

How I Stalked My Prince of Tides

It began with a gift.

In 1987, my new husband and I moved from Kentucky to South Carolina. Before we left, my mother-in-law gave me a popular novel set along the coast of my new state. Having gone to college in South Carolina, she appreciated this novel's descriptions of the land and culture.

Years later, while I was going through cancer treatment, I found *The Prince of Tides* in a long-forgotten box. I have always been a reader, sometimes devouring a book in one day, but this time it took me a while to get started. I kept rereading the prologue, admiring the beautiful construction of the sentences. I was struck by how the author injected wonder into the story one moment and filled the page with dread the next. He had me studying the elegance of his execution rather than just rolling along with the plot.

I was prone to introspection that winter of my illness. I was only 28. If I had limited time, what would I want to accomplish?

I made a list. In no particular order, I wrote:

- 1) Trip around the world.
- 2) Own a convertible.
- 3) Write a novel.

When my treatment was over, my husband and I joined friends on a trek through Thailand and India. We flew always west eventually encircling the globe. A few months after our return, I bought a white used Miata.

My health continued to improve. Precious days ticked by moving me toward that five-year mark where cancer patients begin to believe in the future again.

One day, I received an unexpected delivery. Inside the box was a laptop with a note from my brother.

No excuses. Write that book.

I gathered the nerve to quit my public relations job at an art museum and set out to become a writer. I had written about visual art for years, so it was a natural transition to freelance writing. I had no problem getting assignments from editors who remembered my media releases.

As my portfolio of magazine clips grew, so did my attempts at writing fiction. I wrote a number of short stories and a novel that I felt had good bones but lacked something in execution. I took a fiction class and formed a writing group with other students who brought snippets of work they



admired. Often the name Pat Conroy came up. He had become a notorious figure by then, his work widely admired, his politics derided, his personal life a sad sore.

One night after writing group, I was drawn to my bookshelf where I tilted the familiar salt marsh cover of *The Prince of Tides* toward me and the Lowcountry slipped into my hands. Here again was that amazing prologue, a singularly beautiful piece of literature. If I could be a writer, I wanted to be descriptive like this Pat Conroy. I wanted such a felicity of language and the ability to paint fertile landscapes with words.

My group took a trip to a nearby burg to hear Pat Conroy speak. Unlike so many authors, he didn't read from his novels. He told stories. You could tell entertaining was in his DNA. He had an "aw shucks" way about him; *I'm one of you* his approach implied. Afterward, I waited in line for an hour before shyly offering my tattered book for his signature.

His performance that night made me realize that being an author wasn't just about writing. It was also about being a personality able to captivate an audience. I'd seen a number of authors speak, but until I saw Pat Conroy I'd never seen it done right.

My goal became to interview him. I contacted his publicist who sent me a galley copy of *My Losing Season*, his new book that was many months away from release. I pitched the story idea to my editor at *Charleston* magazine and she bought it.

I hadn't anticipated how difficult it would be to get in touch with the author. He didn't have a website and working through his publicist didn't pan out. I started contacting people I thought would know him. Folks at the SC Arts Commission claimed a connection, but refused me his number or address. Bookstore owners also felt the need to protect that information. That was when I saw the poster, a glorious stroke of fortune. Pat Conroy was to speak at the student center at University of South Carolina.

After his talk at USC, I boldly approached him before he could get behind the signing desk where he would be for an hour or more.

"Mr. Conroy," I blurted out. "I read *My Losing Season*. I'd love to interview you for *Charleston* magazine."

He turned to me. "Really? How did you get my new book?"

"Your publicist."

He smiled and his blue, blue eyes focused on me. Then he said, "Why of course young lady. I would be most pleased to have you interview me."

"I don't know how to get in touch with you, sir. Everybody feels as if they need to protect you."

He laughed at that and motioned for me to hand him my note pad. He scribbled down his number.

"Give me a call and we'll talk." Then his people whisked him away.



I spent the next few weeks reading his novels. I amassed a sizable file of articles on him and began to notice a pattern to his interviews. He spoke foremost of his family, his abusive father and frustrating mother, and how a traumatic childhood was a great asset to a writer. As a PR person, I appreciated his understanding of platform and how to stay on point, but I didn't want the same interview he had given to others. I read and formulated questions I felt had gone unasked.

I left my request for an interview on his answering machine. Weeks passed. I left more messages.

One day my phone rang and I was surprised to hear that precise, clipped voice.

