp. The decades his old companions are offstage, from approximately ages 18 to 38, are pivotal. Although they share their histories through pages of colorful dialogue, the "reeflike accretions that build up friendships" are often obscured. By the time the novel is transformed into a thriller — "The city of palms . . . turns into a place of galvanic nightmare" — their concerns have come to feel tangential.

The technique Conroy has used so successfully in earlier works — a lone storyteller urgently sifting and interpreting a chaotic world — becomes constricting here. Our view of Leo's friends is foreshortened by his obsession

with "the great arching motion of my life." We often miss their own urgent need to heal, to press on. It's as if Leo, the newspaper columnist, has churned through this material too many times before, leaving it sapped of its vitality.

Conroy remains a magician of the page. As a writer, he owns the South Carolina coast. But the descriptions of the tides and the palms, the confessions of love and loss, the memories "evergreen and verdant" set side by side with evocations of the "annoyed heart" have simply been done better — by the author himself.

SOUTH OF BROAD

By Pat Conroy

514 pp. Nan A. Talese/Doubleday. $29.95

Roy Hoffman, a staff writer for The Press-Register in Mobile, Ala., is the author of a novel, "Chicken Dreaming Corn."

A version of this review appears in print on , on page BR22 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Reunited.

Book Review: 'South of Broad' by Pat Conroy

By Chris Bohjalian
Special to The Washington Post
Tuesday, August 11, 2009

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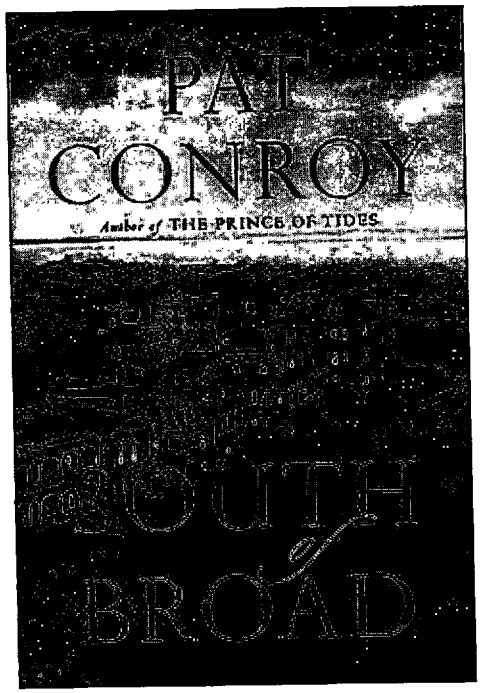

Enlarge Photo

When I was on Page 322 of Pat Conroy's 514-page new novel, "South of Broad," I began to feel that the characters were crying a lot, which wouldn't have bothered me if the characters were children. They're not. So, I began noting in the margins each time an adult let loose with the waterworks. The finding? Characters cry, sob, tear, weep, wail and well up on the following pages: 322, 330, 340, 354, 367, 382, 393, 395, 396, 403, 418, 419, 420, 429, 439, 440, 444, 448 (twice), 452, 462, 463, 465, 466, 467, 477, 490 (twice) and 493. In addition to the main players in the novel, Meryl Streep is tearful on Page 447 and God weeps on Page 476. Bear in mind, these are only the tears I tracked in the last 200 pages of the tale. Hurricane Hugo, the storm that ravaged Charleston, S.C., in 1989 and figures prominently in the novel's final pages, might not have dumped quite as much water on the city as Conroy's characters.

It's possible that the sobbing and sniveling occasionally felt inauthentic to me because I am a priggish New Englander who is uncomfortable with what may be a Southern penchant for drama. But as a novelist, I know all too well that there are few easier ways to wrest sniffles from a reader than to have a couple of real men cry like babies in each other's arms or a good woman stoically sniff back her tears. Been there, done that.

In all fairness, "South of Broad" is a big sweeping novel of friendship and marriage -- and, perhaps, vintage Pat Conroy. In other words, a lot of that crying is justified.

With the Citadel, the Roman Catholic Church and "palm-haunted" Charleston as Conroy's familiar backdrops, "South of Broad" — named for the locale of historic houses and blueblood sensibilities near the Battery — sets out to probe the lives of Stephen and Leo's family and friends. The novel alternates between 1969, when a group of high-school seniors — black and white, straight and gay, Appalachian-poor and old-Charleston-rich — become linked through Leo, and 1989, when they meet up again, a plot device reminiscent of "The Big Chill," the popular 1983 ensemble film, also set in South Carolina.

