Beach Music Short Guide

Beach Music by Pat Conroy

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Characters

Replete with at least two dozen characters, Beach Music challenges the reader to keep up with the role of each one. Jack McCall, narrator and protagonist from South Carolina, flees to Italy with daughter Leah following a custody battle with his in-laws. Devastated by the suicide of his wife, Shyla, who jumped from a South Carolina bridge, he chooses to live in Italy, a country containing only low bridges. A cookbook and travel writer, McCall attempts an escape from his past which includes an alcoholic father and a smiling liar of a mother. He never wants to think about his extended family again, or about the treachery of one particular friend which led to the supposed suicide of another. Jack considers himself a cold person, unable to love in the way he should, and he carries a guilt regarding his wife's suicide which he cannot release. His daughter Leah provides his only emotional sustenance while he lives away from home in Italy. Only Jack and Shyla knew of his best friend Jordan's existence following a faked suicide. Jack aids Jordan's escape after he executes an explosion accidentally killing two people.

As the secluded life Jack has constructed for himself and his daughter unravels, Jack must face the reality of his past. Filled with hatred toward people who have contributed to his misery, he struggles to find meaning in past events which have haunted him for years. Eventually Jack returns home to South Carolina to face his past and his former best friends, as well as the impending death of his mother. Jack is persuaded to join Ledare in constructing his own past, along with that of his friends and family, as they write a television miniseries based upon their lives for the now-famous producer Mike Hess, a high school friend. Still filled with hostility toward Shyla's parents for their frantic attempts to remove custody of Leah following Shyla's suicide, Jack must find a way to integrate his daughter back into her grandparents' lives. An even larger task is the handling of his alcoholic father who remains constantly drunk following Jack's mother's remarriage.

Shyla Fox is Jack's wife who has already committed suicide when the book opens. The reader learns of Shyla's past through the dialogue of other characters and through flashbacks. The Jewish daughter of two Holocaust victims, Shyla is known for her beauty and her intelligence. She grows up in the house next to Jack, and they become fast friends in childhood. Following her involvement in the protests of the Vietnam War, Shyla joins Jack to hide their mutual friend Jordan following his accidental killing of two people.

She and Jack fall in love, marry, and have a daughter named Leah. Jack is left to wonder about Shyla's reasons for committing suicide, and her death begins his life outside of his native South Carolina. Shyla's final words, "the lady of the coins," become part of the mystery surrounding Shyla's death which Jack hopes to solve. Although not alive during the contemporary actions in the novel, Shyla acts as a catalyst, drawing Jack to South Carolina and the scene of their romance and her eventual death.

Ledare Ansley, while a member of Jack's childhood friends and a one time girlfriend, remains the only character not involved in the public reaction to the Vietnam War. As such, she becomes an objective point of view for what actually happened with her friends during those trying years. A romance and screen writer, Ledare reunites with Jack in Italy at the request of their mutual friend Mike Hess, who wants Ledare and Jack to write a miniseries about their childhood experiences. She had dated Jack in the past, but as a socialite whose name had long been important in the South, she ended up dropping Jack and eventually marries, then divorces, Capers Middleton. Her uniting with Jack in his contempt for Capers gives them a common ground, allowing the development of an eventual romance.

Jordan Elliott begins the novel as a mysterious figure. Although the reader understands that Jordan is a fugitive and the focus of a manhunt, the reason for his status does not become clear until midway through the novel. The only non-Carolinian among Jack's crowd in high school, his free spirit captured their affections when he took up residence as a result of his father's transfer. Jordan is a military brat, forced to move around the country as his abusive Marine father receives new assignments. Unlike any boy they've ever seen, Jordan is quickly adopted into Jack McCall's circle of friends. His spirit leads the boys into various adventures while they're young. Following high school, his father forces him to attend the Citadel until Jordan arranges his own expulsion in order to join his friends at the University of South Carolina. There they engage in the antiwar activities which will lead to his fugitive status and to a permanent rupture in the close bonds among the Waterford boys. He turns to the priesthood to help heal his animosities against his abusive father.

Capers Middleton is the member of Jack McCall's past whom Jack hates the most. A privileged and wealthy member of Southern aristocracy, Capers remains the undisputed leader of his crowd throughout school, guiding Jack, Jordan and Mike Hess in their various pursuits. His leadership position applies in college at the University of South Carolina as well, but his private agenda leads him to act in a way the others of his group see as a betrayal.