"This is Pat Conroy. Would this be the tenacious Ms. McMahan who is looking to interview me?"

I always tried to speak with visual artists in their studios. To see a person's workspace allows for a better sense of them as an artist, so I asked if I could to talk him in person. He agreed and we set a date.

As I pulled up to his sea island home I was prepared, but nervous. Never before had I interviewed someone whose work I admired so much. I wanted to learn about how to be an author from this literary superstar.

The door was answered by his wife, novelist Cassandra King. Her wide, gentle smile seemed to say that I was welcome and I immediately felt better.

She showed me to the living room where I shook hands with my subject and we settled into a comfortable sofa. I pulled out my sleek new digital recorder and my note pad.

As I set up he said, "So how did you get this interview with me?"

I paused. He didn't remember meeting me or our telephone conversation?

"I met you after your lecture at USC. You gave me your phone number." He nodded slightly and I was glad to move on. "Is it okay if I tape this?"

"That will be fine. I've never seen one of those. What is that?"

"Digital recorder. You don't have to switch out tapes."

I fumbled with the controls. After a number of failed attempts, I silently cursed myself for not having practiced with it more than I had.

"Not to worry. I have my cassette recorder in the car," I said.

"And here I was prepared to be so impressed by you," he said. This startled me, but then I saw his eyes snap and a grin pull at the corners of his mouth.

Aware that his time was valuable I delved right in with questions. He was eloquent and forthcoming, but I noticed when he began to nudge the conversation in a direction I recognized.



I decided to take a chance. “I know that story from other articles I’ve read about you. Can you tell me something you haven’t told anyone else? Something new and fresh?”

He studied me and I thought I’d crossed the line. Then he said, “Let’s get out of here. I’ll give you my Beaufort tour.”

The floorboard of his luxury sedan was littered with fast food cups, newspapers and magazines.

“Just throw all that in the back,” he said.

As we headed toward the mainland I clicked on my trusty old recorder and began again with questions.

At one point he said, “You’re very prepared. Most people who interview me have read only one of my books at best.”

He talked about people showing up on his doorstep unannounced. Even though he lives in a gated community, numerous strangers rang his doorbell. I suddenly understood his earlier question about how I had gotten the interview. In his world, it paid to be cautious.

He talked about how he had no patience for writers who whined about the difficulty of writing. He insisted it was all good, from the solitude of creating to the speaking gigs to the hours of book signings. We talked about his recent foray in magazine writing for *Gourmet* and *Southern Living*. When I expressed surprise that he would do magazine work he simply said, “I see no downside to going to the finest restaurants, eating the best food and writing about it.”

He gave me the history, architecture and Hollywood tour of Beaufort. As his car crawled the heavily shaded streets of his chocolate box town, he pointed out local landmarks like the sturdy fireproof house and the home with the eye-lid window. We stopped at one Georgian-style structure he called The Cat lady House where hundreds of cats, both dead and alive, were found inside after the owner’s demise.

“Some were in the freezer,” he said. “You couldn’t write that stuff.”

He pointed out where the movies for *The Great Santini* and *The Prince of Tides* were shot. He showed me where his mother gave him a book party for his first novel. He took me to the cemetery where his parents lay. He spoke to the neighboring interred as if they were family. When we reached The Great Santini’s grave he said, “Hello, Dad.”

We spent the afternoon talking about the writing life and what makes good literature. He said to be prepared for readers to share their own painful stories. He also warned me to be cautious of self-censorship.

“We are our own worst censors. We won’t write anything that we think will hurt people, so we water things down. Don’t do that. Be brave. Write about things nobody is willing to talk about. That’s where story lives.”



I have interviewed Pat twice since. I suppose it is fair to say we are professional friends. Both he and Cassandra are always gracious to ask me about my own writing when I run into them at book events.

My day with Pat stoked my ambition. He made being an author seem like a logical dream. I wasn't crazy. I was a writer. That year I wrote my first novel. *Calling Home* rapidly found an agent, publisher and commercial success.

So, I didn't really stalk Pat Conroy. I just wanted to meet my literary idol and I went for it. I wanted to be a writer and he told me how do it.

If you are ever in need of inspiration for artistic endeavors, I highly recommend spending the day with Pat Conroy. But don't ask me for his contact information. I'm sorry, but I just can't give that out.

~Janna McMahan

From the anthology, *The Limelight: A Compendium of Contemporary Columbia Artists*, Muddy Ford Press, 2015.



JannaMcMahan.com