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Roy Hoffman, a staff writer for The Press-Register in Mobile, Ala., is the author of a novel, "Chicken Dreaming Corn."

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The tale begins on June 16, 1969, when high school junior Leopold Bloom King is asked by his mother, the school principal, to befriend some students who will be starting there the following September. That day he meets the companions he will take into adulthood: dirt-poor brother and sister orphans, Starla and Niles Whitehead, who are handcuffed to chairs; preternaturally charismatic twins Sheba and Trevor Poe; aristocratic brother and sister Chad and Fraser Rutledge, Carolinians of impeccable breeding; Chad's equally patrician girlfriend, Molly Huger; and Ike Jefferson, among the first African Americans to be integrated into the public school.

They will all become the greatest of friends, class and race lines becoming irrelevant except as good-natured ribbing. As adults, Leo will marry Starla, Chad will marry Molly and Niles will marry Fraser. (Fans of the classic TV sitcom "Frasier" are going to pause on the title of Chapter 12. I know I did.) Sheba will go to Hollywood and become a movie star with a mouth like a sewer and the sort of libido that men always want in their women, while Trevor will go to San Francisco where he will become the toast of the gay community until he winds up HIV-positive.

It would be impossible to summarize all that occurs to the group in this space, but suffice to say their adventures are extensive and, often enough, tear-jerking. They win (and lose) big football games, they venture to San Francisco to retrieve Trevor when he is ill, they try to protect themselves from Sheba and Trevor's psychotic killer of a father. Leo frets over his estranged wife, a woman damaged beyond repair by her childhood as an orphan. And then there's that hurricane.

Meanwhile, adding a penumbra of sadness to Leo's story is the suicide of his elder brother. Leo was only 8 when he found his brother, "his arteries severed, dead in the bathtub we both shared, my father's straight razor on the tiles of our bathroom floor." Leo will spend a large chunk of his childhood first in mental institutions and then taking the fall for a crime he didn't commit.

Much is made of the idea that Leo's mother has named him after James Joyce's Leopold Bloom and all of these friends find each other on the very day when Joyce's "Ulysses" is set. But "South of Broad" seems to be a reworking of the Joyce masterpiece only in that Leo learns "the power of accident and magic in human affairs . . . the unanswerable powers of fate, and how one day can shift the course of ten thousand lives."

I should note that even though I felt stage-managed by Conroy's heavy hand, I still turned the pages with relish. Conroy is an immensely gifted stylist, and there are passages in the

novel that are lush and beautiful and precise. No one can describe a tide or a sunset with his lyricism and exactitude. My sense is that the millions of readers who cherish Conroy's work won't be at all disappointed -- and nor will anyone who owns stock in Kleenex.

Bohjalian is the author of 12 novels, including "Midwives," "The Double Bind" and "Skeletons at the Feast."

BOOK REVIEW

'South of Broad'

In his first novel since 1995, Pat Conroy seems to have lost his powerful narrative voice.

August 11, 2009 | Scott Martelle

Deep friendships are forged from a wide range of factors -- common interests, common careers, common heritage, even common friends. But the friendships that take root in the soul tend to be forged by fire -- a shared trauma, a shared survival, a shared confrontation with evil. In those relationships, outsiders often can't sense the depth of the bond or understand why it holds fast against logic.

Such friendships form the core of Pat Conroy's new novel, "South of Broad," his first since 1995's "Beach Music." That's a long dry spell even for a novelist legendary for dry spells. In a career that began with "The Boo" in 1970, and carried through such bestsellers as "The Great Santini" in 1976, "The Lords of Discipline" in 1980 and "The Prince of Tides" in 1986, Conroy has long gone five or six years between novels.

This more extended delay has not been good for "South of Broad."

Conroy built his reputation using a lyrical and powerful narrative voice to spin stories often from events in his own life and that of his combative family. At his best, as in the opening chapter of "Beach Music," Conroy sweeps you up in a whirlwind of language and propels you through time and place so persuasively that you take in stride highly improbable plot twists (the appearance of a tiger at an opportune plot turn in "The Prince of Tides" comes to mind).