Jack and Shyla both hate Capers for his actions, and Jack vows never to see or speak to Capers again. While in college, Capers and Shyla are lovers, but after his distancing of himself from the old home group, he marries Ledare Ansley, a fitting companion socially and financially. Eventually he and Ledare divorce, and Capers takes on a new younger beauty-queen wife who will support and promote his political career. Capers aspires to become governor of South Carolina and eventually a candidate for the Presidency. After no contact with Jack for years, Capers suddenly re-enters his life with a plea for his help. It is a plea Jack receives with a loathing equal only to his previous love and admiration for Capers.

Mike Hess, a member of a Jewish family, realizes early on that he wants to participate in movie making. He acts as a cameraman throughout his friends' war protest days and eventually becomes a wealthy and famous, although unfulfilled, Hollywood producer. After not having seen Jack for years, Mike appears in Italy requesting Jack's help to find Jordan. At first his interest seems only in creating a miniseries, but Jack realizes later

that Mike hopes to help Jordan return home to face and successfully overcome the charges against him for a crime committed decades earlier. Mike acts as a catalyst to reunite Jack with all of his old friends, although Jack treats Capers and his new wife with loathing.

Lucy McCall Pitts acts as the matriarch figure for this novel, uniting her family as they face together her impending death from leukemia. Her background as a penniless nobody is revealed through flashbacks, and her strong influence on her sons and on the town of Waterford itself slowly surfaces. Married to an abusive alcoholic, Lucy has made mistakes in the rearing of her family which come back to haunt her. Jack says, "our parents acted like two storm fronts moving against each other." It is from his mother that Jack gains his talent for writing. He says of Lucy, "through the years, as my mother gained confidence in herself and in her position in the town, she became famous in the neighborhood for her storytelling gift." Lucy finally divorces her husband and remarries Dr. Jim Pitts, a local surgeon.

In her final days, the various people she's hurt forgive her, and she emerges an admirable character, a loving mother and grandmother, and a strong advocate for the preservation of Waterford's natural history.

Judge Johnson Hagood McCall is Jack's father and the town drunk. Once a well-respected judge, he has allowed alcohol to consume his life and his energies. Inconsolable when his wife divorces him, he harasses Lucy and Dr.

Pitts. Rather than serving as an inspiration to his sons, he embarrasses and humiliates them. The parent-child relationship is reversed as the Judge requires his sons' care in his drunken state.

Jack's brothers are Dallas, an attorney who joined his father's practice; Tee (Tecumseh) who teaches autistic children; Dupree, who works at the local mental hospital; and John Hardin, the schizophrenic baby of the family who lapses in and out of reality as Dupree attempts to care for him. The personalities and desires of each become clear when Jack reunites with them following his lengthy absence from home. A quick witted, glibtongued group, they lead Dr. Pitts to despair for their sometimes upsetting influence on their sick mother. Constantly criticizing and attacking one another, their underlying attitude still remains one of love and devotion. John Hardin's frequent driftings into fantasy and his ever-present paranoia become a challenge for the brothers. From his life in a tree house, to his ordering his brothers to leap naked from a bridge before half the population of Waterford, John Hardin serves to add both comedic and tragic touches to the novel.

Ruth and George Fox, Shyla's parents, occupy a central position in the novel as they tell of their experiences in the Holocaust. Jack hates them for trying to take Leah away from him following Shyla's suicide. But it is only through their help that he comes to understand why Leah might have had some of the inclinations that she did.

The Great Dog Chippie becomes for Beach Music what the tiger Caesar was for Prince of Tides (1986); the family protector. A crucial difference, however, is that Chippie's protecting takes place only in Jack McCall's stories to Leah. She assumes an important position in acting as a figure of hope, effective as a story character in allowing Jack and Leah to cope with their problems.

Additional characters who play important parts in the novel are Father Jude, Lucy's brother and a local priest; Celestine and General Rembert Elliott, Jordan's parents; Mac "the Great Jew" Rosoff, mayor of Waterford and a character contributing to the Holocaust stories; and Grandpa Silas and Grandma Ginny Penn McCall, quirky and humorous characters similar to the grandparents in Prince of Tides.

Social Concerns

Readers familiar with Conroy's previous works will recognize all of those social concerns important to the novelist in addition to a renewed focus upon war and its effects which may stretch over several generations. Suicide also occupies Conroy's attention as his narrator attempts to come to terms with that of his wife. The narrator's extended family also must face the death of its loved and hated matriarch, a new approach to coming to terms with the mother in Conroy novels.

Mental illness receives attention through the figure of the schizophrenic John Hardin and his brother, Tee, who works with the mentally ill and Dupree, who works with autistic children.

Insanity in general becomes central to the novel as not only mental incapacities, but also emotional ones, seem to consume many of the characters. The idea of healing across generations acts as both a theme and a point of social concern, as the novel depicts the attempts of those splintered by political and religious differences to reunite after the passage of many years. The idea promulgated in the 1960s of the "generation gap" comes full circle as the novel's youngest generation acts to heal the gap between the two previous ones.

Environmental concerns figure strongly as Conroy educates the reader to the dangers faced by the logger turtles of South Carolina. They are threatened due to a rapid overdevelopment of the coast line and the erection by humans of rock barricades against rising water which prevent the mother turtles from climbing out of reach of the surf for their egg deposits. An additional social concern is that of justice and the capability or incapability of the United States justice system to serve its constituents, whether they be human or animal.

A social concern not emphasized quite as pointedly in Conroy's previous novels is that of feminism. On more than one occasion, he calls notice to the plight of women bullied and brutalized by men and to the social systems which allow such treatment. In one scene in Italy, Jack McCall fights a man who physically abuses his wife in public, even though many of the native male lookers-on do not approve of his interference. Jack's maternal grandmother, whom he never meets due to her suicide, eventually must destroy her own husband following an abusive encounter. In another approach to the rights of women, Conroy mentions the South's misdirection of its girls when he says of Ledare, "she had grown up in that pampered, baby-talking way that the South has of making its girls follow the paths of least resistance."

Techniques

Again Conroy uses first-person narration. Because Jack McCall knows his friends and their family members so well, he is able to accurately present their points of view. The novel is structured in layered vignettes which vary in time reference. The narration moves from present to past and back again, complimenting Conroy's theme of the acceptance of the past in order to control one's future. Each flashback episode reflects upon a main character to explain a background which has helped determine his or her present situation.

For instance, the Holocaust stories of Ruth and George Fox help Jack to understand one reason why Shyla committed suicide, and the background of Jordan's interaction with his father is necessary for the reader to understand their fractured relationship. The fracturing and separation of generations is echoed in the divorces of various couples and the physical separation of Jack from not only his friends and families but also his country.

Conroy supplies abundant mythological aspects mixed in with reality, some of which may tax the reader's acceptance. His tale of the behemoth manta ray which leaps back and forth across the boys' fishing boat is, if not believable, at least replete with beautiful imagery, significance and symbolism.

A porpoise's supplying an "accompaniment" to the singing of a child with Down's Syndrome could be labeled improbable, yet it brings with it echoes from stories through the ages past, in which those individuals labeled by contemporary culture as insane or mentally deficient were believed to possess great powers. Conroy does temper his mystical animal stories with those of the "heroic" Great Dog Chippie, admitted to be pure fantasy. Jack tells Leah contrived stories in which an ordinary dog from his past acts as a heroic figure, available when some extraordinary feat of rescue is required. In this way, Conroy may be telling his readers that animals and mysticism are best used where needed, and realism may not be all important.

Jack remarks to Leah that "Stories don't have to be true . . . They just have to help."

Like Prince of Tides, Beach Music also contains a mystery. This one focuses upon the background of Jack McCall and his relationship to his friends. The reader gains clues as to past occurrences along the way, but does not learn the answer as to what really happened to Jack's crowd during the Vietnam protest era until the last part of the book. This structure pulls the reader forward, as does the overlapping of the various individual tales.

Themes

While avid Conroy fans will recognize many of the thematic concerns of previous novels in Beach Music, including sibling relationships, parent and child relationships, family abuse, mental illness, class differences, politics, religion and faith, new themes add focus to this novel. War occupies much of the reader's attention through the discussion by the Jewish characters of the terrors of the Holocaust and through an overview of the effects of the Vietnam war on those who remained at home. No scenes or reminiscences from the fighting in Vietnam itself appear, but much attention focuses on the war protestors and on the older generation who greatly disapproved of such actions. Conroy attempts to balance the arguments for and against involvement in the war as characters disagree over the definition of "patriotism." The subtheme of peace takes on a double meaning as Jack's high school friends try to find a way to accept one another's actions by applying a new perspective thirty years following the war-protest events which severed some of their friendships.

The related themes of faith and religion, frequently present in Southern writing, and always present in Conroy's novels, find revival through Conroy's consistent focus on the mysteries of Catholicism and also through an emphasis on the Jewish religion. Not only does Conroy's main figure struggle with his own faith, he must direct the religious training of his daughter whose mother was Jewish. Through shockingly vivid memories of the Holocaust, the Jewish characters cause the freedom of religion to assume new importance. The use of two priests as main figures and the dual consideration of Mary as simultaneously being the mother of Christ and a Jew adds a thoughtful dimension to the conflict the characters and readers might face.