FROM THE ARCHIVES

'The Water Is Wide,' but not very deep

January 28, 2006

But with "South of Broad," Conroy's muscle has gone lax. You don't get caught up in his narrative so much as you commit to it. Tragic twists just appear, lacking the kind of buildup that makes them work. The net effect is the surprises, even when not telegraphed, don't surprise. They just click over like another mile on the odometer.

MORE STORIES ABOUT

Pat Conroy

Part of the problem is the pacing of the story itself. Hurricane Hugo blasts into the novel near the end as a cataclysmic event, unleashing a storm surge that is both devastating and cleansing, at least for plot purposes. But Hugo, which hit in 1989, has been supplanted by Katrina as our collective notion of what calamity is, and what it can do to a city. That, and a gay character's infection with the virus that causes AIDS, leaves "South of Broad" feeling like a leftover from the '90s.

The story is built around the life of Charleston resident Leopold Bloom King, named by his Joyce-worshiping mother and damned by circumstances. His older brother, Steve, killed himself -- Leo discovered the body in the bloody bathtub -- and neither Leo nor his parents ever really recovered. Add in a chance moment in which Leo let himself be a patsy -- holding drugs for a high school acquaintance as a police raid descends -- and his life is set for ruin.

He becomes a beloved local newspaper columnist in Charleston, in part due to the circle of friends he assembles in 1969 during his senior year in high school. There are the Poe twins, Sheba and her gay brother, Trevor, both sexually abused as youngsters by their father and sexually precocious as teens (Trevor is the AIDS patient); Ike Jefferson, Leo's black best friend in the still-segregated South; siblings Niles and Starla Whitehead, recurrent orphaned runaways from the mountain country; the tomboy Fraser Rutledge and her silver-spoon chewing brother Chadworth Rutledge X (they like the name "Chadworth" in the Rutledge family); and Molly Huger, the down-to-earth aristocrat's daughter for whom Leo develops a lifelong crush.

Conroy reels his teenage characters through cliche showdowns of racial and class divisions, trying to make those broad social issues the backdrop to the personal stories in the narrative -- including the recurring presence of the shadowy and vicious Poe father. But Conroy doesn't have anything new or

interesting to say about the racial and class divides. And too many of his characters are set up as types instead of fully fledged people, incapable, at times, of anything more than the most mundane of dialogues.

Skip ahead to the summer of 1989, in the weeks before Hugo hit, and the friends' lives have altered considerably. Sheba returns to Charleston as an A-list actress very publicly sleeping her way through Hollywood. Leo has married Starla, who is even more damaged than he and disappears for as long as a year at a time. Fraser has married Niles over the strenuous objections of her class-conscious family. Chadworth has married Molly, Leo's not-so-secret love, but is a profligate philanderer; and Ike, married to a fellow cop, is about to become Charleston's first African American police chief.

Sheba has returned to town to enlist the old gang to help her find Trevor, who has gone missing in San Francisco; she fears he has died or been left homeless by his illness.

So the gang dutifully takes her borrowed private jet (the reward of intimate favors bestowed on a Hollywood producer) out West and hits the streets, where the twins' father also appears and pursues the friends, Trevor in tow, all the way back to Charleston. And when Hugo begins churning out in the Atlantic, you can feel the collision with evil like a bum knee reads a plummeting barometer.

Some of the old Conroy magic wells up in his description of the hurricane's arrival, capturing both the hubris of those who stay and the paralyzing terror unleashed by the power of sea and storm. But it's also telling that in a novel built around characters and friendships, the most engaged writing is about nature.

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SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Reunited

By ROY HOFFMAN AUG. 20, 2009

The anguished and rhapsodic men who narrate Pat Conroy's novels may not be neighbors in the South Carolina Lowcountry, but they share the same psychic territory. In roiling confessions, in soaring prose, they tell of damaged families and desperate efforts to rescue their loved ones. When Tom Wingo of "The Prince of Tides" says, "My wound is geography," and Jack McCall of "Beach Music" declares that "no one walks out of his family without reprisals," they not only echo each other, they mirror aspects of their novels' plots.

"Beach Music" was jolted into motion by a suicide, and so is Conroy's fifth novel, "South of Broad." Its narrator, Leo King, is a newspaper columnist who has fought his own demons on a mental ward. "Somehow," homely Leo says, recalling his family's reaction to the death of his "dazzling" older brother, Stephen, who slit his throat and wrists with a razor, "we managed to survive that day, but none of us ever experienced the deliverance of recovery. I realize you can walk away from anything but a wounded soul."