One Jewish character prays to a statue of Mary, thinking of her as a young Jewish girl.

Concerns for the environment are highlighted through Lucy McCall's passion for the preservation of the local loggerhead turtles. Her clashes with the wildlife authorities who label her intrusive methods illegal highlight the fact that man's laws do not always provide the guidance they should.

Lucy is a revolutionary, evading her country's laws in order to preserve the higher good, just as Shyla, Jack's dead wife, revolted against what she saw as her country's mistaken involvement in an immoral war. The conservation concerns allow the alliance of grandmother and granddaughter as Leah inherits her grandmother's fiery compassion and commitment to saving the turtles.

While Conroy has featured mental illness in his past novels, especially in Prince of Tides, the character of John Hardin allows him to further experiment with the effects of the human mind on human actions. John Hardin's schizophrenia represents the loss of order, but also the achievement of a type of freedom through chaos. It is, however, a dangerous freedom, allowing Conroy again to emphasize the importance of the legal system, no matter how imperfect it may be. When John Hardin terrorizes his family and neighbors, the law must step in to help re-institutionalize him. But Conroy is not totally

confident regarding the treatment of the mentally ill. His narrator stresses the fact that commitment to a mental institution is the easiest thing in the world to achieve in the South.

Jack's college friend, Jordan, is effortlessly committed by his parents following his involvement in war protests, although he is not mentally ill. Suicide receives a glance through Shyla's self destruction, and various theories are proposed as to why one takes one's life. There's also a discussion between the members of Jack's circle in high school as to how they would commit suicide; Jordan's plan turns out to be quite prophetic. Any serious theories regarding the causes of suicide remain bound up in family relationships, and this theme remains one not quite as deeply explored as some of Conroy's other themes.

Through the interactions of Jack and his four brothers, the theme of sibling relationships emerges. Although all matured in the same stifling environment, that of the home of an alcoholic, they react to life in different ways, developing varied interests and personalities. Again and again, Conroy shows how the fabric of brotherhood helps protect each individual from the tears in the fabric of family. Jack McCall says of his brothers, "We . . . had grown to manhood in a household of secret terrors that had marked each of us in different ways . . . We used laughter as both a weapon and a vaccine."

Judge McCall's alcoholism allows Conroy an additional emphasis upon order versus chaos. His ironic contrast of the Judge's disorderly life, made so through alcohol, with his practice of the law, meant to bring order, helps support his questioning of the value of law and order. A flashback to the Judge's finest hour as he supported integration helps illustrate how even those who love law the most can abandon its precepts under the pressures of emotional and mental challenge.

While local politics remain an issue through discussions of Vietnam and of Capers Middleton's bid for the office of governor, a concern for international politics are emphasized through discussions of the horrors of the Holocaust and also through an attack by terrorists at a Italian airport. Conroy seems to want to remind readers that just because the United States is not involved in an official war, wars around the world continue to rage.

The theme of maturation appears on three different levels as three generations are traced from youth to maturity. Jack's daughter, Leah, represents the youngest generation, attempting to find her Southern roots after having been raised in Italy. Jack and his peers represent the next oldest generation.

Each continues to strive toward the discovery of their destinies, at last finding they are closely intertwined with the destinies of the generation that preceded theirs and which they tried so hard to reject. The values of this older generation, while seemingly so different from those of their children, end up finding a common ground with those of youth. Most of the faults the younger generation finds with the older has to do with their feeling manipulated toward accepting their parents' ideals and dreams. This results in a

conflict often based upon the theme of class differentiation, as individuals find themselves excluded from their friends' lives due to parental perception of the importance of social distinctions. Because Jack does not come from a wealthy and "rooted" Southern family, his early romance with Ledare is discouraged by her parents. By the close of the novel, differences are forgiven, and grace finally surfaces as the important factor in one's maturation.

Perhaps the strongest theme is that of storytelling. The stories Conroy weaves remain central to his novel, although the major plot of discord and reunion between Jack and his friends and family could have been told without many of the "side stories" Conroy supplies. Such tales feature his knowledge of the sea and all of its creatures, as well as a revelation of the cruelty peculiar to the South. Much of his story magic focuses upon animals, symbolizing an innocence unshared by humans. Never has Conroy allowed himself to use the aspects of the ageold romantic quest as he does in Beach Music. Ancient narrative elements such as a journey across water, magic and mysticism, the need for a guide, the search for identity, the claiming of the father's heritage, loss, the descent into darkness, renewal through new life, and recovery of reward abound.

Key Questions

Beach Music is the lengthiest Conroy novel yet, containing an expanding cast of characters and mythological-type tales featuring each. Readers might be interested to know that Conroy's manuscript he presented to his editor was almost twice as long as the novel in its final form. This novel offers many of the Conroy themes readers have come to expect, with the addition of the Holocaust and the Vietnam War as specific causes of atrocities by man against man. The author's inclusion of narrative focused upon the present, in addition to that focused upon the past through flashbacks, will offer all ages of readers subjects with which they are familiar. One way to approach discussion would be to separate readers into groups made up of individuals possessing a "first hand" familiarity with the various eras, i.e. World War II, the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Vietnam era, the years bearing the effects of the Vietnam War, and modern times.

1. What is the significance of Lucy's particular type of cancer as related to the ongoing theme of family betrayal found in Conroy's novels? Why do the brothers laugh when they discover the type of illness Lucy has?

2. Does religion act as a character in the novel, or is the prominence of religion a symbolic device, keeping the reader aware of an ongoing battle with faith versus the tangible?

3. How do animal protectors in Conroy's novels enlarge the humanity of the characters? What are the differences between the animals in Beach Music and those seen in Prince of Tides?

4. How successful or unsuccessful is Conroy's comparison of the Holocaust to the turmoil in America over Vietnam?

5. What is the significance, if any, of the growing family sizes seen in Conroy's novels when examined chronologically? Does this relate to the growing complexity of his characters?

6. Why, of all the water imagery in Conroy's novels, are the living parts of the sea (dolphins, manta rays, shrimps) so prominent and central? Should these creatures be considered crucial "characters" to Conroy's stories?

7. What relationships in the novel are the most memorable: the friendships among the four boys or the familial relations in the various families?

8. How might the friendships in the novel reflect upon the development of children who grow up in bitterly divided families?

9. What inconsistencies do you see in Jack McCall's narrative attitudes about his family versus his attitudes when confronted by and interacting in person with its members?

Does this aspect add to the novel's realism, or simply make it a needlessly "bumpy" read?

10. Discuss the similarities between Lila Wingo from Prince of Tides and Beach Music's Lucy McCall. How might their differences reflect on Conroy's evolving feelings about his own mother?

Literary Precedents

The literary precedents noted for the Prince of Tides also apply to this novel, and the Prince of Tides itself may be included as a precedent. All of the familiar Conroy characters and issues are present. Due to the autobiographical nature of Conroy's novels, each one seems to pick up where the previous novel leaves off in terms of themes and the slowly changing ideas of the narrator. An example would be this narrator's gentler attitude toward his mother as she moves toward death. Again, readers will note even more strongly in this novel than in Prince of Tides the use of many elements of the traditional quest story, listed above. A close examination of, for instance, Homer's Odyssey reveals Odysseus (or Ulysses) involved in a sea voyage, both to escape his enemies and in hopes of returning home. Jack's attempted escape from, and eventual return to, South Carolina as he crosses the Atlantic remains reminiscent of Odysseus' voyage. Many fantastic creatures appear in the Odyssey; in Beach Music, the dolphins, the turtles, the porpoise that responds to song and especially the great manta ray parallel those creatures. Jack's very involvement with stories and story telling reminds one of the weaving of Penelope (Odysseus' devoted wife), an activity which later became symbolic of storytelling; most readers are familiar with the phrase, "weaving a tale."

As he continues to turn out new novels, Conroy repeats his own patterns and symbolisms in each. Some instances have been mentioned in discussions of the other novels. Not only is water (symbol of baptism or rebirth) always present and important, but so is military life (symbolic of an order that destroys), in either the narrator's family or that of a main character. Animals (figures which in ancient mythology represent protection or wisdom) in mystical sequences appear frequently, as do trees (symbols of wisdom and life), as temporary housing or as a means of communication and reunion for characters. The endless search for identity by the narrator, including an imitation or rejection of a father figure, also repeatedly appears. One might even say that Conroy has developed his own cliches, peculiar to and repeated in his novels.

Related Titles

All of Conroy's previous novels may be called "related titles," not because they include identical characters, but because the characters, situations and techniques are so similar. While his novels may be compared to those of other Southern writers such as Welty and McCullers, as mentioned above, he seems unique in his constant mythmaking and in his use of the imagery of sea creatures to help advance his plot and support his themes.

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